Shirt

SUMMARY

The speaker begins by listing out the various, specific pieces of fabric that make up their own shirt, before envisioning how those parts were sewn together in a sweatshop in a country such as Korea or Malaysia.

The speaker imagines how the sweatshop workers might have chatted over lunch, gossiping or talking about politics while sewing together the shirt's arm—the cuff of which the speaker buttons up even now.

Then, the speaker begins to list specific, specialized pieces of factory machinery used to make clothing, like "pressers" and "cutters," as well as words that have to do with labor laws, unions, and building codes.

This all makes the speaker think of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster, a fire in which 146 people died: they were stuck on the ninth floor with no fire hydrants to extinguish the flames and the building didn't have any fire escapes.

The speaker imagines a witness in another building at the time looking on as a young man helped a young woman climb up onto a windowsill and then jump away from the burning factory. Then he helped another girl do the same. The man did this as casually and politely as though he were simply helping them climb into a streetcar rather than helping them drop down to their deaths.

The speaker imagines a third girl passionately embracing the young man before he held her out the window and then let her fall.

When the young man then jumped out of the window himself, the rush of air almost immediately made his suit jacket fly up and away from his shirt and puffed up his gray pant legs.

The young man in his ballooning shirt looked like a character from a Hart Crane poem, who jumped to his death off the Brooklyn Bridge. The speaker then thinks about the physical construction of the shirt again, appreciating how its pattern is perfectly aligned across its different parts—as though the fabric's pattern and the shirt's construction were different words in a perfect rhyme or notes in the same major chord.

The speaker considers different textile patterns—like plaids, houndstooth, and madras, and then begins to deconstruct the patterns' histories starting with tartans (which historically have been linked to specific Scottish clans). These, the speaker says, were actually designed by factory owners taking cues from the "hoax of Ossian" in order to control their Scottish workers, whom they viewed as less civilized. (Ossian is the name of a fictional epic poet created in an attempt to foster pride in Gaelic literary history; likewise, the speaker is saying that tartans were designed to make displaced and oppressed Scottish workers feel tied to a made-up symbol of their clan's lineage and nobility.)

Similarly, the speaker describes how kilts were actually designed to make workers more productive by allowing them to freely navigate the factory floor. This prompts the speaker to picture different types of workers at different points in the production process—weaving, spinning, and so forth.

The speaker then thinks of the workers who transport materials—those who load them onto ships or vehicles, those working at docks, those manual laborers building roads, canals, railroads, and so forth. Next, the speaker considers the origins of the shirt's raw materials in the first place: the people who plant, pick, and sort cotton. They compare contemporary cotton farmers to enslaved people toiling away on plantations.

The speaker invents their own character—a Black textile inspector in South Carolina named Irma who, they imagine, is the modern-day descendent of the English poet George Herbert.

Like the speaker, Irma is satisfied with the shirt based on its physical characteristics: color, fit, feel, and smell. Both the speaker and Irma have made determinations about the shirt's appropriate price and its quality by evaluating every detail—from its buttons made of faux ivory to the brand label that's been affixed to the collar.

The speaker then lists labor alongside the different elements—like the cut, fabric color, and brand name—that make up the shirt.

THEMES

EXPLOITATION AND CONSUMERISM

Robert Pinsky's "Shirt" describes the unseen (or actively ignored) people whose labor goes into a single shirt, from the Korean workers stitching its collar to the people who planted, picked, and sorted the cotton from which its fabric was woven. In tracing the history of this shirt, the poem alludes to a series of human tragedies tied to the mass production of consumer products (including American slavery, sweatshop labor, and worker exploitation, and the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911). By telling these stories of exploitation and industrial disaster, the speaker exposes all the hidden pain and suffering that goes into the production of a simple object that most people take for granted.

Throughout the poem, the speaker switches between narrating

human stories and describing the details of the shirt itself. In doing so, the poem invites readers to think about the human costs behind material possessions. For example, the speaker refers to "sweatshop" workers "talking money or politics" while piecing the garment together and "[g]ossiping over tea and noodles on their break." By creating connections between the physical qualities of the shirt and the different narratives that make up the poem, the speaker demonstrates how each part of production relies on human labor.

Every part of the shirt—from its buttons to its collar to its pattern—is linked to some kind of exploitation. The speaker also alludes to historical tragedies tied to large-scale production to suggest that this shirt is simply one piece in a long history of exploitation and inequality. For example, common decorative patterns—"Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras"—all originate in systems of colonial or imperialist authority; similarly, "clan tartans" were "[i]nvented by mill-owners... [t]o control their savage Scottish workers, tamed / By a fabricated heraldry." Even something as seemingly harmless as a plaid pattern is linked to the degradation and exploitation of a group of people.

The speaker also highlights the fact that, because consumers demand these produced goods, they are at least partially responsible for the suffering that production causes. The elements of the shirt that are intricate and even beautiful stand in stark contrast to the brutality behind its creation, suggesting that consumers often purchase and use products without thinking about the history behind them. The speaker is "satisfied" with the shirt's "cost and quality" directly after narrating all the horrific events that were part of its production process.

These tragedies, the poem stresses, aren't apparent when one looks at a finished project—and it's all too easy for consumers to be apathetic and wilfully blind to workers' struggles.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

The back, the ...
... Koreans or Malaysians

The poem opens with a detailed description of the speaker's shirt. Some of these terms might be unfamiliar to anyone who's never sewn before:

- The "yoke" is the piece of fabric around the neck and shoulders. (Yokes are also wooden beams placed over the shoulders of an animal, usually a cow or ox, that allow them to pull a heavy load behind them. Because the poem explores the tragedies of labor and production, this double meaning—which implies the comparison between human workers and beasts of burden—becomes quite important.)
- "Yardage" refers to the amount of fabric needed to make the shirt.
- "Lapped seams" refers to a sewing technique in which one piece of fabric is laid over the edge of another to create a two-layer seam.

By listing out all these specific elements of the shirt, the speaker reveals that a lot goes into making even a seemingly simple item of clothing. The asyndeton here adds to the effect, making it sound as if the speaker is quickly scanning the shirt and examining the specific details of its construction, one by one:

> The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
> The nearly invisible stitches along the collar

Without any conjunctions, it sounds like this list could go on and on. This, in turn, speaks to just how complex this shirt really is. (The poem will return to this technique over and over as the speaker explores both the shirt's appearance and its history.)

The fact that the "stitches along the collar" are "nearly invisible," meanwhile, speaks the skill of whoever made this shirt—and prompts the speaker to think about the workers behind this craft. The speaker can only guess who made the shirt: perhaps people in a "sweatshop" somewhere, "Koreans or Malaysians." The juxtaposition between the intricate beauty of the shirt and the "sweatshop" in which it was made hints at the poem's broader point: that people often overlook or don't care about the human cost behind their material comforts.

This stanza is a tercet, meaning it's made up of three lines. The poem will use this form throughout, and the strict stanza structure results in frequent enjambments. That is, the speaker often breaks up thoughts right in the middle of a clause in order to stick to the three-line form, as readers can see in the final two lines of this opening stanza:

> The nearly invisible stitches along the collar
> Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians
> Gossiping [...]

All this enjambment will make the stanzas feel intertwined and connected, in turn evoking the connections between each element of a single shirt.

LINES 4-7

Gossiping over tea ...
... at my wrist.

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker guessed that

"Koreans or Malaysians" working in a "sweatshop" must have sewn this shirt together. Now, the poem begins to vividly imagine those workers' lives—how they might be "gossiping over tea and noodles" and seriously discussing "money or politics" while sewing. These details highlight the fact that these workers aren't just faceless, faraway machines: they're real people with real lives.

But those lives are very different from the speaker's own. While the speaker "buttons" the shirt's cuff—using and enjoying the shirt—the sweatshop workers fit the "armpiece with its overseam to the band." The technical language here emphasizes both the workers' skill and their difference from the speaker: their job is to create the shirt, not to wear it. They must produce the object that the speaker consumes. The enjambment of these lines works similarly, moving readers swiftly down the page and reflecting the deftness with which these works sew.

Although the speaker doesn't present a completely bleak picture of the workers' lives, imagining them socializing and enjoying themselves, the reality of the situation is that they are sweatshop workers: confined to a factory, likely forced to work brutal hours, and making less than a living wage.

The poem thus highlights the fundamental inequity of consumer culture: some people *make* goods (and live in pretty awful conditions), and some people *buy* goods (and live comfortably). Imagining the real lives of the people who made this shirt, the speaker implicitly reflects on the unfairness of this situation.

LINES 7-12

The presser, the ...
... no fire escapes—

Once again, the physical details of the shirt lead the speaker to think about its production process. In another example of asyndeton, the speaker lays out the tools of the garment industry. The anaphora here (all those "the"s) makes the list seem to go on and on, in turn emphasizing just how much work, how many small steps, go into the creation of a single shirt:

> [...] The presser, the cutter,
> The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,
> The treadle, the bobbin. [...]

Readers probably won't be familiar with all these specialized tools, making the list seem all the more overwhelming and impressive. These are indeed all real devices. The "wringer," for instance, expels water from clothes in a way that is quite violent—foreshadowing the brutality of factory equipment (and factory life) that the speaker later lays out. "The mangle," a kind of press once used to get water out of just-washed clothes, also has some sinister connotations.

- Back in the Industrial Revolution, when clothes were first mass-produced, there were few labor laws to protect workers. Many workers were exhausted and undertrained, and the powerful tools they worked with were often badly maintained.
- This made textile factories extremely dangerous, and countless workers were horrifically injured in machine accidents—literally *mangled*.

As the speaker continues this list of factory tools, then, they begin to switch back and forth between tools of the trade (like "the needle," "the treadle," and "the bobbin") and institutions relating to labor laws and workers' rights ("the union" and "the code").

This train of thought leads the speaker to explore one of the most famous, terrifying disasters of modern American manufacturing: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911.

- The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Greenwich Village, New York City, was, like almost all factories at the time, unregulated. Because the factory had "no hydrants, no fire escapes"—and because its staircases were locked to prevent theft and stop workers from taking breaks, the workers weren't able to escape the building when a devastating fire broke out.
- As a result, it became the deadliest workplace accident in New York history, as well as a landmark event in the fight for workers' rights.

The poem's allusion to this disaster suggests that the speaker's mind is very much on the human suffering behind the long history of mass production.

LINES 13-18

The witness in ...
... and not eternity.

Rather than just narrating the story of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire from a detached, distant perspective, the speaker tells the story of a witness: someone who watched the tragedy but couldn't help the workers trapped inside. By telling the personal tales of both this witness and the people who died, the speaker draws attention to the human toll of this historic disaster.

This witness, the speaker recounts, watched as "a young man" helped a young woman climb up onto a windowsill and then jump out of the building to her death. Compounding the horror of the scene, the speaker continues, "And then another"—indicating that this man helped multiple young women leap away from the flames and to their deaths below.

By describing the figures in this scene as "a young man" and "a girl," the speaker draws particular attention to just how *untimely* these deaths were. This was not only a tragedy that could have

been avoided with even the tiniest degree of concern for these workers' safety and wellbeing, but also one that claimed the lives of vulnerable young people. The kindness the young man displays—helping the girls up to the windowsill even in his last moments, even in the middle of the pain and fear he must himself feel—makes this moment even more poignant.

Notice, too, how the enjambment across the stanza break here evokes that terrifying leap:

> Up to the windowsill, then held her out
> Away from the masonry wall and let her drop.

Finally, the speaker uses a simile to compare the young man's actions to the chivalrous gesture of helping someone up "to enter a streetcar." Of course, he's really helping them to "eternity"—that is, to death. Here, the speaker invites readers to imagine what these young people's day-to-day lives might have been like, juxtaposing an everyday (and perhaps flirtatious) gesture with the needless horror and tragedy of the fire.

LINES 19-24

A third before ...
... his gray trousers—

The speaker continues to emphasize the depth and pathos of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster by humanizing its victims.

Here, the speaker describes the young man helping yet another young woman climb up and out of the burning building. Before "he dropped her" to her death below, however, this girl embraced him—wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him. As soon as this embrace was over, the young man "held / Her into space"—that is, out of the window—and let her fall.

This is a deeply sad image of two young people seeking a moment of comfort and connection before dying. Through this image, the speaker highlights the sadness and desperation held in the decision to end one's own life by jumping out of a window rather than being caught in the fire—a horrific decision, and one that was the direct product of a classist and oppressive system that esteemed productivity over human life. Remember, this tragedy happened in the first place because this factory prioritized production over workers' safety. By narrating this poignant moment of intimacy in the face of such horror, the speaker makes the apathy of consumption and production seem even colder and crueler. In other words, the desire for fast and affordable material goods seems all the more selfish.

Notice how most of these lines are enjambed, a technique that dramatically mirrors the composition of the scene itself. The poem drops off the edge of each line just as the young man drops the girl from the window after she kisses him:

> A third before he dropped her put her arms
> Around his neck and kissed him. Then he held
> Her into space, and dropped her. Almost at once
> He stepped to the sill himself [...]

The structure of the poem thus reflects its content.

In the second of these two stanzas, the speaker describes the young man's own fall from the window primarily by describing his clothes. Although this moment follows a series of intensely emotional, personal images, it marks the poem's move back into the superficial world of material goods. The speaker stops focusing on the man's *personhood*; instead, the speaker narrates the way his clothes look as they fill with a rush of air.

Once again, the material world distracts from the realities of human life—the man shifts into being a collection of consumable objects (jacket, shirt, trousers).

LINES 25-30

Like Hart Crane's ...
... Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras.

Over the course of "Shirt," the speaker switches back and forth between focusing on the physical details of the shirt—or the physical aspects of the textile industry in general (such as the tools listed earlier in the poem)—and the human history of the shirt itself. These frequent transitions highlight how it's often easier, as a consumer, to just enjoy products without ever thinking about their origins and the suffering that goes into their production.

Even as the speaker narrates the tragic tale of young workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory jumping from the window instead of staying inside to die in the fire, the speaker becomes distracted (or, maybe, deliberately distracts themselves) with those physical details.

The speaker continues the description of the young man falling to his death by comparing him to a figure from modernist American poet Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge." Crane writes:

> Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
> A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
> Tilting there momently, shrill shirt ballooning,

The word "bedlamite" comes from "Bedlam," the nickname of an infamous psychiatric institution in London. Crane is describing a disturbed person jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge and the way the rush of air makes this person's shirt puff out as they fall.

This allusion suggests that the speaker is fixating upon the *superficial image* of the falling man rather than the human tragedy of the moment. Rather than the pathos of both situations, it is the image of the "shrill shirt ballooning" that

directly inspires the speaker to draw this connection between art and life.

As the speaker is drawn once again into the shirt's tangible characteristics, they compare its perfectly-matched, perfectly-placed pattern to "a strict rhyme / or a major chord": something that lends structure to a work of art. They then present another list: "Prints, plaids, checks, / Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras." The asyndeton here speeds this list up, suggesting that these patterns almost overwhelm the speaker.

LINES 30-35

The clan tartans ...
... dusty clattering looms.

In this section, the speaker's musings on the history of shirt patterns ("Prints, plaids, checks, / Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras") give way to yet another exploration of the suffering behind the production of a simple garment.

As the speaker considers plaids and checks, they are reminded of Scottish tartans: striped and colored motifs passed down through families. Except, the speaker says, these patterns were actually "invented" by factory owners in order to keep their supposedly "savage" Scottish workers under control.

Some historical context helps here: the speaker is referring to a time when Scots were oppressed under British imperial rule, meaning those "mill-owners" would have been mostly English (and, historically, would have looked down on the Scottish people). The speaker argues that mill owners created these patterns to keep workers pacified, to grant them a (false) sense of cultural pride.

And those owners, the speaker says, were taking their cues from "the hoax of Ossian." Ossian was a fictional epic poet, deliberately made up to stand in as a sort of Gaelic version of Homer or John Milton. By aligning the two events—the fake story of Ossian, the invention of "tartans" tied to specific "clans"—the speaker suggests that the very creation of plaid patterns was an act of domination and control. That is, the "mill-owners" played upon their Scottish workers' desire for a legitimate Gaelic history that they could claim as their own by fabricating a "heraldry" (i.e., a visual symbol of their lineage, like a coat of arms) tied to family names like "MacGregor, / Bailey, MacMartin." (This desire for a sense of Scottish history was inspired by the fact that Gaelic culture had been largely stamped out by early British imperialism.)

The speaker then explains how the traditional Scottish kilt was actually invented for practical purposes: it was intended to be a highly functional garment that workers could wear in the factory, a piece of clothing designed to allow them to easily navigate the equipment and make them more efficient. Even something as seemingly simple as a type of garment or a fabric pattern is linked to this dark, oppressive history of global labor.

LINES 36-42

Weavers, carders, spinners. ...
... inspected my shirt.

Once again, a list (in this case, a list of occupations) leads the speaker from one link in the supply chain to another. The speaker's use of asyndeton conveys the way in which their thoughts free-associate as they go from thinking about:

- "Weavers, carders, spinners" (textile workers in the factories themselves);
- "The docker, the navvy" (workers engaged in some form of packaging/shipping/transportation);
- And finally "[t]he planter, the picker, the sorter" (workers dealing with growing, harvesting, and processing raw materials).

The speaker then lays out the connection between contemporary global sweatshop labor (that woman toiling away "at her machine" surrounded by "cotton") and the heartbreaking legacy of American slavery (those enslaved women sweating while picking cotton "in fields"). By comparing these two images, the speaker suggests the similarities between modern hard labor and historical forced labor. In other words, the speaker suggests that modern working conditions aren't that far off from actual enslavement.

The sounds of these lines seem to evoke the toil being described. For example, listen to the sharp alliteration and consonance of these lines:

> [...] The planter, the picker, the sorter
> Sweating at her machine in a litter of cotton
> As slaves in calico headrags sweated in fields:

Those crisp /p/ and /c/ sounds combine with hissing sibilance to make the passage sound more intense and forceful.

Finally, the speaker compares a made-up textile inspector named Irma to the English metaphysical poet George Herbert. Herbert was famous for his precision and intensity, so perhaps the speaker makes this allusion in order to compare "Irma's" decisiveness in the art of inspecting/approving the shirt to Herbert's skill with language.

LINES 42-48

Its color and ...
... shade. The shirt.

Just as the speaker operates as a stand-in for the global consumer, the fictional Irma is a stand-in for the final stage in the production process: the quality checker or inspector. While both the consumer and the inspector are not directly responsible for the abuses inherent to the production process, the speaker seems to argue that—by being satisfied with the final garment and giving it their stamp of approval—they are

complicit in the capitalist machine: in all of the inequity and pain caused by the systematic oppression of workers.

The list that opens this last part of the poem—unlike most of the preceding lists—features polysyndeton, which emphasizes the piling-on effect of all the qualities the speaker names:

> [...] Its color and fit
> And feel and its clean smell have satisfied

Those "and"s create the effect of forced justification: the speaker, who is obviously very aware of the horrors of the production process, is explaining the rationale behind their satisfaction with the garment.

Then the shirt's "cost and quality" are boiled down to the sum total of its physical characteristics, which the speaker lists off rapid-fire. It's unclear if the speaker is overcome by the overwhelming weight of their own consumerist impulses, or if the speaker is deliberately trying to distract themselves from the guilt of being satisfied with a garment tied to so much oppression.

Either way, the speaker lists out various elements that make the shirt acceptable: its buttons of "simulated bone" (i.e., something like faux ivory), proper sizing, and, of course, the brand label printed "on neckband and tail." Finally, the speaker seems to sum up everything that makes "the shirt":

> [...] The shape,
> The label, the labor, the color, the shade.

Like the poem's minimalist name, the speaker's last thought is an ambiguous one—ultimately, it seems the speaker does not know how to feel about the fact that they've accepted the product of such a cruel process.

But notice how "the labor" is slotted in the middle of this list, alongside every other element with no additional emphasis or fanfare. The anaphora of "the" also makes each list item feel equally important. In listing "labor" so casually next to things like a shirt's color and the name on its label, the speaker is subtly showing how much people devalue the true human cost of their material goods.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This poem weaves in and out of the speaker's perspective on the shirt itself, the garment's history, and the broader landscape of capitalist production. To keep things grounded, the poem is structured around a series of very specific allusions that gesture to different parts of the shirt's production process and link it to trends, movements, and events throughout history.

The first allusion begins at the end of the third stanza:

> [...] The infamous blaze
> At the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven.
> One hundred and forty-six died in the flames
> On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes—

The infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 was a real event in which 146 garment workers—the youngest being just 14 years old—died. Stairway and exit doors had been locked to minimize worker breaks and increase productivity, and many did indeed jump to their deaths to escape the flames as dozens of witnesses looked on. The tragedy led to legislation meant to improve safety standards in factories. By including this allusion, the speaker links their own shirt to a long history of labor exploitation.

Late, the allusion to "Hart Crane's Bedlamite," a figure that appears in Crane's poem "To Brooklyn Bridge," creates an automatic emotional connection while simultaneously underscoring the gravity of the situation.

- In Crane's poem, the "Bedlamite" commits suicide by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. The line "shrill shirt ballooning" is a direct quotation from Crane's poem and refers to the rush of air that fills the falling "Bedlamite's" shirt.
- In the speaker's narrative, a worker is forced to jump from the factory of the window to escape the fire. Air similarly puffs out the falling worker's clothes.

Finally, two allusions to literary events/figures—the hoax of Ossian and the English poet George Herbert—tie the shirt's production (and wider capitalist systems) to elements of literary history. For context:

- Ossian was once believed to be a third-century epic poet, a kind of Gaelic answer to Homer and John Milton. He didn't actually exist, however, having been invented by an 18th-century Scottish poet. In saying that "mill-owners" were "inspired" by this "hoax," the speaker is saying that the creation of clan tartans was a ploy to placate Scottish workers living under British imperialism—to grant them a sense of cultural history and pride in their work (and keep them under control).
- George Herbert, meanwhile, was not literally the ancestor of "a Black / Lady in South Carolina." Instead, this allusion is meant to imply just how intricate the "shirt" is: Herbert was known for his precise language and elaborate conceits. The comparison implies that "Irma" is similarly precise and skilled when evaluating all the intricate details

of this shirt.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "The infamous blaze / At the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven. / One hundred and forty-six died in the flames / On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes—"
- **Line 25:** "Like Hart Crane's Bedlamite, "shrill shirt ballooning.""
- **Line 31:** "Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian,"
- **Lines 40-42:** "George Herbert, your descendant is a Black / Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma / And she inspected my shirt."

SIMILE

The speaker uses two similes that underscore the deep emotion, humanity, and pathos of certain tragic moments.

Both similes appear in the section of the poem in which the speaker narrates the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. And it's no mistake that both similes describe images of workers jumping out the factory windows; the speaker is otherwise unable to capture the sheer fear, horror, and sadness of these deaths. Here's the first simile:

> Away from the masonry wall and let her drop.
> And then another. As if he were helping them up
> To enter a streetcar, and not eternity.

By comparing the first scene—in which a young man helps young women jump out the window rather than letting them remain trapped inside to die in the fire—to the romantic ideal of a young man chivalrously helping a young woman into a streetcar, the speaker draws attention to the tragedy of the workers' youth. By comparing their reality (being forced to work in unsafe conditions and ultimately losing their lives as a result) to the blissful lives of more fortunate young people going on dates in their leisure time, the speaker underscores the inequities of labor, production, and capitalism in general.

The speaker also compares the image of the young man falling from the factory window to a figure from Hart Crane's famous poem "To Brooklyn Bridge": a "Bedlamite," or insane person, who commits suicide by jumping from Brooklyn Bridge ("Bedlam" refers to a psychiatric institution in England). "Shrill shirt ballooning" is a direct quotation from Crane's poem, which describes the way air filled up the man's shirt as he fell to his death.

By highlighting the language "shrill shirt ballooning" in Crane's poem, the speaker draws attention to the falling worker's clothing in "Shirt." This focus on the *garment* the young man is wearing—a shirt that is a part of the very textile industry that killed him—makes the event of his untimely death all the more brutal.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "As if he were helping them up / To enter a streetcar, and not eternity."
- **Line 25:** "Like Hart Crane's Bedlamite, "shrill shirt ballooning.""

ENJAMBMENT

The enjambment in this poem echoes the way in which the speaker's thoughts race and flow into one another. The speaker goes back and forth between appreciating the shirt's physical characteristics and narrating the terrifying, oppressive history of its production, and frequent enjambment seems to echo those rapid shifts in perspective.

The speaker's point of view is ambiguous: rather than making a clear argument that demonstrates their feelings on the shirt (or the capitalist production system behind it), they are indecisive. And as they waver between perspectives, their words spill over the line breaks without pause or punctuation. Like the listing that similarly appears throughout "Shirt," this consistent enjambment dictates both the tone and pace of the poem. It also allows the speaker to transition seamlessly between describing the shirt and imagining its history.

Look at the enjambment in lines 2-7, for example, which speeds the reader down the page and swiftly past stanza breaks in a way that evokes the skill and efficiency of these garment workers:

> The nearly invisible stitches along the collar
> Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians
> Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break
> Or talking money or politics while one fitted
> This armpiece with its overseam to the band
> Of cuff I button at my wrist. [...]

The enjambment here also links the speaker—the consumer—and the workers: there's no pause to indicate a separation between as the poem moves from the process of creating the shirt to the speaker putting it on.

Finally, this continuous flow of information mirrors the speaker's own confusion in the face of the dilemma of being an informed consumer: if they are aware of the suffering that went into the production of a garment, how can they conscience buying and using said garment?

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "collar / Turned"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Malaysians / Gossiping"

- **Lines 4-5:** "break / Or"
- **Lines 5-6:** "fitted / This"
- **Lines 6-7:** "band / Of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "blaze / At"
- **Lines 11-12:** "flames / On"
- **Lines 13-14:** "street / Who"
- **Lines 14-15:** "step / Up"
- **Lines 15-16:** "out / Away"
- **Lines 17-18:** "up / To"
- **Lines 19-20:** "arms / Around"
- **Lines 20-21:** "held / Her"
- **Lines 21-22:** "once / He"
- **Lines 22-23:** "flared / And"
- **Lines 26-27:** "perfectly / Across"
- **Lines 27-28:** "bar-tacked / Corners"
- **Lines 28-29:** "rhyme / Or"
- **Lines 30-31:** "tartans / Invented"
- **Lines 32-33:** "tamed / By"
- **Lines 34-35:** "workers / To"
- **Lines 37-38:** "sorter / Sweatin'"
- **Lines 38-39:** "cotton / As"
- **Lines 40-41:** "Black / Lady"
- **Lines 41-42:** "Irma / And"
- **Lines 42-43:** "fit / And"
- **Lines 43-44:** "satisfied / Both"
- **Lines 44-45:** "quality / Down"
- **Lines 46-47:** "characters / Printed"

ASYNDETON

Like the enjambment that runs throughout the poem, asyndeton speeds the poem up in a way that evokes the speaker's rapidly-shifting train of thought. In omitting the conjunctions readers would expect, the speaker creates a dual sense of urgency and confusion as the items in the poem's many lists rush after one another. Asyndeton also creates a piling-up effect—the feeling that the speaker could go on and on listing out details that go into the shirt's creation.

The poem uses asyndeton right from the start, quickly listing out the various pieces of the shirt:

> The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
> The nearly invisible stitches along the collar

The speaker immediately thrusts readers into a description of the shirt that pans over its details, passing quickly from those to "[t]he nearly invisible stitches along the collar" and then to the image of the Korean or Malaysian sweatshop in which the shirt was constructed.

Because these lists mirror the swift passage of the speaker's own train of thought, the speaker often uses them to transition between the different perspectives explored in the poem.

When the speaker lists off factory tools—"[t]he presser, the cutter, the wringer, the mangle"—they quickly go from thinking about the tools of the trade to the brutality of the trade itself, and then to one of the most well-known, public manifestations of that brutality:

> The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The infamous
> blaze

They repeat this strategy later in the poem, when "[w]eavers, carders, spinners" give way to "[t]he loader, / [t]he docker, the navvy" and finally "[t]he planter, the picker, the sorter."

The asyndeton in these lists allows the speaker to think their way through the supply chain and imagine all the processes that ultimately produced and delivered the shirt into their hands.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams, / The nearly invisible stitches along the collar"
- **Lines 7-9:** "The presser, the cutter, / The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union, / The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The infamous blaze"
- **Line 12:** "On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes—"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Prints, plaids, checks, / Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras."
- **Lines 33-34:** "MacGregor, / Bailey, MacMartin."
- **Lines 36-37:** "Weavers, carders, spinners. The loader, / The docker, the navvy. The planter, the picker, the sorter"
- **Lines 40-41:** "your descendant is a Black / Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma"
- **Lines 45-48:** "the buttons of simulated bone, / The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters / Printed in black on neckband and tail. The shape, / The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism works alongside the asyndeton in this poem's numerous lists. For example, note the anaphora of "the" as the speaker lists out various parts of the shirt in the opening lines:

> The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
> The nearly invisible stitches along the collar

The speaker uses the same format—a quick list punctuated by "the"s throughout the poem, moving seamlessly from talking about parts of the shirt itself to the tools of the trade ("The presser, the cutter, / The wringer, the mangle") to the many different laborers who worked on the shirt ("The docker, the navvy. The planter, the picker, the sorter").

The descriptions of the shirt come quickly—the speaker seems

almost overwhelmed by all the minute, artisanal details of the garment. Yet with each of those details comes the realization that someone, somewhere put in the labor to create that particular element. That is, this parallel language links workers to their machinery and to their final product. It suggests that consumers can't actually separate material goods from the human cost of their creation.

By drawing parallels between different parts of the shirt, the speaker also underscores the delicacy of their differences while simultaneously suggesting their *similarities*: it ultimately *doesn't matter* whether the speaker is looking at a pocket or a cuff or a pattern, since all of these different aspects of the garment were created in the same brutal system.

Parallelism and repetition also effectively drive home this brutality. When the speaker describes the conditions at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, for example, the parallelism in the phrase "no hydrants, no fire escapes" underscores the extent to which workers were endangered by shoddy labor conditions and left completely unprotected. In this same section of the poem, the parallelism between "[t]he infamous blaze," and "[t]he witness in a building across the street" draws attention to the stark difference between the observer, who is safe across the street, and the workers trapped in the burning factory.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The back, the yoke, the yardage."
- **Line 2:** "The nearly invisible stitches along the collar"
- **Lines 7-9:** "The presser, the cutter, / The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union, / The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The infamous blaze"
- **Line 12:** "no hydrants, no fire escapes"
- **Line 13:** "The witness in a building across the street"
- **Lines 30-32:** "The clan tartans / Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian, / To control their savage Scottish workers,"
- **Lines 34-35:** "The kilt, devised for workers / To wear among the dusty clattering looms."
- **Lines 36-37:** "The loader, / The docker, the navvy. The planter, the picker, the sorter"
- **Line 46:** "The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters"
- **Lines 47-48:** "The shape, / The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration contributes to the intense, frantic flow of the poem/ the speaker's train of thought. On a basic level, the many shared sounds make the poem feel all the more emphatic and, at times, overwhelming. Take lines 37-39, where /p/, /s/, and sharp /k/ sounds pile up:

> The planter, the picker, the sorter
> Sweating at her machine in a litter of cotton
> As slaves in calico headrags sweated in fields:

Here and elsewhere, the combination of alliteration and asyndeton makes the poem feel even faster, creating a rhythm that drives the poem forward. For example, when the speaker describes the young man jumping from the window, the repeated /s/, /f/, and /l/ sounds flow into and build upon each other (while also suggesting the sound of wind whistling past a falling body):

> He stepped to the sill himself, his jacket flared
> And fluttered up from his shirt as he came down,
> Air filling [...]

In addition to accelerating the poem and connecting its different ideas, alliteration also emphasizes the effects the speaker creates. The harsh /k/ sounds in the phrase "[w]e have culled its cost and quality" evoke the implicit brutality of consumption, while the thudding /b/ sounds in "the buttons of simulated bone, / The buttonholes" draw attention to the word "bone"—a grim reminder of the pain and even death behind the shirt's production.

Finally, in one of the most powerful examples of alliteration (in addition to consonance and assonance), the last stanza of the poem employs repeated starting letters ("shape," "shade," "shirt," "label," "labor") to suggest that each of these words can *transform* into the next. The "label" of the shirt, which is a stand-in for its physical characteristics, easily turns into the word "labor:" the inhumanity of its production. Likewise, the garment's qualities (its "shape" and "shade") easily turn into the "shirt" itself.

The alliteration in this passage, and in the poem overall, leads readers to one of the poem's central questions: what exactly makes up a shirt, or any consumer good? Is it the sum of its parts, of its history, or both?

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "yoke," "yardage"
- **Line 6:** "band"
- **Line 7:** "button"
- **Line 11:** "forty," "flames"
- **Line 22:** "stepped," "sill," "himself," "flared"
- **Line 23:** "fluttered," "from"
- **Line 24:** "filling"
- **Line 25:** "Bedlamite," "shrill shirt," "ballooning"
- **Line 26:** "pattern," "perfectly"
- **Line 27:** "placket," "twin," "tacked"
- **Line 28:** "pockets"
- **Line 29:** "Prints, plaids"
- **Line 32:** "savage Scottish"

- **Line 33:** "MacGregor"
- **Line 34:** "MacMartin," "workers"
- **Line 35:** "wear," "clattering looms"
- **Line 36:** "carders"
- **Line 37:** "planter," "picker"
- **Lines 37-38:** "sorter / Sweating"
- **Line 38:** "cotton"
- **Line 39:** "slaves," "calico," "sweated"
- **Line 42:** "fit"
- **Line 43:** "feel," "smell," "satisfied"
- **Line 44:** "culled," "cost," "quality"
- **Line 45:** "buttons," "bone"
- **Line 46:** "buttonholes"
- **Line 47:** "shape"
- **Line 48:** "label," "labor," "shade," "shirt"

ASSONANCE

The assonance in this poem basically functions in the same way as the alliteration that runs through it (though assonance appears less often overall). The repeated vowel sounds connect and compare different aspects of the speaker's train of thought and also simply add sonic interest and intensity to the poem. Take the quick, delicate /ih/ sounds of "invisible stitches" in line 2, which subtly evokes the intricacy and skill behind the shirt's production.

Later, repeated /ah/ sounds pile up in lines 26-27:

> Wonderful how the pattern matches perfectly
> Across the placket and over the twin bar-tacked

There's also a great deal of consonance and alliteration here of crisp /p/, /k/, and /t/ sounds. The speaker evokes the intricacy of the shirt itself through the intricacy of the poem's language.

Finally, the long /ay/ sounds in the poem's final two lines add a rush of intensity and create a sense of connection between the different parts of the shirt:

> [...] The shape,
> The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt.

The shared sounds here reflect the link between each element of the shirt and the shirt itself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "invisible stitches"
- **Line 7:** "cuff," "button"
- **Line 8:** "needle"
- **Line 9:** "treadle"
- **Line 13:** "witness in," "building"
- **Line 26:** "pattern matches"
- **Line 27:** "placket," "tacked"
- **Line 43:** "feel," "clean"
- **Line 44:** "me," "quality"
- **Line 47:** "shape"
- **Line 48:** "label," "labor," "shade"

CONSONANCE

The consonance in this poem works just like alliteration and assonance, filling its lines with intensity, urgency, intricacy, and a forceful rhythm that propels readers forward.

At times, consonance works alongside the poem's use of parallelism/anaphora to create the sensation of an endless building list. Take lines 8-9, where the speaker lists out different tools used in the manufacturing process:

> The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,
> The treadle, the bobbin. [...]

Sounds seem to slip into each other and trigger new thoughts from the speaker. The shared sounds might also seem a bit overwhelming, in turn reflecting just how many steps go into the creation of a simple garment.

Consonance also adds to the poem's tone. It's no coincidence that so many works here include /p/, /k/, and /t/ sounds—crisp, even harsh, sounds that evoke both the intricate detail and icy brutality of the labor process. For just one example, look to lines 26-29:

> Wonderful how the pattern matches perfectly
> Across the placket and over the twin bar-tacked
> Corners of both pockets, like a strict rhyme
> Or a major chord. Prints, plaids, checks,

These sounds create a harsh internal rhythm that drives the poem forward even faster.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "back," "yoke," "yardage"
- **Line 2:** "stitches"
- **Line 3:** "Turned," "sweatshop"
- **Line 5:** "talking," "politics"
- **Line 6:** "band"
- **Line 7:** "button," "wrist," "presser," "cutter"
- **Line 8:** "wringer," "needle," "union"
- **Line 9:** "treadle," "bobbin"
- **Line 11:** "forty," "flames"
- **Line 12:** "floor," "fire"
- **Line 21:** "Almost," "once"
- **Line 22:** "stepped," "sill himself," "flared"
- **Line 23:** "fluttered"

- **Line 24:** “filling”
- **Line 25:** “Bedlamite,” “shrill shirt ballooning”
- **Line 26:** “pattern,” “perfectly”
- **Line 27:** “Across,” “placket,” “twin bar-tacked”
- **Line 28:** “Corners,” “pockets,” “like,” “strict”
- **Line 29:** “chord,” “Prints, plaids,” “checks”
- **Line 30:** “Houndstooth,” “Tattersall,” “clan,” “tartans”
- **Line 31:** “hoax”
- **Line 32:** “control,” “savage Scottish workers”
- **Line 33:** “MacGregor”
- **Line 34:** “MacMartin,” “workers”
- **Line 35:** “wear”
- **Line 37:** “planter,” “picker”
- **Lines 37-38:** “sorter / Sweating”
- **Line 38:** “litter,” “cotton”
- **Line 39:** “slaves,” “calico,” “sweated”
- **Line 42:** “fit”
- **Line 43:** “feel,” “clean smell,” “satisfied”
- **Line 44:** “culled its cost,” “quality”
- **Line 45:** “buttons,” “simulated bone”
- **Line 46:** “buttonholes,” “sizing,” “facing,” “characters”
- **Line 47:** “black,” “neckband,” “shape”
- **Line 48:** “label,” “labor,” “color,” “shade,” “shirt”

VOCABULARY

Yoke (Line 1) - A yoke is the part of a garment that fits over the shoulders. The speaker uses it here to literally refer to that aspect of the shirt.

Yardage (Line 1) - The word "yardage" has to do with measurements (the number of yards in a particular length). In this case, it refers to the amount of fabric needed to make the shirt in question.

Lapped seams (Line 1) - A lapped seam is a kind of seam, or connection between two pieces of fabric, in which one piece of fabric overlaps the other (hence the term "lapped").

Wringer (Line 8) - A wringer is a device that wrings water from (typically fabric) objects like clothes. It typically squeezes and manipulates them until water is expelled.

Mangle (Line 8) - Although this word appears in a list of factory tools/equipment (a "mangle" is another word for a "wringer," which is a device that expels water), its double meaning makes it all the more profound. The verb "to mangle" means to horribly tear or disfigure something. By using this word here, the speaker alludes not only to the machine by this name, but to the awful machine accidents that often injured and even killed factory workers.

Triangle Factory (Line 10) - The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was a textile factory in New York City's Greenwich Village, and the site of the deadliest industrial disaster in the city's history (and one of the deadliest in American history). When a fire broke out at the factory in 1911, 146 workers were killed—in large part because the factory owners had locked the doors to the stairs and fire escapes to prevent theft/workers from taking breaks. This horrific accident became a landmark case in the struggle for workers' rights and safer industrialization.

Hart Crane's Bedlamite (Line 25) - This phrase is an allusion to a poem by American Modernist writer Hart Crane: "To Brooklyn Bridge." In the poem, Crane describes a "bedlamite," or madman, jumping from Brooklyn Bridge. The term "bedlamite" itself (commonly used to describe a person out of their mind) originates from the name of a London psychiatric hospital in the 1400s. The hospital was called "Saint Mary of Bethlehem"; over time, its name was shortened to "bedlam" and the word became used to describe any kind of insanity, panic, or chaos.

Placket (Line 27) - An opening at the top or sleeve of a shirt that allows the garment to be put on more easily.

Bar-tacked (Lines 27-28) - Bar-tacking is a process by which certain areas of a garment (often ones that are put under a lot of stress) are reinforced through double-stitching.

Houndstooth (Line 30) - Houndstooth is a Scottish textile pattern similar to a checkerboard print, but in which the squares of light and dark color are broken up into more irregular shapes (resembling the jagged teeth of a hound dog).

Tattersall (Line 30) - A simple checked pattern created by combining a horizontal stripe with thin vertical stripes.

Madras (Line 30) - A lightweight cotton fabric with a tartan pattern named after the city of Chennai, which was formerly called Madras when it was an outpost of the British East India Trading Company. The colonial, imperialist history attached to this fabric and its name complicates it and makes it more than just a simple textile.

Hoax of Ossian (Line 31) - Ossian, dubbed "the Homer of the North," was a fictional epic poet invented by the Scottish poet James Macpherson in the 18th century. For a long time, this fabricated figure was held up as a cornerstone of Gaelic history, culture, and literature.

Fabricated heraldry (Lines 32-33) - Heraldry is the use of symbols to display relationships, historic ranks, or family lineages. In this case, the speaker refers to a "fabricated heraldry": a made-up system of signs, crests, and family names bestowed upon Scottish workers by factory owners. By assigning these workers false histories, the factory owners were better able to manipulate and control them.

Spinners (Line 36) - Like the word "carder," the word "spinner" can be used to refer to either a piece of machinery or a person. The "spinner" tool spins individual strands of wool into yarn; a worker who is a spinner operates this tool.

Carders (Line 36) - Simple devices that prepare fibers

(particularly wool) to be spun into textiles. The word "carder" can also refer to the specific factory worker tasked with this job.

Loader (Lines 36-37) - In this part of the poem, the speaker moves away from discussing textile factory workers and starts discussing workers involved with other parts of the production process. Given this context, a loader is a dockworker who loads and unloads cargo from a transportation vessel.

Docker (Line 37) - Like a loader, a docker works in shipping—specifically, dockers help dock transportation vessels as they enter and leave ports with their assorted cargoes.

Navvy (Line 37) - "Navvy" is an antiquated British term for workers employed in arduous civil engineering projects, particularly the digging of canals. The word is an abbreviation of "navigator" or "navigational engineer," but also came to refer to unskilled manual laborers in general.

Calico (Line 39) - A kind of woven cotton fabric that's often patchworked or patterned with multiple colors. Calico originated in Calicut, India, and is considered a simple and accessible fabric (contrasted against the complex cotton garments the slaves themselves are weaving).

George Herbert (Lines 40-41) - George Herbert was a Metaphysical poet in 16th-century England renowned for his effective use of language, poetic purity, and word choice. Much of his poetry was devotional and religious in nature, which added to the precision of his thought andf writing.

Culled (Line 44) - To cull something is to select it from a large quantity, or to cut a population down to a smaller group. It has violent connotations—in animal breeding specifically, it describes the process of removing "undesirable" traits from a genetic pool.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Although this poem doesn't have a particular rhyme scheme or meter, it does have a very regular form. It's divided into a series of 16 tercets—groups of three lines.

These tercets break the separate pieces of the poem up: visually, they create some white space between different phases in the shirt's production. This gives the speaker's fluid train of thought some structure as they switch between considering the shirt's physical construction—the tangible, easily noticeable details that satisfy the consumer—and the brutal history and implications of its production process.

Many of these lines are also enjambed, meaning they flow into each other without pause—often across stanza breaks, as in lines 42-43:

> And she inspected my shirt. Its color and fit
> And feel and its clean smell have satisfied

While the steady tercets lend the poem structure and a sense of moving along step by step, all this enjambment reflects the fact that each of the individual processes and workers is ultimately connected by the shirt itself.

METER

Although this poem is separated into regular tercets and filled with rhythmic lists that spur it forward, it doesn't have any kind of regular meter. Instead, it's written in free verse—a form that allows the poem to feel more like a direct transcription of the speaker's free-flowing thoughts.

Take the first two lines, for example:

> The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
> The nearly invisible stitches along the collar

Although these lines feature a clear alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables that gives the poem a bit of a disjointed, galloping effect (that, perhaps, mirrors the speaker's racing thoughts), they certainly don't have a regular meter.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Shirt" doesn't have a steady rhyme scheme. Although there are a lot of repeated sounds in the poem (in the form of assonance and consonance), there isn't really rhyme, not even slant rhyme or internal rhyme. As with the poem's lack of meter, this looseness reflects the way the speaker's thoughts bounce from one image to the next, tracing the long, windy history of a simple shirt.

It's also worth remembering that rhyme tends to make things feel cohesive and tidy. The lack of rhyme scheme here thus subtly works to underscore the speaker's cognitive dissonance. That is, the speaker doesn't really know how they feel about the shirt: although they appreciate it as a product, they are aware of its tragic history and acknowledge their own complicity in the production process as a consumer.

SPEAKER

The speaker is first and foremost a consumer. They are primarily defined by their relationship to the shirt: they appreciate it, presumably wear it, and most importantly, they have approved of it through their implied purchase of the garment.

The speaker is also someone interested in history, particularly production history. The fact of the speaker's deep knowledge only makes their consumption of the garment more fraught; because they know so much about all the pain, suffering, and

oppression that went into the shirt's production, their appreciation of the shirt becomes all the more complicated.

Throughout the poem, the speaker grapples with a sort of double consciousness or cognitive dissonance: how can they, knowing what they know about the cruelty of the shirt's production, buy or wear the shirt itself?

SETTING

This poem bounces rapidly between settings. Although its main setting is somewhat abstract—just a continued physical survey of the shirt itself, which the speaker keeps returning to—the speaker's digressions into the history of the shirt's production lead them to a variety of different places, even though these movements all occur in the speaker's mind.

The first setting that emerges is a sweatshop in Korea or Malaysia, while the second is both a scene in place and in time: the infamous 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

Later in the poem, a few different scenes briefly flicker in the speaker's imagination—English/Scottish mills and Deep South cotton fields. Finally, the speaker ends the poem by examining the shirt again: a return to the garment, and to the domain of the speaker's physical observations.

By moving fluidly between all these settings, the poem illustrates just how much history and how many human lives are packed into a simple item of clothing.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Pinksy published "Shirt" in his 1990 collection *The Want Bone*. In 1997, seven years after the publication of *The Want Bone*, he was elected Poet Laureate of the United States.

Although "Shirt" tackles global labor issues in a way that feels undeniably contemporary, it actually belongs to a long tradition of poems that meditate upon individual objects (John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is one of the most famous examples of a poem in this genre). Because Robert Pinsky chooses here to focus on a mass-produced object rather than a singular work of art, however, this poem complicates the genre and questions the very fabric of modern relationships with production.

Pinsky was famous for being one of the "civic," public poets. This particular poem reflects his efforts to democratize poetry by making it both accessible and relevant to contemporary American audiences. It also builds on Pinsky's fascination with history evidenced in his second book, the long poem *An Explanation of America*. At the same time, "Shirt" seems to anticipate the poet's later movement towards combining the personal with the large-scale and political: his explorations of the history of the self alongside the broader history of countries and movements.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Shirt" itself spans hundreds of years in the history of labor, touching on everything from 18th-century Scotland to American slavery to modern-day sweatshops in Asia. The common thread of all these different contexts in the poem is human exploitation in the name of profit—that is, people being valued less than the products of their labor. The exact mechanics of production may have changed, the poem implies, but the cost of mass consumer culture remains as high as ever.

The 1980s, the decade leading up to the publication of "Shirt," was considered a particularly materialistic time in American history. This was, after all, the heyday of "yuppies" (young professionals with cash to burn and expensive tastes) and shopping malls; Madonna's "Material Girl" came out in 1985. "Shirt" doesn't nod to any of this directly, but this cultural backdrop undoubtedly informs the poem's critique of rampant consumerism and shoppers' selective ignorance.

By the time "Shirt" was published, there was also a growing resurgence of interest in political poetry—one likely inspired by an overarching resurgence of interest in politics and protest, particularly in artistic or intellectual circles.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Robert Pinsky's Life and Work — A biography of Robert Pinsky from the Poetry Foundation covering his life, work, and literary development. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-pinsky)
- "Shirt" at New York Fashion Week — Listen to a conversation between designers at New York Fashion Week describing the production process in relation to Pinsky's poem, followed by an analysis by the poet himself. (https://www.poetryinamerica.org/episode/shirt/)
- Want List: A Review of The Want Bone — A review of Pinsky's collection The Want Bone, the book in which "Shirt" first appeared. (https://newcriterion.com/issues/1990/12/want-list)
- The Art of Poetry: Robert Pinsky — Read a Paris Review interview with Robert Pinsky in which the poet discusses his artistic process and relationship to language. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1218/the-art-of-poetry-no-76-robert-pinsky)
- Poetry on Film: Robert Pinsky's Shirt — A discussion of "Shirt" as well as the a visualization of the poem produced by the Nantucket Project. (https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/poetry-film-robert-pinskys-shirt)

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