

Clothing Poems

Because a piece of clothing is more than protection from the cold or from prying eyes, it is natural for us to form emotional attachments, especially when a garment reminds us of a pleasant or unpleasant experience. A clothing poem is written in free verse to explore the significance of one or more pieces of apparel that the poet finds in his or her wardrobe. The best clothing poems are those with universal appeal for readers because they capture something true and interesting about human nature. Here's an example.

My Safari Helmet

I bought it at the San Diego Zoo,
But I'm ashamed to wear it in public.
I told the clerk it was a gift for my nephew,
But I bought it for my secret self.
I hide it in the back of the closet
And wear it only behind closed doors
When I need to imagine myself in Africa
Stalking a rhino or lion, feeling the wildness
In my blood, admiring myself in the mirror,
Before I have to go into the real jungle.

Notice that the theme of "My Safari Helmet" is something that most people can identify with—a person who needs an object or ritual to gain courage for facing life. The poet's safari hat is like a warm blanket or a stuffed animal for a child feeling fearful. Notice also the absence of rhyme and rhythm, but the poem still creates poetic imagery.

My Pink Flannel Pajamas

I outgrew them years ago,
But for some reason I can't throw them away.
I think I was wearing them that last Christmas morn
As Bubba and I tore into our gifts
And I looked up and saw Momma crying.
Daddy had not come home the night before,
But he was often late for family gatherings.
Full of hope, I thought he would arrive on Santa's heels.
Clad in my warm pajamas, I felt my blood turn cold.
When Momma said the word *divorce*.

To prepare to write a clothing poem, go to your closet or chest of drawers and pick out three or four garments that catch your eye. Pull them out one by one and display them on your bed. That red knit cap may be special because it was the last gift your grandmother gave you before she died. That dress may be special because you were wearing it when you first met your boyfriend. That pair of sneakers may have a special meaning because you were wearing them when you won a tennis tournament. As you look at these stand-outs from your wardrobe, treat them as souvenirs of what you were doing when you wore them. The best choices are those garments that conjure up specific images in your mind's eye—people, places, and things that you can use in your poem to help readers understand the significance of the clothing you write about.

Next, take pen or keyboard in hand, and list all of the memories and senses that are stirred by the clothing you have chosen. At this stage of the writing process, you may write in phrases rather than lines and stanzas. When you have enough material for 10 or 12 lines, start writing to discover/reveal the person behind the clothing.

Suggested Topics

the camouflage cap you wore on your first deer hunt
the homemade costume you wore to that awful Halloween party
the jeans you wore and tore at the Habitat for Humanity project
the leather jacket you borrowed but never returned
the French Quarter tee shirt your boyfriend bought you on a trip to New Orleans
a hand-me-down that reminds you of a brother or sister who's grown and gone
a pair of grimy leather gloves you wore one cold night trying to fix your girlfriend's car
the football jersey you wore in your last junior high game
the ornate blouse your great aunt Mae gave you that you never wore
the pullover sweater you wore on your first ski trip to Colorado
the suit and ruffled shirt you wore to your cousin's wedding
your favorite swim suit
the leopard skin coat you wore in a high school play
an amazing hat that you bought at a yard sale
the uniform you wear in ROTC
the souvenir scarf your parents brought you from Paris
a lucky pair of sox that you have to wear when you compete
the old game vest that your grandpa left you that still reeks of squirrel blood and pine rosin
your first pair of cowboy boots
something you made for yourself
an article of baby clothing that your mother saved
a garish belt that doesn't go with anything else in your closet
your favorite casual outfit that makes you feel comfortable with yourself and the world
the dress that's too formal to wear
the leather skirt that raises eyebrows wherever you go
an article of clothing you loved three years ago but wouldn't be caught dead in now
something you outgrew but can't bring yourself to throw away
the flashiest outfit in your closet
your uniform from work
ugly, but comfortable house shoes