

“Coat of Many Colors”—Dolly Parton (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Lydia Hamessley (guest post)*



Original album



Dolly Parton



Coat replica

Ask someone to name a song written by Dolly Parton. Chances are they'll say "Jolene," "9 to 5," or perhaps "I Will Always Love You" (although some folks are still surprised to learn that she, and not Whitney Houston, wrote the latter song). These three songs are certainly at the core of Dolly's musical brand, and no concert of hers would be complete without them. But if you ask Dolly what her favorite song is from among her vast catalogue, she will unequivocally answer, "Coat of Many Colors." The reason she gives? The song is a true story from her childhood, and it always brings back loving memories of her mother. Dolly writes songs to keep memories alive, and she points to "Coat of Many Colors" as one example, saying "whenever I sing that I just see my whole childhood."

Songwriting always came easily to Dolly--her father recalled "she was writing songs before she knew how to hold a pencil." Her first song, "Little Tiny TassleTOP," was about her homemade corn cob doll. From that humble beginning, Dolly has written over 3,000 songs. More than a singer, actress, businesswoman, and philanthropist, Dolly says she is "first and foremost a songwriter. I've been writing since I was seven--serious songs. Love and my family and writing about those days keeps me sane in an insane world." Dolly's songwriting has been recognized with numerous awards, including her induction into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1986 and the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2001.

Dolly is a consummate storyteller in her songs. Writing story songs, as she calls them, comes natural to her. It is her favorite and easiest way to compose: "To tell a story, I can rhyme words really good, and to me, it's the same as writing a book. So I really enjoy it... Boy, I can tell you a story in a minute. Honestly, I can sit down and write a big long story song much easier than I can the other kind--the more commercial, typical songs."

"Coat of Many Colors" is an example of Dolly at her best as a creative story teller. In it she weaves a painful, true story from her childhood. What happened is this. As a young child, Dolly needed a new coat one winter, so her mother sewed one out of fabric scraps. So that Dolly would feel proud of her coat, her mother told her the Bible story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. Dolly ran off to school, proud to show off her new coat. But Dolly's classmates made fun of her, teasing her about her coat of rags. (In later interviews about this incident, Dolly revealed a much harsher element to the story: the other children stripped the coat off of her and locked her, half naked and screaming, in a dark coat closet. She says this is why she always sleeps with a light on now.) Dolly said that she was too ashamed to talk about what had

happened until she composed the song years later in 1969, which she says helped to heal her residual hurt and shame.

Dolly did not record the song immediately, and in the intervening time Porter Wagoner recorded it on two occasions in 1969, with Dolly singing backup. Dolly's recording was released in 1971 on her album "Coat of Many Colors"; the song went to #4 on the "Billboard" Country Music chart (and the album went to #7). The album cover featured a painted version of a school photo of Dolly wearing her coat taken the same day, according to Dolly, that she was teased about it.

"Coat of Many Colors" illustrates the way Dolly combines her keen skill at storytelling with a memorable musical setting that belies the song's seeming simplicity. With its folk-like melody, standard three-chord harmony, and subdued accompaniment, the song's first-person account of events draws listeners into an intimate story of childlike innocence, pain, and grace. The song is in verse-chorus form, but Dolly starts with an intro that creates a sense of community with her listeners. Rather than opening her tale with lines about her mother sewing the coat, Dolly begins in the present and journeys back through time to her childhood, as though lost in thought: "*Back through the years I go wandering once again.*" In the second line, we arrive at the point in her life in which the story is set--"*back to the seasons of my youth*"--and she begins to remember the box of rags that kicks off the central story of her mother sewing the small scraps into a coat.

In the two verses that follow, Dolly begins her story. She describes the rags that her mother fashioned into a much-needed winter coat and the Bible story her mother told her about Joseph and his coat of many colors. In the song's chorus, Dolly moves away from plot and storytelling and reveals the moral of her story: "*Although we had no money I was as rich as I could be in my coat of many colors my mama made for me.*"

In the next verses, Dolly returns to the story: she hurries off to school, filled with pride as she nonchalantly reminds us of the "*patches on my britches*" and "*holes in both my shoes.*" The end of the verse relates the jeering and laughter of her classmates. With the last verse Dolly sings of her confusion at this teasing and her response about the real meaning of riches and poverty. The song ends with the chorus, but this time with the first four lines changed to amplify the moral of her story: "*one is only poor, only if they choose to be.*"

Much of the power of the song is that it does not give in to the maudlin. Dolly does not describe in great detail the torment she suffered from the other kids in order to ratchet up the pathos of the song; indeed, they only get one line for their teasing. Rather, she focuses on her childlike confusion tempered with her conviction that her mama was right: she was rich in her little coat.

The song appears on many of Dolly's compilation and greatest hits albums. Dolly also published the lyrics as a children's book in 1996. In 2016, she released a new version of the book as well as a made-for-TV movie, "Dolly Parton's Coat of Many Colors." The song was added to the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2019.

"Coat of Many Colors" is also prominently featured in Dolly's Chasing Rainbows Museum at Dollywood. A replica of the coat, made by Dolly's mother, is displayed there along with the original papers with the song's lyrics. On the wall behind the coat is an almost life-size, sepia toned photograph of children looking directly at the camera, laughing at the viewer who is placed in the position of being teased. Adjacent to this mural is a panel with the text of the song. In this intimate alcove, the coat is thoughtfully displayed to highlight the song's message about bullying. Dolly says that because the song "deals with something everyone has felt, [it] seems to have a healing effect on people."

The personal story Dolly tells in her most beloved song is one that touches many people who can relate to the pain and embarrassment of being teased as a child, even if they did not grow up in poverty.

Dolly once said, “I want to be known as a great writer--now that’s a dream of mine. I like to describe my writing as being simply complicated. It’s got enough depth to be appreciated and enough simplicity to be understood.” Dolly’s dream certainly came true with “Coat of Many Colors.”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress.