
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Emily Disher

Thesis Advisor:  
Dr. Pat Collier

Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana  

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Abstract

Victorian periodical poems survive in many forms—as commodities, political statements, entertainment, and advertisements, to name a few—and often perform various functions at once. Both Thomas Hood’s famous “The Song of the Shirt,” and one of its parodies, an obscure advertisement for Finkle and Lyon sewing machines entitled “The Sewing Machine,” create a framework for understanding how periodical poetry participates in a culture to perform multiple functions simultaneously. Exploring the similarities and dissimilarities between the audience, purpose, and classification of each poem, helps to reveal the complexities of the Victorian periodical poem. The first section of this thesis examines the role of each poem in a commodity culture. Then, a closer assessment of an audience immersed in this culture reveals the degree to which the poems participate in Victorian gender and class stereotypes. Finally, I explore the multiple functions of the poems as they interact with their audience through periodical media and the inevitable ambiguity of classifying such poems, ultimately raising questions about the survival of the poems.

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During the week of November 9, 1861, a relatively inconspicuous poem entitled “The Sewing Machine” found its way into approximately 120,000 American homes, sandwiched between a political cartoon and an advertisement for Beadle’s Dime Novels on page 720 of Harper’s Weekly. The poem, an advertisement for the Finkle and Lyon sewing machine, exemplifies the creativity employed by companies competing in a hot sewing machine market of at least forty manufacturers who sought to market their product to the female consumer. From elaborate (and often unrelated) illustrations on trading cards bearing the manufacturer’s name, to clever short stories and poems in periodicals and broadsides, companies like Finkle and Lyon used artistic forms filled with feminine images in order to attract female customers.

“The Sewing Machine” caters to this audience through its parody of Thomas Hood’s famous poem “The Song of the Shirt,” which was popular throughout Britain and America during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The advertiser for Finkle and Lyon was certainly not the only writer for a sewing machine manufacturing company to parody Hood’s poem, though he may have been the first. Steven E. Smith’s A Selected, Annotated Bibliography of Parodies, Spin-offs, and Adaptations of Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt” lists a similar parody in 1893 by New Home Sewing Machine Company, and a broadside parody by Groves and Baker Sewing Machine Company created sometime during the 1860s (89, 88). Whether the Finkle and Lyon advertisement appeared first among the parodies remains debatable. The piece, however, with its adherence to the original structure of the poem, and its stanza-by-stanza adaptation of portions of the earlier poem to create an antithetical picture of the seamstress, produces a window into the complexities of gender and class in Victorian culture when juxtaposed with Hood’s original poem. In this thesis, I will first explore the similarities between the Finkle and Lyon advertiser and Hood, as each uses popular concerns of their culture to
market a commodity. I will then show how contrasting the two poems provides a round, detailed picture of the Victorian gender and class stereotypes which both shape and become reflected by the poems. Finally, I will investigate the role of each poem as it exists within the ambiguous categories of Victorian periodical literature.

**Advertising a Commodity**

At the root of both Hood’s “Song of the Shirt” and “The Sewing Machine” lie their attempts to manipulate current trends, customs, and values in order to capture a middle-class audience and thereby achieve a profit. Thomas Hood, like many of his peers in the *Punch* circle, wrote to keep food on his table, making the popularity of his poems necessary to his survival. In order to maintain popularity with their audiences, as Roger Henkle explains in his essay “Comedy as Commodity: Thomas Hood’s Poetry of Class Desire,” the *Punch* writers “exploit[ed] the latest whim of the growing bourgeois readership” (301-2). In order that the greatest portion of their audiences—the middle class—would find interest in their work, continue to read the periodical, and thus ensure their jobs, the writers adhered to their sense of the desires of the popular audience, not daring to stray from its general values, customs and ideas, and were quick to note changes in popular thought. This was the surest way to win the appeal of the literature consumer. Thus, Henkle explains, “we need to consider Hood’s poems as a register of the commodification of objects and expressions in the consumer society” (302). All of Hood’s poems, from his comedic verse to his social protest pieces, Hinkle suggests, might be read as commodities, meant for consumption by popular culture.

“The Song of the Shirt” beautifully exemplifies Hood’s utilization of popular middle-class concerns. A series of articles published in the *London Times* during October 1843 typifies middle-class readers’ contemporary interest in the plight of the poor seamstress. The first article,
published on October 26, presented the case of a poor seamstress named Biddell who, in order to
feed herself and her children, pawned some of the trousers she had sewn for a man named Mr.
Moses; when she could not retrieve the trousers, she was arrested. The article reads as follows:

Yesterday a wretched-looking woman named Biddell, with a squalid, half-starved infant
at her breast, was placed at the bar on a charge of unlawfully pawning several articles of
wearing apparel which she had been intrusted to make up for Mr. Moses, a slopseller on
tower-hill. [...] The prisoner, who while the evidence was being given against her cried
bitterly, said she was compelled to pledge a part of her work when it was finished to
enable her to go on with the remainder, and to provide bread for herself and her two
children. (The Times, 7)

The article then describes the death of Biddell’s husband and her subsequent struggle to provide
for her two children, exposing the meager “seven pence” paid to Biddell for each pair of trousers
she would produce. The magistrate sends her to the poorhouse rather than the “House of
Corrections” where she may take her children along and earn a better wage than “attempting to
make a living by the miserable pittance of a slopseller [which] had got herself into her present
condition” (7). The Times’ comprehensive series covering the poor seamstress’s case, reader
reactions, and similar incidents (one of which occurs on the same day as Biddell’s case), created
heightened awareness of the poor working conditions of the seamstress and the laboring class in
general.

Less than two months later, on December 16, 1843, Hood debuted “Song of the Shirt” in
the Punch Christmas number with details paralleling the Biddell case (a fact noted by nearly all
of Thomas Hood’s biographers, and recent scholarship on “Song of the Shirt.”) This fact does
not undermine Hood’s genuine concern for the conditions of the poor seamstress, but does
highlight his ability to capitalize on the popular interests of the day. Biographer John Clubbe explains that the plight of the seamstress plagued Hood long before the publication of “Song of the Shirt”: Hood wrote a reproachful piece in January 1843 for New Monthly in which he describes the emaciated figure of the seamstress and her “pitiful earnings” and compares sewing gusset and band together to stitching together the body and soul (153-4). Clubbe also notes, “Hood may have put a draft of the “Song” aside, then decided to capitalize on it when he saw the furor caused by the Biddell case” (154). Whether or not Hood had written a full draft of the poem before Biddell became a recognizable name, her case certainly enabled him to bring his ideas to a mass audience, and launched him into popularity as soon as he publicly acknowledged authorship of the poem (which he had originally published anonymously.)

The cultural incidents surrounding the publication of “Song of the Shirt” support Henkle’s discussion of Hood’s dependency on popular values and interests of his day; Henkle’s line of argument becomes similarly applicable to a discussion of “The Sewing Machine” as it works in its cultural environment. Each poem “binds itself intimately with the social context of its audience” and “speaks [the audience’s] language, invokes their desires or anxieties, draws on their interests, accommodates their level of cultural sophistication” (Henkle 307). While “The Song of the Shirt,” draws on social anxieties, creating a space in which readers may sympathize with the poor seamstress, “The Sewing Machine” eliminates audience anxieties altogether, relying on idealized values of Victorian women and tapping directly into their desires; each poem gratifies its reader by allowing her to escape into fantasy.

The fantasy of “The Sewing Machine” reveals itself both in its descriptions of the seamstress as a beautiful, dutiful, queenly woman, working away with ease at her Finkle and Lyon sewing machine—an ideal picture of womanhood as middle-class Victorians viewed it—
307). “The Song of the Shirt” contains the space for sympathy desired by a middle-class whose sense of morality is ambiguous (as I shall explore as the paper progresses), and thus the poem can be considered a “commodity.”

Just as the advertiser had to market the Finkle and Lyon sewing machine, so, too, did Thomas Hood have to market his product, and his first attempts were unsuccessful. After submitting the poem to three journals and having been rejected by each, Hood finally sent the piece to *Punch*. In his letter to Mark Lemon, the editor of *Punch* from 1941 until 1970, Hood writes, “I send the Song of the Shirt—Will it be too grave for *Punch*?” (*Letters* 580). Along with the manuscript he also attached a note that “left it to Lemon’s discretion whether to put it in the journal or in the ‘waste-paper basket’” (Clubbe 149). The fact that *Punch*, a satirical journal aimed at a middle-class audience, catering to popular taste with comic writing and illustration¹, should choose to publish the poem, proves the power of the poem’s timely relevance. The poem’s concordance with popular culture outweighs its incongruence with *Punch’s* typically lighter fare (although the journal did try to soften the inconsistency of the subject matter by publishing the poem inside an absurd comical border.) That “The Song of the Shirt” was extraordinarily popular once it found a venue, however, was hardly surprising. In the words of biography Lloyd Jeffrey, it “was a dramatic crystallization of public feeling that ran easily through the mind because of its rhymed and strongly rhythmic verses” (129). Discovering how “The Song of the Shirt” worked on its audience, and how its parody in “The Sewing Machine” reached essentially the same audience by turning the tables on Hood’s poem, becomes possible by examining each work in the context of its female audience, and the resulting relationship between the two poems.

¹ For more on *Punch* and its audience, see Attick, Richard D. *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution 1841-1851*. Columbus: OSU Press, 1997.
The Participation of “The Song of the Shirt” in Middle-class Stereotypes

The conversation created between “The Song of the Shirt” and “The Sewing Machine” defines the tightrope between work and leisure upon which the middle-class Victorian woman balanced. As Elizabeth Nelson explains in her work on nineteenth-century American market culture, middle-class women of the century sought to validate their consumption habits (which mimicked those of the aristocracy) through the elevation of their household chores to “duties,” a term that connoted moral purpose, creating for the middle-class woman a greater valuation of her labor. By defining her domestic work as duty, the middle-class woman who “aspired to an ideal of genteel womanhood that seemed inconsistent with labor” could differentiate her toil “from that of working-class women” (19). Thus, the middle-class woman could, like women of the aristocracy, acquire the kinds of clothing, furnishings, etc. that displayed her family’s economic advantage over lower classes, while still performing her own household work, unlike the aristocratic woman whose life was characterized by leisure without duty, which the middle-class woman viewed as sinful. The duties of the wife and mother, performed in the home, then, helped sustain for the middle-class woman a sense of moral superiority to both the leisurely life of the aristocrat and the working woman laboring outside of the home.

The opening stanza of Hood’s poem depicts exactly the type of working woman from whom the middle-class woman sought to distinguish herself:

With fingers weary and worn,
    With eyelids heavy and red,
A Woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
    Plying her needle and thread –
    Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
    And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the ‘Song of the Shirt.’ (1-8)
The woman sits in "unwomanly rags," suggesting a lack of Victorian femininity and her inability to meet the idealized stereotypes of the woman as neat, pretty and pristine. This definition of femininity, which associated women's clothing with respectability and persisted throughout the Victorian period, is best summarized by economist Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 *The Theory of the Leisure Class*: "[P]roductive labor is in a peculiar degree derogatory to respectable women, and therefore special pains should be taken in the construction of women's dress, to impress upon the beholder the fact (often indeed a fiction) that the wearer does not and cannot habitually engage in useful work" (126). Although middle-class women performed work inside their homes, they dressed as though they rarely lifted a finger, using their attire to display their wealth and disguise the daily labors they performed in the home. Hood's seamstress lacks the money even to feed herself—"the fasts I keep, / Oh! God! that bread should be so dear" (38-9)—much less the funds to spare for new clothes. Her toil is visible in every inch of her appearance. By the end of the poem, Hood implements the stronger verb "sate," describing how the seamstress "sate in unwomanly rags" (83). This may suggest the woman's *saturation* in the unfeminine and unclean.

Ironically, middle-class women went so far, in certain cases, as to purposely *prevent* working-class women from wearing the fineries that marked the middle-class woman's "superiority." The dichotomy of the middle-class woman and her servants demonstrates the most explicit example of such purposeful impediments. Servant women and governesses gained a little more respect from members of the middle class than did other working women because they were, at least, working in the home—their "proper" sphere (E. Roberts 14). Elizabeth Langland explains in *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Cultures*: "The importance of dress in signifying class emerges yet more clearly when one reads
the numerous pamphlets and sermons decrying fine dress in servants and urging mistresses to use their power and influence to curb this license and the class discontent it betokens” (38). Working women, in fact, were not permitted to wear the finer clothing of the upper classes, even when such fineries became available. Through the persistence of simplistic (in the case of house servants), or shabby dress among working-class women, the middle-class woman could maintain superiority in appearance, and a symbolic transcendence of “a manual laboring environment” and the sins most often associated with it (Young 107). Thus, her clean appearance, imbued by middle-class stereotypes, signaled the cleanliness of her spiritual/moral character.

Not only would the physical appearance of Hood’s seamstress have indicated her distance the middle-class woman, but the latter also would have been repelled by the poor woman’s living conditions. She owns only “A bed of straw,/A crust of bread—and rags,/That shattr’d roof—and this naked floor—/A table—a broken chair—” (43-46). In a time of growing consumption among the members of the middle class who now had the financial means to imitate the sophisticated aristocrats, the lack of basic furnishings endured by members of the working class creates a stark contrast. In her study of middle-class culture in nineteenth century America, Australia and Britain, Linda Young writes:

As the desire and capacity to emulate aristocratic tastes expanded with the growth of the middle class, the rhetoric of furniture, household equipment and decorations grew more and more nuanced. Beside their display meanings, furnishings arranged to represent the spirit of the home came to be seen as actively shaping the moral character of inhabitants” (174).

The middle-class housewife prided herself not only on her physical appearance, but also on that of her home, or the extension of herself (as defined by Victorian social mores.) Beautifying the
home became a means of celebrating the domestic sphere and, in effect, making it a fit environment for moral development; the home, after all, was considered the seat of morality. A neat, orderly, and well-furnished house became proof of the woman’s fulfillment of her moral duties to her family.

Because middle-class women placed such emphasis on domestic and personal appearances, they tended to associate immorality with most working women. Reactions like that of Mr. Moses toward Biddell, although she committed her crime out of desperation, were not uncommon amongst members of the middle class. In Women’s Work 1840-1940, Elizabeth Roberts notes, “Working wives and mothers especially were often regarded as unnatural, immoral and inadequate homemakers and parents” (13). Parliamentary blue book reports, in fact, upheld these stereotypes. Examples from Friederick Engels’ The Condition of the Working Class in England demonstrate the way that these types of stereotypes permeate even this work written to promote awareness among the middle class and create positive change for members of the laboring classes. In his piece, written one year after the publication of Hood’s poem, Engel’s describes the living quarters of working-class citizens as follows: “There is no need for me to discuss the physical and moral state of these dens of vice. Every one of these houses is a breeding-ground of crime and also the scene of much conduct of unnatural and revolting character” (78). While attempting to cite the necessity for change in the living conditions of the majority of working-class laborers, this passage sustains the negative correlation between poor living conditions, uncleanliness, and immorality upheld by members of the middle class.

Middle-class women saw themselves as examples of moral purity for these immoral women of the working class, and the popular ladies’ manuals of the day continuously reinforced a biased understanding of morality among the classes, equating domesticity with morality. The

2 See Johnson 24-5.
1846 *Young Lady's Companion and Token of Affection* (a guide to proper behavior for the young woman) explained, “Were each American female but faithful to her God, her family, and her country, then would a mighty sanctified influence go forth through the wide extents of our beloved land, diffusing moral health and vigor” (Nord 85). The women writing and reading such manuals would view the woman working outside the home as unfaithful to her children and her husband despite the fact that the survival of her family was usually the sole motivation for her work. In *Victorian Women*, Joan Perkin describes middle-class denial of the necessity for the working-class woman to provide an income:

The fact that most working-class married women had always worked out of necessity did not convince middle-class observers that it was *really* necessary and desirable for them to do so. And even when it was agreed that some unfortunate wives needed to earn, only certain types of jobs for them were approved and encouraged—mainly those connected with domestic work, though these were notoriously badly paid. (197)

Regardless of these realities, according to the standards of the middle class, as well as laboring-class males, all women were expected to work in the home. Patricia Johnson notes in *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social Problem Fiction* that “by the mid-1840s, the Tory reformer Lord Ashley, upper and middle-class women, working-class men, and even many middle-class factory owners had come to agree that working-class women must be returned to the domestic sphere” (6-7). The problem with this, as Perkin notes, was that domestic servitude was “notoriously badly paid” compared to other labor available to working-class women (197). Single women, she explains, could not survive on the wages of domestic work; only married women, who needed to supplement their husbands’ incomes but were bound by social restraints to work within the home were “ready and anxious to work for wages on which a single woman
would have found it impossible to live" (189). Women like Hood’s seamstress/Biddell stand as a prime example of this. She performed her work in her home, and could not afford to feed her children at seven pence per pair of sewn trousers. Ironically, the fact that she worked in her own domestic sphere often went unconsidered by middle-class women, because, as Engel’s reminds us, her home was usually considered a “den of vice.” Thus, only domestic work in the middle-class home seemed morally acceptable to middle-class women, but the meager wages paid to domestic servants by most middle-class families forced single women to look for work elsewhere. Thus, by providing less than a living wage, middle-class women inadvertently promoted women’s work outside the home, which they then harshly condemned.

Engels unsympathetically sums up the kind of hypocrisy inherent in such behavior when he condemns the middle class, saying, “The vampire middle classes first suck the wretched workers dry so that afterwards they can, with consummate hypocrisy, throw a few miserable crumbs of charity at their feet” (213). The “charitable activities” performed by middle-class women do seem like “miserable crumbs” when we investigate the motivations behind them. Although cases like Biddell’s seemed to evoke sincere sympathy from readers of the London Times, middle-class women, whose duty it was to perform acts of charity as part of the expectations of her class, generally did not take significant action. As Leonore Davidoff explains in The Best Circles: Women and Society in Victorian England, “Actual work with the poor was often considered too arduous, contaminating and degrading for young girls to undertake” (57). Most women, however, readily participated in “Charity Bazaars, Fancy Fairs, private theatricals, [and] charity garden parties […which] for many people were seen primarily as part of the season’s social calendar” (56). Thus, the goal of such charity events often became lost in the
elaborate social rituals surrounding them. Perkin explains the ineffectiveness of unorganized charity as well:

Women rarely analysed the significance of their daily activities, or worried about the limited usefulness of unorganized charity. Nor did it occur to most of them that they might be intruding on the privacy of the poor when they exhorted them to give up drinking; or that it was meddlesome and condescending to assign religious texts for memorization by people who were in no position to refuse their visits. (206).

Middle-class women seem to have spent more time considering their own fulfillment, whether socially or in performing Christian duty, rather than the improvement of the conditions of the working class when they performed charity.

In an October 26, 1843 letter to the editor of the London Times, part of the newly aroused controversy over the Biddle case, a concerned reader attacks the hypocrisy inherent in these middle-class attitudes of immorality attributed to working-class women:

To the strong and undeniable appeals which have been lately made through your papers on behalf of the poor upon the bounty of the affluent, permit me to add this much:— […] Carry this picture [of the poor] to the wealthy—to those who have unbounded comforts within their reach: […] And let them sit down to the gorgeous banquet and enjoy the rarest dainties with the reflection (if it be so) that not one of the needy myriads who pass their door has been relieved by them, and they are well aware that none will be fed with the crumbs that fall from their table. There may be imposition; there may be hypocrisy: but there is want enough—absolute, terrific want—to alarm every one who never considers the poor, while he has all, and abounds in riches, as often as he hears it read
from the Holy Book, "Wo unto you that are rich, for you have received your consolation." (5)

Although "The Song of the Shirt" capitalizes on and crystallizes a vogue of awareness of the conditions of the poor, the fleeting concerns of the middle-class seem to be more examples of what this Times letter-writer underscores—hypocrisy. Jeffrey writes, "Hood's poem (and of course the articles in the Times and Punch) not only compelled awareness but made it fashionable, so to speak" (129). Yet, just as fashions tend to fade, so, too, did the fervor over Hood's poem. Many publications written after the Times' 1843 string of articles on the poor seamstress prove that middle-class values—the very values that kept such women in such despicable working conditions—were not changed by the vast attention the newspaper articles together with Hood's poem had inspired. Johnson's Hidden Hands explores a spectrum of Victorian fiction and its misrepresentation or abolishment of the image of women at work (outside the home.) She writes, "To narrate the life of a working-class woman [...] meant describing the hard labor she was made to perform, the money she earned in full-time labor, and the strength and independence that these tasks demanded, all elements which conflicted with the Victorian view of 'the feminine'" (7). It was the desire to uphold this view of the feminine that continued the suppression or misrepresentation of a complete picture of the working-class woman in Victorian written works from fiction to journalism. Engels, writing during the year and a half after the debut of Hood's poem, asserts:

The middle classes, who consider themselves to be the most important social group, are ashamed to publish to the world the true facts concerning the workers. The property-owners and industrialists will not admit that the wage earners are suffering, because if they did, they would have to accept moral responsibility for this misery (26).
Engels’ complaints suggest the fleeting impact of the *Times* issues and Hood’s poem, as the middle classes continued to hide or ignore the facts of the conditions of the laboring classes.

“The Sewing Machine” and Middle-class Desire

The same kinds of journals and newspapers that had briefly created the whirlwind of social concern in 1843, in fact, seemed to help propagate the oppressive stereotypes that kept the respectable woman in the home and working women “in the margins” (Johnson 7). *Harper’s Weekly*, a popular United States weekly newspaper, was no exception. “The Sewing Machine,” appearing in the November 9, 1861 issue, exists as a striking example of the proliferation of these stereotypes because it manipulates the very poem that promoted escape from these stereotypes. The first stanza of the poem, like Hood’s 1843 piece, begins with a physical description of a seamstress, but one quite different from Hood’s:

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With fingers nimble and fine,
    With features gladsome and gay,
A lady sat in her pretty boudoir,
    Joyfully working away.—
Click! click! click!
    In comfort she sat—like a queen,
And sang to the music merry and quick,
    Of Finkle and Lyon’s machine. (1-8)
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This stanza adheres most closely to Hood’s poem, by implementing lines metrically similar to Hood’s first stanza (barring line eight), as well as the same abcbdede rhyme scheme and use of alliteration. Immediately, these devices call to mind “The Song of the Shirt,” and the reader becomes struck by the difference between Hood’s seamstress and this one. Hood’s seamstress’s “fingers weary and worn” have been transformed into “fingers nimble and fine” and “eyelids heavy and red” become “features gladsome and gay.” While Hood’s “Woman sat, in unwomanly rags,” this seamstress is a “lady” sitting “in her pretty boudoir.” Simply changing “woman” to “lady” invokes a particular image of a well-bred, society woman, confirmed by comparing her to
“a queen.” Thus, the Finkle and Lyon poem infuses the labor of sewing with *dignity*. The duty of sewing in the home becomes glamorized by the possession of a sewing machine, which allows the seamstress to be both useful and lovely at once.

By incorporating the queen motif, “The Sewing Machine” not only adds to the glamour of sewing with a machine, but also endows it with a sense of maternity. The implementation of the queenly image was one of which both English and American women would have been aware. Although the degree of reference experienced by English women would have far outweighed the respect American women would have felt, the female consumer of the United States would surely have been familiar with her image and implied characteristics of femininity as Victoria was portrayed in countless advertisements during the last half of the century. The queen embodied many of the ideals that middle-class women wanted to associate with themselves: everything, in fact, that their image of the working-class female undermined. Loeb articulates the use of the queen motif in advertising, and its various points of appeal to the middle-class female consumer:

It is through excelling in [her maternal function] that a queen may distinguish herself most impressively, become a ‘model,’ and ‘example.’ The domestication of the royal image encourages the humble consumer to strive to attain the royal ideal; to excel through achievement and merit in her maternal role, to celebrate an essential quality among mothers, rather than to gaze awestruck at the class-specific dignity of a queen’s ceremonial role” (92).

The queen, then, becomes the ultimate example, for women who sought to be examples themselves.
In setting an example, middle-class women strove to create an unrealistic image of perfection. As earlier discussed, despite the fact that the middle-class woman performed work in her home, running the household, overseeing her staff, baking, sewing, and performing motherly tasks, she made all attempts to appear simultaneously leisurely, because “adult leisure […] evok[ed] aristocratic status or at least wealth” (Loeb 171). Thus, “The Sewing Machine,” makes every attempt to cater to this idea of the “lightness” of domestic duties, by transforming the drudgery of Hood’s poem into the fun and easy use of the sewing machine. Consider, for instance, the original lines from “The Song of the Shirt”:

“Work—work—work
Till the brain begins to swim:
Work—work—work
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
Seam, and gusset, and band,
    Band, and gusset, and seam,
    Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
    And sew them on in a dream!” (17-24)

Then, the following stanza from “The Sewing Machine”:

“Click—click—click—
How the magic needle flies!
Click—click—click—
    I can scarce believe my eyes!
Seam, and gusset, and band,—
    Band, and gusset, and seam,—
    I really could almost work asleep,
    And sew away in my dream!” (17-24)

Like the first stanzas of each poem, these third stanzas share identical rhyme schemes, and the writer again parallels his subject matter to that of the Hood’s piece, while twisting the original implications. The “eyes” in Hood’s piece are “heavy and dim,” while “The Sewing Machine” poet “can scarce believe [her] eyes” as she watches the amazing machine perform her work. Hood’s exhausted sleep and following dream, implying the endless hours of labor performed by
the working-class seamstress, in the latter poem occurs not from exhaustion but ease. The drudgery and exhaustion in Hood’s poem becomes an energy created by the machine, followed by a sweet sleep induced by the ease of sewing with the machine.

The poem calls women to sew, suggesting both productivity and fun in performing this domestic duty:

“Click—click—click—
   My work is almost done,
Click—click—click—
   Before I have scarcely begun!
Oh! shame on the girls, I say,
   Who now would their duty shirk,
And waste their time in dressing and play,
If this is needle work! (9-16)

Again, this stanza parallels the subject matter of Hood’s second stanza, although its end rhyme scheme differs in lines 13 to 16:

“Work! work! work!
   While the cock is crowing aloof!
   And work—work—work,
   Till the stars shine through the roof!
It’s O! to be a slave
   Along with the barbarous Turk
   Where woman has never a soul to save
If this is Christian work! (9-16)

Both stanzas depict the timeframe of the seamstress’ work, and become tied together by “The Sewing Machine” poet’s use of similar rhymes between the two poems like “Turk” and “shirk” or assonance like “slave” and “say” or “save” and “pay.” In Hood’s piece, however, the woman sews from dawn when “the cock is crowing aloof / [...] Till the stars shine through the roof” while the sewing machine owner’s “work is almost done / [...] Before [she has] scarcely begun.” Then, as the first poem admonishes the treatment of the English woman seamstress like that of “the barbarous Turk,” the advertisement cautions against the extreme opposite—women (like
those of the aristocracy) who "would their duty shirk, / And waste their time in dressing and play." Sewing, in the second poem, becomes a suitable leisure activity, which also fulfills the woman’s "moral duties" in the domestic sphere.

The advertisement writer infuses "The Sewing Machine" with the kind of liveliness associated with leisurely play throughout. For example, the poet changes the rhyme at the ends of lines two and four to the more energetic sound of "flies" and "eyes" rather than the muted tone of "swim" and "dim," accentuating the energy of the lines with exclamation points. The addition of the dash after the third "click" in lines one and three creates a forward movement, as well as the addition of dashes at the ends of numerous lines, to counter the stagnant feeling of Hood's poem. In addition, the Finkle and Lyon poem also removes the many images of death present in Hood's piece, replacing them with energy and images of life which even extend to the personification of the machine. Where Hood creates beautifully disturbing images of the woman sewing a death shroud as she sews the shirt, and her gaunt, deathlike appearance which move the reader to sympathy, "The Sewing Machine," continues to depict its seamstress performing her easy work with endless energy. Rather than "Sewing at once, with double thread, / A Shroud as well as a Shirt" (Hood 31-32), the sewing machine, "sews whatever you choose,— / From the finest piece of tender gauze / To a cloak or a pair of shoes!" ("The Sewing Machine" 26-28). So much energy exists in the second poem, in fact, that in direct contrast to the fasting figure of Hood's piece, "The Sewing Machine" endows the machine with the same energy that infuses his seamstress: "As I watch the merry thing / In fancy oft, within my sight, / To life it seems to spring!" (30-32).

The lines 13-16 in which these playful qualities of sewing on the machine and the duty implied in the act of sewing come neatly together, also define the audience. These particular
lines suggest that the user of the machine will be a middle-class woman or girl, rather than house servants, as the poet offers the option of sewing as the alternative to the “dressing and play,” which would not have been activities in which house servants indulged. The middle-class wife often prided herself on particular tasks in the home including baking, embroidery and sewing projects, maintaining these duties separate from those of her servants. Ellen Plante writes in *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* that “many middle-class women prided themselves on their ability to bake excellent breads or turn out exquisite cakes and would balk at turning such jobs over to domestics” (142). She also notes that advice pamphlets “set high standards in regard to all manner of home work, [...] placing yet more pressure on wives and mothers to achieve perfection” (141). The poet seems to utilize the emphasis on perfection by imitating the regularity of the stitches created by the sewing machine versus Hood’s irregular indentations conveying hand-sewn stitches.³

Not only did the sewing machine cater to the image of perfection sought by middle-class women, but also the picture of leisure so important to the housewife. Women’s magazines discussed the lightened burden of the woman’s sewing duties. In an 1855 issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, in fact, a section called “Godey’s Arm-chair” reprinted an excerpt from the “Saturday Post” that described the sewing machine as follows:

[T]he housekeeper feels that with its help she can easily compass that important part of her duties—the clothing of her family. The spring sewing or the fall sewing for half a dozen children, loses its formidable aspect, when a yard of handsome and substantial stitching can be run off in two minutes. That never-ending, still-beginning drudgery of the needle, immortalized by Hood in his mournful “Song of the Shirt,” need not much

longer be counted among the grievances of humanity: for no woman of the least enterprise of spirit will long submit to sit stitching from dawn till dark, at a garment which could be better done in forty minutes. (185)

The writer of the Finkle and Lyon advertisement may have found his inspiration from this very article printed in the Saturday Post. What is most striking about this excerpt, as well as the poem, is the misleading suggestion by both that the sewing machine would lighten the burden of the kind of woman “immortalized by Hood.” That such a poem or article would make such an implication seems remarkable, considering that the target audience for both women’s magazines and the Finkle and Lyon poem was middle-class women—the kinds of women whose husbands made enough money to purchase a sewing machine. Yaffa Draznin explains in Victorian London’s Middle-Class Housewife that sewing machines “ranged in price from an inexpensive £6 model [...] to the best but expensive Singer machine selling for up to £15” (67). While England’s middle-class incomes rose significantly between 1850 and 1870, Andrew August’s Poor Women’s Lives explains that London’s average working-class family in 1880 made enough money to spend on rent and food (usually of the poorest variety) with “seven shillings per week left for other expenses” (66). Likewise, for American working-class women the expense would have been difficult to manage, especially with husbands entering the war, and wives increasingly entering the field of domestic servitude and industry, earning “the lowest wages and often the harshest conditions on the American industrial scene” (Montgomery 33). Even on the installment plan, which allowed buyers to purchase machines for about two shillings, six pence per week, buying a sewing machine would have severely strained the budgets of the working-class family (August 90).
Of course, even with a sewing machine, the working-class woman would have to do endless sewing to make enough money to support herself and her family; hardly the playful work described by “The Sewing Machine.” The effects of the sewing machine on the working class, in fact, were more negative than publications like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* would ever have acknowledged. Although “sempstresses using sewing machines suffered less from contracted chests, pallid colour and weakened eyes than their predecessors, who had sewn by hand” (Perkin 193), it also lowered their wages. August explains, “the sewing machine allowed [manufacturers] even grater savings by eroding skills and reducing costs. These employers directed a larger share of the work to poorly paid women” (94). Whether or not the health benefits of using the sewing machine outweighed the difficulty that depressed wages made of meeting rent dues and acquiring food is a matter of speculation. In any case, the sewing machine hardly lightened the burden of the working-class seamstress.

The lightness of the work implied by “The Sewing Machine,” also ironically avoids the sense of responsibility, patriotism, and serious importance brought to the act of sewing by the American Civil War (which began six months before the appearance of the Finkle and Lyon advertisement.) A letter published in an 1863 issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* suggests that, in light of the war, the woman’s fulfilling of her ordinary domestic duties was no longer sufficient. Nelson summarizes the import of the letter, explaining, “it was [women’s] responsibility to provide a moral example that went beyond their roles as loving mothers, sisters, and wives and reclaimed their roles as productive members of society” (164). In response to their growing responsibility to the war effort, women began working together to increase productivity. As women took up their domestic duties with new fervor, sewing circles became popular, producing various supplies from uniforms to quilts. Sewing quickly became a tangible form of women’s
patriotism, speaking directly to that sense of “duty” so familiar to the middle-class woman, and carrying the notion from the well-being of her immediate family to the good of her nation as a whole. Jeannie Attie, in her work on the roles of Northern women during the American Civil War cites an article from *Arthur’s Home Magazine* in 1962 which “declared that while men dominated as statesmen, patriots, and conquerors, women were invisible but all-important heroines at home” (30).

Many middle-class women worked harder than ever before, driven by this new urgency placed upon her domestic duties. In her book *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust explains the physical exhaustion of one such woman driven by patriotism:

Lucy Wood wrote to Waddy Butler in May 1861, describing herself as nearly “broken down” from having sewed so intensively for the past three weeks. The ladies of Charlottesville had assembled each morning at town hall with cloth and sewing machines and had worked steadily through the day, except for the interruptions for group prayer. Exhausted, Lucy was nevertheless proud to report that she, too, was making her contribution to the Cause. “Our needles are now our weapons,” she wrote, “and we have a part to perform as well as the rest.” (24)

Lucy Wood, using a sewing machine probably much like the Finkle and Lyon model, exhausted herself with her hours of labor contributing to the Cause. In contrast to the seamstress in “The Sewing Machine,” Lucy’s fingers were probably not “nimble and fine,” nor her “features gladsome and gay,” by the end of her working day, although her sense of patriotism continues to fill and motivate her. The idea of sewing “the finest piece of tender gauze / To a cloak or a pair of shoes,” too, becomes unrealistic when women are sacrificing luxuries and spending their
hours sewing uniforms and blankets for men in battle: traditional views of femininity and
domicity are effectively beginning to change in America. Thus, “The Sewing Machine” relies
on a fantasy based in ideals of femininity that are starting to become passé. While Hood’s poem
creates a sphere for the comfortable middle-class to sympathize with the suffering seamstress,
“The Sewing Machine,” creates a small realm for women to fantasize in the midst of national
turmoil.

**Ambiguous Roles within the Victorian Periodical**

Studying “The Song of the Shirt” and “The Sewing Machine” in juxtaposition not only
reveals cultural history by creating an elaborate picture of the enduring class and gender
stereotypes in which the works participate, but also provides deeper understanding of various
literatures existing in the increasingly popular Victorian periodical press. During the nineteenth
century, the written word became readily available in unprecedented ways; rising literacy rates
and new printing technologies made the periodical a frequent source of reading material for large
portions of the population. Jennifer Phlegly gathers the statistical evidence in her book *Educating
the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the
Nation*, to demonstrate the prominence of the magazine: “During Queen Victoria’s reign, there
were as many as 50,000 magazines published in Great Britain alone […] In the U.S. 2,500
magazines were issued between 1850 and 1865, despite the hampering effects of the economic
panic of 1857 and the Civil War” (2). In addition, the number of weekly newspapers in the U.S.
reached 2,300 by 1850, with circulation increasing drastically with the American Civil War
(Geller 26). In both Victorian England and America, the periodical reigned.

The large audience for Victorian periodicals generally would have consumed periodical
literature without distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction, advertisement and news, story
and editorial. Anne Humpherys explains in her essay “Popular Narrative and Popular Discourse in *Reynold's Weekly Newspaper*” that “[I]n the beginnings of […] the periodical press] in the late seventeenth century, there was little if any recognizable boundary between fact and fiction, between novel and news. […] This mixture continued into the nineteenth century” (35). One readily finds this mixture in “The Song of the Shirt” and “The Sewing Machine.” Hood’s poem, firmly based in the facts of Biddel’s trial and as dependent on timeliness as its news-story counterparts, simultaneously exhibits the characteristics of finely-crafted poetry, while the “The Sewing Machine,” appears as a poem, with little to distinguish it from other poetry appearing in *Harper’s Weekly*, but functions as an advertisement. Both “The Song of the Shirt” and the Finkle and Lyon advertisement exhibit the ambiguity between various forms of literature appearing in nineteenth-century periodicals.

Hood’s presentation of timely subject matter in traditional poetic conventions in “The Song of the Shirt” and many of his other poems, made difficult the classification of and the assignment of literary value to Hood’s work during his lifetime and beyond. His reception during the years he was writing varied greatly depending on his critic. Throughout his lifetime, Hood gained great respect among contemporaries such as Charles Dickens, Allan Cunningham, and Edgar Allen Poe, yet “received few sound criticisms,” as critics “urged him not to forsake his romantic, ‘serious’ muse” (Clubbe 7). Hood’s critics seemed to continue relying on the conventions of Romanticism to evaluate literary works during a time when such conventions began to clash with periodical literature’s increasing emphasis the culture’s most timely concerns. Many of Hood’s biographers and critics today argue that this period of changing literary emphasis constitutes a brief but distinctive and often overlooked literary period squeezed between Romanticism and Victorianism. In this space, Jefferey explains, “Hood is not only
overshadowed but eclipsed by the great Romantics who preceded and by the great Victorians who followed him” (Preface). Hood’s poetry adopts a gradual movement away from his predecessors as Romantic ideals become subject to the culture of the Victorians. Biographer J.C. Reid explains the literary moment as follows:

In Hood’s generation, perhaps more than in the previous one, the basis was laid for Victorian popular poetry. It was Hood and his contemporaries who diluted the spirit of the Romantics, blended their manners with elements from a pre-Wordsworthian style and by adapting Romantic themes and forms to the taste of lower middle-class readers, established precedents in the poeticizing of the commonplace. [...] In the 1820’s the Romantic energy peters out in spiritual and imaginative exhaustion, [...] and poetry becomes uneasily betrothed to journalism” (4-5).

Hood adopts the Wordsworthian insistence on the experience of the common man in ordinary, unadorned language, but also contemporary issues not only, as Reid suggests, “to the taste of lower middle-class readers,” but also to the upper- and middle-class readership of Punch and the many periodicals which republished the poem shortly after its appearance. The social protest nature of “The Song of the Shirt,” and its timely relationship to its audience’s concerns, overpowers its Romantic characteristics and creates a foundation for future Victorian verse, intimately tied, as Reid suggests, to the periodical press in which it most often appears.

While Hood’s biographers tend to view the writer as a pioneer of Victorian literature, as he sets the stage for future nineteenth century literature’s emphasis on the popular interests of its largely middle-class audience, many of today’s critics seem to be struggling with the same difficulties as the critics of Hood’s day. A brief examination of literary anthologies from the mid-twentieth century (Hood’s popularity seems to have dropped off after the 1930s) through today
reveals a varying spectrum of importance attributed to Hood’s works. In 1972, Hood appears in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, but his most popular poem, “The Song of the Shirt” does not appear among the three works chosen. Two years later, he earns only a tiny blurb in the *Oxford Anthology of English Verse*, under the section “Other Romantic Poets.” He does not appear in the Norton or Longman Anthologies popular in today’s English classrooms, but finds his place in movement-specific anthologies like *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (1997). He seems to have acquired a “hit or miss” quality among anthologies of the past fifty years.

The precarious existence of Hood in recent literary anthologies seems to be partly due to the struggle of current literary scholars to distinguish between categories of “literature” and “journalism”—distinctions that did not exist until the late nineteenth century. Laurel Brake explains in her Introduction to *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, “It is only as academic specialisation developed that journalism was defined principally as a practice” (xii). The term “journalism” becomes part of literary discourse with Matthew Arnold’s 1887 definition of “New Journalism” to define a growing field of writing which he assigned to “the bottom of the hierarchy of cultural forms” (Brake *Subjugated* 83). Today, many scholars seem to apply Arnold’s opinion toward earlier Victorian periodical literature, leaving “the most prolific literary form of the nineteenth century, and the precursor of modern journalism, [...] largely [...] ignored by scholars and students in higher education” (Brake *Introduction* xii). Thus, one suspects that critics of today toss Hood in or out of their lists of must-read poetry, as they impose varying criteria upon his work in order to decide whether the undeniable “journalistic” timeliness of his poetry outweighs its “literary” merits.

Just as “The Song of the Shirt” seems to defy current attempts to classify his work as journalism or literature, and possesses characteristics of various categories of periodical
literature, serving multiple purposes—as a piece of literary art, as a space in which readers can sympathize, and as a reinforcement of current news and audience concerns—"The Sewing Machine" remains likewise ambiguous. The ambiguity of the advertisement come as little surprise, because just as journalism and literature once coexisted under the umbrella term "periodical literature," so, too did advertising. In the early years of the nineteenth century, advertisements were essentially news, tossed into the blurry mixture of fact and fiction that seemed to constitute periodicals of the day. Philip Gold clarifies the early characteristics of the periodical advertisements in *Advertising, Politics, and American Culture*: “Prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, [...] most ads merely announced the availability and commented on the special virtues of specific merchandise up for sale. Such notices, of local and temporal interest, and often exceedingly dull, were generally written and placed by retailers” (5). The "pizzazz" lacking from these early advertisements gave the reader little to distinguish them from news stories.

Another contribution to the ambiguity of advertising and other periodical components was the use of "puffery." Manufacturers and business owners who wanted a "puff," paid editors to write favorably of their products or services under the guise of an editorial or news story, as Pamela Walker Laird explains in *Advertising Progress* (Laird 37). Puffery, in fact gave way to literary criticism with increasing academic specialization. Brake elucidates the relevance of puffery to the development of literary criticism in *Subjugated Knowledges*. She notes that "the effectiveness of puffing [...] was largely dependent on the absolute authority accorded the periodical of one’s choice" (7). Eventually, reliance on this "authority" waned and "hastened the reliance of publishers on more open advertising" (7). This more open advertising seemed to come into its own during the 1860s (although puffery was not entirely dead), when, as Laird
notes, American readers began to differentiate “between commercial and noncommercial announcements by reserving the term *advertisements* for the former” (59).

Even as the field of advertising began to separate from the overarching field of publishing, print advertisements appearing in periodicals continued to be somewhat ambiguous, as “The Sewing Machine,” demonstrates. The very placement of the advertisement on its *Harper’s Weekly* page makes the piece difficult to classify. Pamela Walker Laird notes in *Advertising Progress*, “Densely packed pages that often did not distinguish between commercial and other announcements typified newspapers until printing technologies in the 1870s permitted increased illustrations” (20). Interestingly, however, the page on which “The Sewing Machine” appears in 1861, is packed with both detailed political illustrations as well as advertisements. It’s placement alongside the political cartoons, and its poetic form which is unlike the other advertisements on the page, makes it appear, at first glance, to be strictly a poem, rather than an advertisement. Reading the piece, however, it reveals itself as an advertisement, but its simultaneous conversation with Hood’s poem makes it valuable as a piece of literature as well. Thus, even after reading the poem, the question of its worth as an advertisement *and* as a piece of literature remains elusive—it exists, like much of Victorian periodical literature, as a blending of periodical genres, capitalizing, as most did, on popular culture.

As advertisers became more attuned to popular culture and the ways to manipulate the values and ideals of the periodical readership, their popularity boomed, seeming to become as important a part of the reading material of periodicals as the news itself. A subtle growth in the popularity of the advertisement can be seen as early as 1861, during the months leading up to the publication of “The Sewing Machine.” An inspection of issues of *Harper’s Weekly* beginning in August 1861, reveals a slight increase of space devoted to advertising from about a quarter of a
page to nearly a full page’s worth by November (though scattered on more than a single page.) Throughout the decade, many companies were spending tens of thousands of dollars annually on advertising. As the decade went on, the advertisement gained greater visibility and extreme popularity. According to Frank Preserby in *The History and Development of Advertising*, George Wakeman wrote an article for *Galaxy Magazine* in 1867 declaring that:

> [A]dvertising in the United States had then got to the point at which “the names of successful advertisers have become household words where great poets, politicians, philosophers and warriors of the land are as yet unheard of; there is instant recognition of Higg's saleratus and Wigg's soap even where the title of Tennyson's last work is thought to be 'In a Garden' and Longfellow understood as the nickname of a tall man (255).

Ironically, however, the actual names of the advertisement writers, like that of “The Sewing Machine” poet, go completely unrecognized.

Ultimately, the instant fame of Hood's poem in 1843, and the popularity of advertising by the 1860s point us back to the dominant ideology of the consumer culture, and the direct relationship between the periodical and its consumer. Victorian literature as we have come to know it, could not have existed without an acute sense of popular ideology, and a certain degree of subordination to the role of commodity—an object to be consumed by a culture dominated by consumption. The most profitable writers were those that could best manipulate the current trends in news, fashion, and values. The extent to which such literary works continue to be relevant once the events of the moment have passed, and the lingering question of how to assign literary value to works that capitalize on timeliness have created enduring debate among literary scholars and critics. It will be interesting to see whether Hood's work survives as a literature, or
fades into history like “The Sewing Machine” as the work of a mere advertiser who skillfully marketed his product to the popular concerns of the readership.
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