This is a composition that focuses on workers within the landscape. The eye is drawn to a large piece of working machinery, left of center that includes a smoking chimney. Chains attach to structures right and left in the composition. The large left hand structure has a two level system of pulleys that glisten in the sunlight. The right hand structure is smaller, has an open door framing a figure, and a soft plume of smoke that comes from its chimney. A tall shaft with a circle pulley diagonally slants at its rear. Immediately in front of that structure a blue weighbridge frames a horse and wagon. The wagon appears to be carrying coal. Figures to the right of this shovel move more of the coal into wheelbarrows.

In the foreground, several figures move to the left of the composition. In the center, a man leads two donkeys containing baskets of coal. Left of center, another man pushes a wheelbarrow of coal. Two horses are to his right, while another two - attached to a coal filled wagon - graze behind.

**Background**

The action of this illustration seems to follow a circular movement, from left to right and back again. Starting at the left, the large structures and machinery dominate. Our eye moves along the cable to the right, where a horse and wagon carry coal - coming from the smaller structure. Perhaps this is a cause and effect illustration. Workingmen, above the ground, load coal into baskets and wagons for transport. The large machinery in the middle ground overshadows the workers size and occupation.
Mining coal had been a viable British industry even before the Industrial Revolution. As population increased, there was a greater demand for coal for domestic heating. Increased industrial activities - requiring steam-powered engines - demanded even greater amounts.

Thomas Newcomen invented a steam engine to pump water out of underground mines in 1712. Atmospheric pressure moved the piston down the cylinder and steam from the boiler caused the piston to rise. A vacuum was created with the interaction of cold water and hot steam, and the piston was in full operation moving the counterweights up and down. Newcomen's engine was replaced with James Watt's steam engine later in the century. Watt's steam engine gradually replaced the natural power of the waterwheel.

We found a prodigious large fire engine at work, draining the water from the pit; and adjoining to it a circular aperture of a tolerable diameter, filled with smoke. We were gently lowered by the operation of six horses employed for that purpose, till we found ourselves at the end of about five minutes safely landed on solid ground, and with a huge fire burning on one side, to keep the air at the proper temperature. What surprised me the most, were the horses I found living there. The miners do not continue in the pits above twelve hours at a time. The coal is wound up in baskets, and these baskets again are emptied onto carts, which are placed on cylindrical wheels.

Contemporary account of a visit to a Northumberland coal mine; 1778
The Iron Forge  Joseph Wright, 1772  Tate Gallery

A small rectangular shape of pure light is the visual center of this composition, around which all action occurs.

A bending man, with his back to the viewer, holds the glowing bar on top of an anvil. His leather apron drapes in front of him, and his leather boots tie at the knee. A tall man with his arms folded across his chest stands in the center middle ground. A strong reflected light defines his features and muscular physique. He wears a white shirt with a red striped vest and brown leather apron. His capped and tilted head glances to his left. Cast in reflected light, three female figures of various ages stand on the right.

Within the group, the central woman - her back to the viewer - has her hair up in a bun and holds a young child. Her brown shawl lightly drapes around her neck to reveal the falling shoulder of her golden dress. To her right, an adolescent girl holds the woman's waist and looks in the direction of the viewer. Her blue overskirt is drawn up to reveal a patterned slip beneath. She wears white stockings and simple black shoes.

On the left, a man sits with his back to the viewer. His head bent, he holds his hand up to his eyes while looking in the direction of the glowing bar. A young child clings to his right leg.
The room's interior is of rough construction. A thick wooden beam above the figures creates a strong horizontal plane. Wooden roof slates form a diagonal emphasis, catching reflected light. The walls and floor of the structure appear to be made of cut stone, their textures and colors catching and reflecting light. A vertical column of brickwork appears on the far left.

A large hammer creates a strong diagonal line above the glowing bar. Immediately behind, a large round wooden barrel shaped structure is horizontal to the picture plane. The cast light defines both shapes as well as their component parts.

**Background**

This strongly lit composition creates a sense of drama and heroics in the workings of a rustic iron forge. Centered around a water-wheel driven tilt hammer, this scene displays the power of the material (iron) and the power of those who work it.

All this part of the country is very agreeably pleasant, wholesome and fruitful...and is accordingly overspread with good towns, gentlemen’s houses, populous villages...and the lands well cultivated...south is exceedingly grown with timber, has an abundance of waste...with many large ironworks, at which they cast great quantities of iron cauldrons, chimney-backs, furnaces, retorts, boiling pots, and all such necessary things of iron – besides iron cannon, and cannon ball etc., in an infinite quantity, and which turn to very great account; tho’ at the same time the works are prodigiously expensive, and the quantity of wood they consume is exceedingly great...
Daniel Defoe, 1726

When ye workmen hear the bell each moulder from the various rooms runs with a ladle to catch a due quantity of metal and takes it to his mould which he fills with it – a mould is always to be filled at one pouring, if one man’s ladle will not hold enough at a time, a large one is brought, carried by two or more persons and if a very large casting, the metal is run into a large pot and both hoisted and carried to the mould by a crane.
Joshua Gilpin, on his visit to Coalbrookdale, 1796

In Vulcan’s Forge; Venus...
Admir’d their sinewy arms, and shoulders bare,
And ponderous hammers lifted high in the air.
In an ironworks;
Quick whirls the wheel, the ponderous hammer falls,
Loud anvils ring amid the trembling walls,
Strokes follow strokes; the sparkling ingot shines,
Flows the red slag, the lengthening bar refines.
Erasmus Darwin, The Botanic Garden
This graphic image is divided into two sections - left and right. The left-hand portion of the image portrays three scantily clad coal miners at work. They are illuminated by a lamp placed beneath the standing figures. This source of light, in a darkened shaft, illuminates the workers and their tools. The extreme left-hand figure is kneeling and in action. His left hand is about to beat the chisel that is poised at the wall. Behind him, a standing figure moves to the wall with his pick axe. The light shines on their upper torsos, indicating reasonably young men. A third worker pushes filled cart away from the wall, the cart being on tracks. His body is bent to the weight of the cart and he too is illuminated by the light beneath. Tools of the workmen lie beneath the workmen and cart.

The right hand portion of the composition is occupied with another drama. A young boy with a pony fills the right hand portion of the print. The viewer sees the pony first, as the animal is bathed in light from the illumination of the second lamp. The young boy's face is illuminated as well. An older man stands behind the filled cart and holds the lamp, while appearing to be in conversation with the young boy.

One gets the illusion of a closed and confined space, as the background walls are dark against the illuminated figures. The ground also appears darkened, focusing the viewer’s attention on the figures.

**Background**
Images of the working class were often romanticized in Victorian English painting. This image, an illustration about the Durham coal miners, appeared in the magazine Graphic, and made no allusions to the 'romance' of working class life. Lifelike figures and compositions were often marked with contrasts of light and dark - drawing the viewer's attention to the nuances of facial and bodily characteristics as well as to the drama of the situation. The strong chiaroscuro (light and dark) of this image relays the sweat and hard work of the miners without any romantic allusions.

This image focuses on the aspect of the conditions of the men and boys working in the coalmines. Scantily clad men went deep into the mines to dig coal that could be brought to the surface via pony drawn carts. The three figures on the left rely on their own strength as well as the lamplight to guide them as they go about their tasks. The darkened shape of the coal cart conveys its own weight and is heightened by the fact that a miner is bodily pushing it. His tools lie on the surface to the right of his foot.

The young boy and pony form a curious addition. The pit boy is clothed, as is the other adult male in the composition. The pony is hitched up with a harness while the boy holds a rod in his right hand and looks as if he is about to hook up to the coal cart. The second lamp illuminates these actions. The contrast between a young child and strong horse highlights the brute strength of the miners themselves.

Cut off from the light of heaven for sixteen or seventeen hours a day, they are obliged to undergo a drudgery which the veriest slave in the plantations would think intolerable, for the might sum of fourteen pence...’‘the overseer, appointed by the proprietor to keep the men on duty) ‘...constantly keeps a shop contiguous to the Pit, where he lays in every necessity both for the belly and the back, and obliges poor men to buy whatever they want from him, stopping it out of their wages’ (keeping them constantly in his debt.)

Richard Atkinson, letter to Lloyd’s Evening Post, September 25 – 27, 1765

You feel to be standing on a column of thin vapour, that now assails your nostrils with mingled smells, as down, down goes the skip on which you stand, and you follow by virtue of your own weight. Drops of water patter on your head, coal dust fills your eyes; the ascending loads shoot upwards, and soon a glimmering light from the bottom points out the limit of your descent...You have a candle, stuck into a bit of moist clay – a very convenient candlestick, too, for a mine, seeing that you can fasten to the side or anywhere that you like. With this, your eyes have become accustomed to the gloom, you can now explore the mine. You pass stables, which in a pit have a curious indescribable smell. You observe the roof bulging in and bending down the cross timbers that rest on the stout upright ‘trees’ for support. Here and there, it may be, are hollows where, having been disturbed by older works in strata a storey higher up, it has fallen in – forming dark caverns in which explosive gas accumulates. Touch it with a candle and it will flash like a gun-cotton, in blue flames along the roof. A door, kept by a boy who sits all day pent up in darkness to perform this monotonous duty, opens to admit us. We come across boys...drawing coals or ‘spoil’ to the wagons. These appear like imps; while the men, naked to the waist, toiling in deep twilight and black coal dust, wielding picks and maundrels, look full grown demons.

John Randall, after a visit to a colliery in Madeley Wood, 1850

When the policemen saw the dangers that the miners worked in they said - "Why we would not work in such places for a pound a day." And the colliers might get a pound
a day if they liked - for the coal was the spring of all commerce and industry, and a pound of it was worth more than a pound of gold. They had to sell their labour, and it was duty to sell it at the highest price. If all the colliers in the Kingdom were to lay down their tools and demand a high price for their labour they could get it...

Notes by the Chief Constable of Staffordshire—Meeting of Colliers, 30 August, 1858

**Iron and Coal** William Bell Scott, 1861 Wallington Hall, Northumberland

Three capped, standing muscular men, each clad in a blue work shirt, dominate the central portion of this composition. Heavy animal skin aprons are wrapped around their waists, covering their lower torsos. Their arms are raised and each is lifting a black hammer. To their right and partially obscured, a fourth man—also clad in a blue work shirt and cap—bends down and appears to be busy at work as well. The most central of these standing workmen faces the viewer allowing us to see a determined face and large, tense muscles as he swings the hammer.

The surrounding images crowd the picture plane illustrating various activities. To the right of the working figures, a furnace burns brightly with red and yellow flames. Beneath the furnace, dark heavy objects are silhouetted against a lighter background. A newspaper is draped over a broad sheet of drawings that appear to be illustrating parts of machinery. In the left foreground a young girl sits on a horizontal rounded object holding a wrapped parcel and book. As she faces the viewer directly, we have an opportunity to see her loose fitting clothing and angelic
face. Behind her, a young boy stands facing the activity that fills the left-hand portion of the canvas. In his left hand he holds what appears to be a slightly curled rope. A lamp is in his right hand.

Activities on and around a dock create vertical emphasis to balance the workmen and fiery furnace. The illustrated figures below are in a reduced perspective, and are busy with their activities. Masted, as well as steam vessels appear dockside. On the extreme left, a tall black pipe (with a red band to balance the furnace) spews smoke over the dockside activities. Two arched bridges cross the river. The lower bridge appears heavier and denser, the higher bridge lighter due to the openings in between the vertical bars. A steam engine crosses the taller bridge, partially obscured by the activity in the right hand side of the canvas. A subdued tall chimneystack in the upper left-hand corner spews additional smoke into the cloud filled sky.

**Background**

This image was one of a series of eight panels commissioned by the Trevelyans family to decorate the enclosed central courtyard of Wallington Hall. Depicting the activities of Tyneside in Northumberland, the activity of this painting is set in an engineering workshop where three muscular 'strikers' are hammering out molten iron. The mechanical drawing in the lower right hand corner illustrates a steam engine built by Robert Stephenson and Co., Engineers, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, an example of which crosses Stephenson's high-level iron bridge in the background. Presumably, the black steam pipe on the left is of the same manufacturer.

The little girl in the left foreground holds her father's lunch and a schoolbook. The appearance of a workers' child illustrates a workers' virtues: providing work for his family (the child appears to be well fed and looked after) as she too provides for her father. Education for the children of the working class is shown through the child's schoolbook. The young boy is a pit boy and is carrying a whip and a Davy safety lamp. The dock scene that he gazes down at shows activities of fishermen, a milk girl (note the milk pail being carried on her head) and a photographer.

A coal barge passes on the river (beneath the heavy lower bridge). Coal, a major aspect of Northumberland life, is glorified in this composition. The product (coal on the barge) and the process (hammering molten metals from a furnace powered by coal) yield the glorification of modern life in mid 19th century England. The technical achievements are illustrated as well: the steam engine, the iron bridge, the guns and machinery of war (anchor and marine air pump - lower right). Recognition of the good that the new technology achieved (an upper class perspective) is illustrated by a well-dressed and educated youngster in the foreground of the composition, facing the viewer. All positive aspects are summed up in the caption that is not pictured: "In the Nineteenth Century the Northumbrians show the World what can be done with Iron and Coal."

Q. What is a steam carriage?
A. A carriage provided with a steam engine, which is made to turn the wheels.

Q. What is a steam boat?
A. A ship provided with a steam engine, the force of which turns the wheels that act on the water like the oars of a boat.
Q. What is a McAdamized road?
A. A road formed of small stones of uniform size and weight, so as to bind together in a smooth road.

Q. How fast is the conveyance by each of these means?
A. By a steam vessel, twelve or fifteen miles an hour; by a steam carriage on a rail-road, thirty to sixty miles... and by a stage coach on a McAdamized road, eight or nine miles.

Blair's First or Mother's Catechism, 1856

And there is something else we miss; there is the poetry of the things about us: our railways, factories, mines, roaring cities, steam vessels, and the endless novelties and wonders produced every day; which if they were found only in the thousand and One Nights, or in any poem classical or romantic, would be glorified over without end; for as the majority of us know not a bit more about them, but merely their names, we keep up the same mystery, the main thing required for the surprise of imagination.

Laura Savage (Frederick George Stephens) in The Germ

**Work** Ford Madox Brown, 1852-1865 Manchester City Art Gallery

This multi-figured composition has, as its central focus, three white shirted and capped males. Two have shovels and are in various stages of digging, while the third pauses for a drink. The three figures are surrounded by many additional figures in different modes of dress and activity.
Beneath the standing male holding his shovel upright is a rectangular opening in the ground. Several logs are stretched horizontally across the opening, the nearest holding a rope and pulley. In the front of the opening and below ground level, a shovel and hand are barely visible. At the rear, behind the standing figure, a red bearded figure holds a _____.

Left of center, near the signposted brick wall, a raggedly dressed male carries a basket of wildflowers. His eyes shift to the central action while he grips his basket. Behind him, two young, well-dressed women carry parasols. Their eyes are looking down and they hold their skirts as they pass the workingmen. The last figure of the group, facing away from the viewer, carries a green box on his head. In the central background, in the shade of the tree, two well-dressed figures are on horseback. The gentleman wears a yellow vest and black cap hat, the woman a pink hat and white gloves. Their standing horses appear to be tethered to the wood, barring their way forward.

Right of center, in the middle ground, three mature trees stand behind the drinking workman. The trees cast shadows on both sides of the composition. Directly in front of the trees figures include a workman with a clay pipe, a young red head with sunlight cast on his face, and a red vested man with a bow and newspaper. In the foreground, raggedly dressed children group between the workmen and their wheelbarrow. The oldest girl, her back to the viewer, wears a well worn and large maroon dress. While holding a baby, she reaches for the young boy who apparently is trying to move the wheelbarrow. The fourth child observes the activity of the workmen. Several dogs in the immediate foreground balance the group.

On the extreme right, leaning against a metal railing, two well-dressed gentlemen are in conversation. One is bearded and rests on a cane; the other holds a book and looks towards the action of the group. His brown frockcoat is dappled in sunlight. Beneath the railing, a road leads the viewer's eye to a continuation of houses. Several figures carrying sandwich boards walk along the road in the sunlight, while several rest beneath the shade of the tree. To the extreme right, moving off the canvas and barely visible, a policeman pushes a female orange seller, causing her to drop her fruit.

**Background**

Brown's painting, inspired by the writings of Thomas Carlyle, focuses on the nobility of labor and the worker. Navvies, the three central figures in the sunlight, are hard at work in various stages of excavating a new road. They are strong and able bodied, the only sign indicating hard toil is the worker's pause for a drink.

Surrounding the navvies are groups that indicate the various levels of contemporary social and economic class. The bow tied man carries a copy of The Times, as well as his carpenter's box. Representing the craftsmen class, his superiority over the laborers is apparent in his mode of dress and ability to read. Behind him, the redheaded young man - perhaps representing a recent Irish immigrant - carries a bucket, the smile on his face indicating a willingness to work.

The leisured class, indicated by the gentleman and woman in the background, has time and money. Their fine clothing and high position in the composition denotes a higher standing in society. Their position in the shade of the trees removes them
from the central focus. As pinnacles of society, they hold no importance as noble laborers.

The lower class, as indicated by the group of ragged children in the immediate foreground, are poor and without the benefits of money or adult supervision. The oldest, perhaps a child of twelve, is dressed in adults clothing, and is doing an adult’s job. Their position is drastically emphasized by their placement: at the lowest point of the composition and opposite the leisureed class.

The ragged and barefoot flower seller at left makes an attempt at work, but his hat (shading his eyes), his full basket, and his general demeanor indicate passivity for his task. Not much nobility there.

The two decorative and demure ladies at left shade themselves from the effects of the sun and a vulgar darkening of skin. They walk gracefully down the incline and hold their crinoline skirts up and off of the dirt path. They represent temperance, as indicated by the flyers they carry and those posted on the nearby brick wall. Hodman’s Heaven and Drink for the Thirsty Soul contrast with the sentiment of the thirsty noble navvy - himself probably drinking a cooling ale.

Idleness, and an unwillingness or inability to work, is indicated by the sleeping figures at right and in the shade. They are physically separated from the central group by the metal railing.

Street traders, as indicated by the orange seller and figures carrying sandwich boards, seem to have a hard time plying their trade. The policeman moves the orange seller along. The oranges drop and become bruised, therefore making them unsellable.

The two standing gentlemen at right represent the intellectual class. Included within the confines of the metal railing, and in partial sunlight, they converse while facing the laborers. Thomas Carlyle (philosopher and writings which include Past and Present) and the Rev. F. D. Maurice (Christian Socialist and founder of the Working Men’s College) were proponents of the nobility of the workers. Brown’s admiration for their philosophy was the basis for this painting.

For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair. Work, never so Mammonish, mean, is in communication with Nature; the real desire to get Work done will itself lead one more and more to truth, to Nature’s appointments and regulations which are truth.

...Consider how, even in the meanest sorts of Labour, the whole soul of a man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work!...Labour is Life: from the inmost heart of the Worker rises his god-given Force, the sacred celestial Life-essence breathed into him by Almighty God; from his inmost heart awakens him to nobleness, - to all knowledge, “self-knowledge” and much else, so soon as work fitly begins...Properly thou hast no other knowledge but what thou hast got by working...

Thomas Carlyle, Labour; Past and Present, 1843
Young women at rest are the focus of this composition. The young women (primarily placed in groups of two) read, chat, drink, walk and rest along a stone wall in the lower third of the composition. They are dressed simply—most with white aprons and in simple solid color garments. The viewer's eye is drawn to the two centrally placed women who wear skirts of red and blue, respectively. Balance is achieved by the inclusion of other red and blue garments placed to the left and right of the central women. Most wear a heavy clog type shoe, although the woman right of center is shoeless. The women's hair is pulled back in a netting and several wear striped shawls over their shoulders. In the lower left-hand corner, an older woman bends down to attend to some drinks pails. Her dark and patterned shawl covers her head as well as shoulders.

Tall brick and large windowed buildings serve as the backdrop for this composition. Two narrow and smoking chimneystacks dominate the top left. The negative space in between the chimneys balance the factory building on the right, as another chimney is obscured by the building. The roofs of the taller building sport what appear to be skylights.

The center of the composition, behind the two centrally placed young women and enclosed in the perspective of the lane between the buildings appears a figure in a dark coat and hat. He walks with a cane, and in the opposite direction of the young women in the foreground.

**Background**
A later 19th century image, this painting depicts women factory workers at rest rather than at the laborious tasks of the cotton mills. As the conventional trends of the time dictated, pictorial painted images needed to be easy for the eye as well as the conscience.

Although not within their place of work and pictured outside the walls of the cotton mills, the mill girls themselves appears to portray the Victorian sentimentality of the workplace and a middle class sensibility of rest. No evidence of hard work is portrayed, and the reference to the working class is illustrated through the women's poses (classical and relaxed), cleanliness, simple garments, hair netting and bare feet. A sense of camaraderie is portrayed through the placement of the young women in pairs.

The solid, angular and austere factory buildings in the background serve as a backdrop for this image. They appear impenetrable, with their windows darker still. The smoking chimneys give evidence to the technology of the steam engines that power the speedy looms, but no evidence is given to the conditions inside the workplace—save for the netting on the girls' hair (pictured as a reference to the danger of accidents to the hair.)

Perhaps the most obscure image is the most important. The tiny central image of a dark and silhouetted man serves as the center of the young women's universe. The mill owner is the figure around which their life depends and is focused. The action of the painting illustrates this as well.

The clothing of the working-people (of Manchester), in the majority of cases, is in very bad condition. The material used for it is not of the best adapted. Wool and linen have almost vanished from the wardrobe of both sexes, and cotton has taken their place... the dresses of the women are chiefly of cotton print goods, and woolen petticoats are rarely seen on the wash line... the Irish have introduced... the custom, previously unknown in England, of going barefoot. In every manufacturing town there is now to be seen a multitude of people, especially women and children, going about barefoot, and their example is gradually being adopted by the poorer English.

The central focus, and visual center of this exterior composition, is a young woman who holds a dress up in front of her.

The young woman, her hair pulled back and wearing a necklace and earrings, is simply dressed and wears sturdy shoes. As she gazes down at a fashionable orange dress, two other women in dark shawls attend her. One checks for the fit, while the other holds a vivid red dress up for her to see. Due to their strong coloring, both sample dresses stand out from the rest of the more muted colors in the composition.

Immediately to the right of the central group, a young child sits in a stroller and appears to be eating a sandwich. Moving to the edge of the composition, another young woman wearing simple clothing tries on a pair of sturdy shoes. A man who wears a red scarf, tweed jacket and simple hat with a blue flower attends her.

In the left foreground there is a small, lit iron stove. A top hat and some cast off clothes placed near the stove are balanced by a group of shoes and clothing on the opposite side.

Behind the stove are two additionalshawled women who appear to be discussing a bottle held by the younger of the two. Behind them, a dark and decorative column rests on a series of steps.
Crowds of interacting people, primarily women, move about in the middle ground. They all wear simple clothing. Several are in groups. To the left of the central group two women share the same shawl as they look towards the young woman holding the fancy dress. To the right, two women - their backs to the viewer - cling together as they happily move about the crowd.

Rows of plain, multi storied buildings with windows - one being the White Lion Inn - move the eye from the middle ground to the background. There, in muted earth tones, industrial buildings with tall chimneystacks appear to evaporate into a mist.

**Background**

Knott Mill, in Manchester, was the site of a twice-weekly market. The tall iron column indicates the market square, once a Roman camp, A primary feature of the market was the second-hand clothes stalls, run by Irish women. '...thread bare garments, translated by the cunning hand of the cleaner and mender into a delusive freshness, are sold to the needy poor of the busy city.' (Treuherz, p58)

Young factory women, although not by any means wealthy, made a decent salary. Necessities of life and industrial work demanded the simpler, sturdier clothing and shoes worn by each of them. The young girl examining the fashionable dress indicates visions of grandeur, and an occasional longing and desire for something beautiful. The two girls, who stand as one on the left, reinforce that sentiment. They look, but do not touch.

Although the factory is ever present in their life, there is a jolly life at the market. The two women at right indicate a strong sense of camaraderie among the factory girls. As they mingle among the crowds, they look around and wave to those that they know.

...the liberty of the ladies, their passion for their fashion...
A Plan of the English Commerce, 1728

That peculiarity of the English urban poor, and their preference for the cast off clothes of a richer class to a special attire of their own – has, in fact, reached the Dorset farm folk. Like the men, the women are, pictorially, less interesting than they used to be. Instead of the wing bonnet like the tilt of a wagon, cotton gown, bright-hued neckerchief, and strong flat boots and shoes, they (the younger ones) wear shabby military bonnets and hats with beads and feathers, ‘material’ dresses, and boot heels almost as foolishly shaped as those of the ladies of highest education.

Thomas Hardy; The Dorsetshire Labourer, 1883
In a darkened room, a young female sits working on some handiwork. She grasps some folded fabric in her left hand, while her right hand is in a clenched position. The middle right finger appears to be wearing a thimble. The woman, with her head placed on an upward diagonal, gazes towards the ceiling. She wears an unadorned red dress with a plain white shawl tucked in her upper bodice.

Partially illuminated on the table to her left appears to be a spool of thread. The canopied bed behind her also frames an illuminated clock that indicates the time as being 2:30. In the upper left-hand portion of the composition, a curtained window frames a cloudy early morning sky as well as the silhouette of a steepled structure. Below the window, in partial light, stands a pitcher supported by a broken bowl. A diagonal line is created from the pitcher to the clock, emphasizing the young woman's right hand and head.

**Background**

Six months before the exhibition of Redgrave's Semptress, Thomas Hood's poem, The Song of the Shirt, appeared in Punch magazine:

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 in a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the 'Song of the Shirt.'

This poem caught the fancy of the Punch reading public, tripling the circulation of the magazine. The public, through the imagery of a simple poem, was made aware of the working conditions and unhealthy lives of the piece workers as well as the factory workers.

The emphasis of this image is the solitary female pieceworker working long hours into the night. Her fingers are sore and worn; her upward glance looks for divine inspiration as she pauses for a moment in exhaustion. This singular reflection creates an emphasis for the viewing public as they too can connect with the solitary activity and servitude of the young woman.

During the course of my investigation into the condition of those who are dependent upon the needle for their support, I had been so repeatedly assured that the young girls were mostly compelled to resort to prostitution to eke out their subsistence, that I was anxious to test the truth of the statement. I had seen much want, but I had no idea of the intensity of the privations suffered by the needlewomen of London until I came to inquire into this part of the subject.

Henry Mayhew, 1849: The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle, 1971