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The Man Who Gave A Voice To A Shirt: Thomas Hood (1799–1845)

Although Thomas Hood was born in London, his father's family were Scottish farmers. After leaving school at fourteen, Thomas worked in a counting house and then began to study the craft of engraving. However, his health, which was never good, suffered and he was sent to recuperate with relatives near the Scottish city of Dundee and it was here that he began to write poetry. He also began writing articles and sketches for newspapers and periodicals.

At the age of nineteen, he returned to London and due to the influence of friends, he was given the post of sub editor of *The London Magazine*. Hood was fond of comic and satirical writing and he went on to edit the *Comic Annual* and other annuals. He continued to edit and to write even after he was confined to his sick bed where he lay for much of his adult life. Year after year of illness brought increasing poverty to Thomas and his wife who he married when he was twenty-five. Due to the intervention of his influential friends, he was awarded a civil pension but it came too late to alleviate his poverty as he died just a few months later.

Two years before his death, Hood wrote his most famous and influential poem, entitled *The Song of the Shirt*. One of the most terrible occupations for a woman in early Victorian times was to be a seamstress. In such an occupation, you were given the choice of being worked to death in your home in order to avoid starvation or you were worked to death in a factory or sweat shop. In his deeply

shocking book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Frederick Engels describes the life of seamstresses who slept in a bare attics above shops and who were forced to work eighteen or more hours each day during the fashion season.



It is a curious fact that the production of precisely those articles which serve the personal adornment of the ladies of the bourgeoisie involves the saddest consequences for the health of the workers . . . Enervation, exhaustion, debility, loss of appetite, pains in the shoulders, back, and hips, but especially headache, begin very soon; then follow curvatures of the spine, high, deformed shoulders, leanness, swelled, weeping, and smarting eyes, which soon become short-sighted; coughs, narrow chests, and shortness of breath, and all manner of disorders in the development of the female organism. In many cases the eyes suffer so severely that incurable blindness follows; but if the sight remains strong enough to make continued work possible, consumption usually soon ends the sad life of these milliners and dress-makers.

Women who lived on the premises had one advantage of those seamstresses who worked in their own slums in that they were less likely to get into debt.

Those who worked at home were compelled to put down a deposit of £2 in order to buy the material with which to make garments such as shirts. No matter how hard or how long they worked each day, it was almost impossible to eat, pay rent and earn enough to pay back the deposit. Thomas Hood came to know a seamstress called Mrs. Biddell who found herself in precisely this position of being unable to pay her debt to the shop owner. In order to avoid seeing her children starve to death before her eyes, she was reduced to pawning the clothes she had made with the material she had been given so that she had no possible means of repaying her debt. The inevitable consequence of this was that she was sent to the workhouse. It would be no exaggeration to say that being sent to the workhouse in early Victorian times was a fate worse than death as there are numerous accounts of women in London throwing themselves into the Thames rather than endure the shame and horror of entering the workhouse. It is not known what happened to Mrs. Biddell, or her children, but in her weakened and half-blinded state, she would have been unlikely to survive long with such a harsh regime.

The Song of the Shirt had an extraordinary success. It was first published anonymously in the Christmas edition of *Punch* magazine in 1843 then soon reprinted in *The Times*. The poem was dramatised for the stage, printed in broadsheets and handkerchiefs. Charles Dickens was a great admirer of the poem. Genteel and fashionable ladies who had for long turned a blind eye to the human cost of their

fashionable garments were moved by the poem and perhaps their emotion was tinged by guilt. As one social commentator remarked, those politicians who had abolished slavery in the British colonies conveniently overlooked the slavery which was taking place in their own country. Hood's poem had a considerable influence in the campaign to alleviate the lives not only of seamstresses but the millions of other British men, women and children who endured intolerable working conditions. Just a year after Hood's poem was published, Parliament introduced a series of *Factory Acts* which eventually reduced the working day to ten hours. Although there was a drastic shortage of inspectors to ensure that unscrupulous employers adhered to this law, it was a vital step forward making it a criminal offence to work employees into an early grave.

A few years after his death, a monument to Thomas Hood was raised by public subscription. There is no such monuments to Mrs. Biddell whose body would presumably have been unceremoniously dumped into a communal pit. She would never have known that her life and sufferings had inspired one of the most socially and politically influential poems in the history of English Literature. In his poem *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, W.H. Auden states that *poetry makes nothing happen* but, on rare occasions, it does.

from *The Song Of The Shirt*
by Thomas Hood

“But why do I talk of death?
That phantom of grisly bone,
I hardly fear his terrible shape,
It seems so like my own -
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep;
Oh, God! that bread should be so
dear.
And flesh and blood so cheap!

“Work – work - work!
“My labour never flags;
And what are its wages? A bed of straw,
A crust of bread - and rags.
That shattered roof - this naked floor -
A table - a broken chair -
And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank
For sometimes falling there!

“Work – work - work!
From weary chime to chime,
Work – work - work,
As prisoners work for crime!
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Till the heart is sick, and the brain benumbed,
As well as the weary hand.

“Work – work - work,
In the dull December light,
And work – work - work,
When the weather is warm and bright -
While underneath the eaves
The brooding swallows cling
As if to show me their sunny backs
And twit me with the spring.

“O! but to breathe the breath
Of the cowslip and primrose sweet -
With the sky above my head,
And the grass beneath my feet;
For only one short hour
To feel as I used to feel,
Before I knew the woes of want
And the walk that costs a meal!

“O! but for one short hour!
A respite however brief!
No blessed leisure for Love or hope,
But only time for grief!
A little weeping would ease my heart,
But in their briny bed
My tears must stop, for every drop
Hinders needle and thread!”

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, -
Would that its tone could reach the Rich! -
She sang this “Song of the Shirt!”