Instructor's Note

Literary criticism teaches students to notice the assumptions they make when reading and to write analysis and interpretation that moves beyond clichés. Students become writers in ENG 304, as they draw on the ideas of philosophers and scholars to make their own arguments, ones in which they have some clear stake.

The second assignment in my 304 requires that students make this move to integrate and apply the work of others writing before them in order to develop their own ideas. That assignment reads in part:

In your second essay, develop an analysis on a literary text in terms of the implicit or explicit conflict at its center. With particular attention to the text’s literary features—metaphor, line breaks, narrative structure, etc—explore the conflict in its historical dimensions and be as concrete as possible. You must draw on one theoretical text to give shape to your discussion. These theoretical texts include essays by Edmund Wilson, Giambattista Vico, Zora Neale Hurston, G.F. Hegel, or Karl Marx... You may find that you need to conduct some historical investigation in this essay; if so, please be advised that you may use either primary historical documents (letters, biographies, diaries, journals, photographs, etc) OR scholarly historical texts (which make an argument while also engaging with other scholarship in the field). Electronic sources like Wiki’s or general reference sources (encyclopedias, etc) may be your starting point, but you may not rely on them in your argument.

In “The Struggle of the Seamstress: Stitching Yourself Into Existence,” Brittany Sperino Horsford advances an analysis of one of Lamont B. Steptoe’s poems. An African-American veteran of the Vietnam war, Steptoe sees poetry as doing the documentary work that journalists are “too spineless” to do. Poetry of this kind, he says, requires “spirituality and consciousness” and eschews the notion of art for art’s sake (http://mark.stosberg.com/tilt-a-whirl/tour/steptoe.html).

In her analysis of Steptoe’s poem, Horsford draws on the insights that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels advanced in their account of class conflict as the engine of history. Part of what makes Horsford’s essay distinctive is that she has absorbed Marx’s theoretical critique without losing her own voice or vision. So, for example, her writing is fresh and accessible. This makes it easy for us to follow her as she steps us through an intricate analysis of the poem’s rich complexity.

The essay's greatest strength arises from Horsford's decision to focus on "weaving," which enables her to synthesize Marx and Steptoe to make the argument that the seamstress uses her craft to stitch herself together with others in a fabric that protects against capitalist depredation. Specifically, the focus on "weaving" enables Horsford to explore the literary text in a broader historical framework, one which also makes it possible for her to see something axiomatic in Marxist thought: labor, as we know it, is constituted by its dialectical relationship to capital. Under alternate economies, work takes very different forms. In Marx's terms, work, under alternate economies, is NOT "labor." In short, Marx was not condemning work as such. Steptoe’s poem, in fact, takes the long, historical perspective on work, recognizing not only forms of work that create human value (rather than strip it away) but also alternate social arrangements and cultural forms—those which imperialists, in pursuit of capital, virtually obliterated. Horsford is very astute to notice these parallels. Finally, the point for Steptoe and Marx is that these alternate economic, social, and cultural forms survive and help us imagine the end of capitalism. Collective ownership of the means of production is crucial to such a transformation, something Horsford’s essay insightfully argues.

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The Struggle of the Seamstress: Stitching Yourself Into Existence

Brittany Sperino Horsford
Sewing is an ancient art, the key word being *art*. Today, sewing has become synonymous with mechanization in the form of the sewing machine. We think of mass production in the textile industry and the droves of clothing strewn about our favorite department stores. When picking up a pair of jeans, people rarely think, “I wonder who ran the machine that stitched these together.” But in the beginning—specifically, in the Lower Paleolithic era—sewing involved nothing more than a human being with a bone awl punching holes into fiber or skin [and] binding them together into something new (Beaudry 45). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels discuss our contemporary focus on the product instead of the laborer in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. They claim the world of things holds greater importance than the world of men (Marx 653). In other words, worth is placed on the product of labor and not on the laborer herself (or himself). Lamont B. Steptoe’s poem, “Seamstress,” shows how this mentality degrades the seamstress and acts as catalyst for the devaluation of her humanity, but the seamstress learns to defend herself and her family through her practice of sewing in order to catapult them into a more meaningful existence; she preserves their worth and averts the path to becoming a deformed product of bourgeoisie rule.

The poem’s narrative structure moves from hopelessness to death to life and ends with a rebirth. In the poem, “Seamstress,” Lamont B. Steptoe opens with:

- she stitched for years on machines the whirr in her ears forever
- the needle a blur a blinding blur she stitched and sewed sewed
- and stitched the whirr in her ears in her blood in her bones the work
- was necessary and numbing numbing and necessary. (Steptoe Lines 1-4)

Here we learn that the seamstress has held this job for years. The repetitive nature of the job is infused into the poem through Steptoe’s repetition of words. It is a very automatic job that requires little thinking, hence the numbing. The sound of the machine—the whirr—echoes in her
ears and reappears throughout the poem. But not only is it in her ears, it is “in her blood her bones” (Steptoe 3). The work infiltrates her and as it does, there is an exchange, which is that she begins disappearing into her product.

This idea aligns itself with what Marx and Engels propose in the Economic and 

Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. Marx and Engels write: “The worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production” (Marx 652). What the seamstress gives to her work increases the value of her product while simultaneously depleting her. Steptoe’s use of words like, “numbing,” “blinding,” and “blur” show how the seamstress works herself into a zombie-like state (Steptoe 2-4). What Marx and Engels propose may make it seem like all work depletes and dehumanizes us, but it is not that absolute. It is crucial to note that the devaluation of the proletariat hinges on that fact that their labor is forced (Marx 655). Steptoe repeats “necessary” twice in the fourth line, telling us that the seamstress’s work was not voluntary (Steptoe 4). This links to Marx and Engels idea of forced labor: “It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. External labour…is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification” (Marx 655). The seamstress goes through this self-sacrificing process which devalues her worth as a human being.

As the poem progresses, we see the practice of her work begin to penetrate her home life. Mary C. Beaudry, Professor of Archaeology at Boston University, discusses how work is weaved into different parts of our lives. In Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing, she writes: “Material culture is not just something people create but an integral component of our personalities and our social lives, deeply implicated in how we construct social relationships” (Beaudry 7). In other words, how we work affects how we approach life because we often find our work coming home with us (whether we want it to or not), and influencing how and whom
we interact with. Marx and Engels said, “[The labourer] is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home” (Marx 655). What happens when work begins seeping in at home, as it does for the seamstress? It is possible her work could consume her, further devaluing her worth. Steptoe writes:

stitching the father to the house the house to the father the son to the world the job to the cross stitching forever stitching the whirr of the machine in her bones her dreams in the Puerto Rican dishes she prepared the whirr of the machine there always there. (Steptoe 6-9)

The stitching of her husband to their house and their house to her husband is a metaphor for what it means to be a part of the property-less proletariat but still have a material resource. To own a home, you must pay a mortgage; to pay a mortgage you must work or else someone will come in and take that home away from you, no matter how much money and hard work you have put into it. Therefore, the house owns you just as much as you own it. That is not real property ownership, not like the bourgeoisie has. What the bourgeoisie have is capital, and capital means controlling the means of production and accumulating wealth (Marx 651). The seamstress knows that having a home does not make her family propertied like the bourgeoisie are.

The whirr of the machine is always around her, in her bones and her dreams. Even when cooking meals for her family, it lingers as if she’s still in front of the machine. She recognizes that her labor is something that exists externally and with it goes pieces of her (Marx 655). This is paramount because without this realization, she would not be able to stop the devaluation process. Awakened, though, she begins her efforts to save her working husband from disappearing into his labor by stitching him to the home and the son—two crucial parts of both of their lives. It is also an effort to prevent the family relation from becoming a mere money relation, to which the bourgeoisie have reduced the concept of family (Marx 659).
Whether she is working or not, the annoying whirr persists in her ear, but her practice also persists. Every part of the seamstress’s day is spent stitching things together, both internally and externally. When the bourgeoisie took over as the ruling class, they instituted new forms of oppression and created new struggles (Marx 657). Being born into the proletariat (the son to the world), the seamstress’s son will face these struggles. If he ever hopes to survive he must get a job to gain material wealth (the world to the job). The seamstress knows this, but wants more for him. She makes a strategic move and stitches “her son to school to railroads of light” (Steptoe 9-10). This is a metaphor for the enlightening, transportive power of an education. Railroads are built for trains, which are modes of transportation, bringing us from one place to another. Light is often associated with a positive force; to shed light on something would clear confusion or raise someone to consciousness. As Marx and Engels said, consciousness is determined by life and, by giving a child of the proletariat knowledge, you shape their consciousness and give them motive to change their economic situation (Marx 656). This hopeful act by the seamstress is immediately mirrored by the tragedy of her husband’s death (Steptoe 11). But the seamstress continues to hone her sewing skill. More importantly, after stitching her son to school, the whirr disappears even while the stitching persists.

Once the whirr disappears in the poem, the seamstress seems to achieve the greatest control over her practice. This control comes from her retirement (Steptoe 11). She is no longer selling her labor; ergo it finally belongs to her and not the bourgeoisie. She has internalized the skills she learned working at the behest of a machine. While working, we saw her begin to use them to benefit herself and her family. But now in retirement she is able to channel the essence of her practice and weave together a counter-culture to save her family, even after she is gone. Sewing has long been regarded as an art, but it was born out of necessity. Beaudry makes this point in her book:
Consider for a moment the likelihood that complex civilizations could have arisen if no one had invented cordage for tying up bundles, creating strings from fibers that could be manipulated in many ways, knotted, netted, laced through skins, woven in cloth. If women had never experimented with fibers, if this experimentation had never led to textile production, to clothing, to tapestries, blankets, bags, coverings of all sorts, the course of civilization, if indeed there was any, would be unimaginable, unthinkable. (Beaudry 5)

If the invention of sewing had this much affect on society when applied to the material things, what impact has it had on people and the development of culture? This is the question the end of the poem answers. Throughout the poem, the seamstress has been learning to take what has been drilled into her skull and has turned it into something beneficial. She binds the people she loves together and to things that will help them advance. The speaker says, “even in retirement stitching her life to grandchildren” (Steptoe 11). She is not just stitching life to her grandchildren; she is stitching her life into them. Her experiences, her knowledge, her legacy are all forms of the earlier metaphor: railroads of light that will bring knowledge to future generations. She cannot disappear into her product if she instills her existence in someone else. They cannot disappear into products when they are older because they have all been stitched to someone or something else, to keep them connected.

The seamstress stitches in order to save and create. For example, she seams “Spanish to English / Caribbean beauty to Philadelphia barrio” (Steptoe 12-13). These are separate things, but, if she binds them together, she can keep her heritage for herself (and her family) while also being immersed in American culture. Dominant cultures often try to assimilate those who deviate from their norm, as the bourgeoisie do the proletariat. In The Communist Manifesto, Marx and
Engels point out that the bourgeoisie “creates a world after its own image” (Marx 660). The seamstress’s refusal to adopt that image is a defiant act against the system.

In the end, instead of the whirr being stitched into her bones, it is her history she stitches into herself, into individuality. The last lines read: “seaming her / spirit to God her bones to her land her dust her sunrise her rhythmic / nights of Afro-Taino-Spanish blues” (Steptoe 13-15). The nights of blues are intangible parts of her culture that she has seamed to her tangible self and family members. There are many possessive pronouns in line fourteen; her bones, her land, her dust transforms into her sunrise (Steptoe 14). The metaphor in this line is reminiscent of a phoenix—dust as form of ash, the sun as fire, rising as rebirth. Each time she or her family hears, performs, or dances to that rhythmic blues, they are reborn whole and not depleted. They are immersed in cultural activities. This is crucial to Marx and Engels who insist that forced labor causes humans to become freely active only during animal functions (Marx 655). In short, the laborer becomes no better than an animal (Marx 655). By learning to harness the labor that is supposed to be alienated from her, on the other hand, the laborer can benefit. This surplus not only makes up for the output the seamstress loses to the bourgeoisie, but also demonstrates that she actively refuses to be devalued. It’s a defense mechanism against a loss of self. With whole, interconnected, and enriched human beings come possibility and a more meaningful existence. It’s a rebirth of culture woven into and throughout her family, all in an effort to keep them whole in a world that works to diminish them. The seamstress holds the power of creation in her own hands.
Works Cited


