**The Jacket**

A Memoir by Gary Soto

**Build Background**

**Literary Context** Although "The Jacket" reads like a short story, it is actually a memoir, a true story about something that happened to the author when he was in fifth and sixth grade. An autobiographical memoir is a primary, or eyewitness, account of events in the author's life and how he or she felt about them.

**Reader's Context** How does wearing a favorite item of clothing affect you? How could your clothes influence the way you experience events?

**Set Purpose**
Prevent the memoir's title and first paragraph. As you read, look for ways Soto uses humor to reveal how the events affected him.

**Analyze Literature**

**Memoir** A memoir is a piece of nonfiction writing that tells a story from the writer's life. Memoirs are about a person's experiences and reactions to historical events. As you read "The Jacket," decide whether Gary Soto is using the memoir to tell about his own experiences or about a historical event that he lived through. Does knowing that the events actually happened to the writer make the story funnier or more interesting to you?

**Meet the Author**

**Gary Soto** writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Soto was born in 1952 in Fresno, California, to a Mexican-American family. The family struggled to make ends meet when he was growing up. There were times when Soto had to wear cardboard in his shoes and pick grapes to make money. In college Soto discovered poetry. He began writing his own poems and soon won a national poetry award. Although Soto has written for adults, today he is best known for his writing for young people.

**Use Reading Skills**

**Identify Sequence of Events** Using a graphic organizer can help you achieve your purpose in reading. Identifying the sequence of events in a story can help you better understand the plot and allows you to analyze the possible meanings of the events. Create a story strip to record the events in the order in which they happened. Note that not all story events are of equal importance in the plot. Decide which events are significant enough to be recorded.

**Preview Vocabulary**

- vi•e•n•t (vi•nt) adj., tough, shiny plastic
- s•w•o•op (sw•op) v., descend quickly in a sweeping movement
- vi•o•c•i•ous (vi•sh•as) adj., cruel, fierce
- m•o•p (m•op) v., be gloomy or in low spirits

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**Preview the Model**

**At a Glance**

**Guided Reading: Reading Model**
- Reading Level: Easy
- Difficulty Consideration: May not hold student interest
- Ease Factor: Length

**Objectives**

Studying this lesson will enable students to:
- use reading skills such as identifying sequence of events
- define autobiography and explain how this genre is different from other nonfiction
- make connections between the author's life and the incident he describes in his writing
- enjoy the retelling of a situation that is familiar to middle school students

**Launch the Lesson**

Prior to reading "The Jacket," have students imagine that they have a gift certificate to use for buying one article of clothing. If possible, have students look through clothing catalogs to find and discuss items they would and would not choose. Have students tell why they prefer certain styles. If it is not possible for them to look at catalogs, simply have students describe clothing styles they like and dislike.

**Words in Use**

**Preview Vocabulary**

- vinyl, 265
- swoop, 266
- vicious, 268
- mope, 268

**Selection Words**

- profile, 265
- terrorist, 266
- gaggled, 268
- eagerly, 268

**Teaching Words**

- eyewitness, 263
- significant, 263
- unfortunate, 269
- inclusion, 269
- indicate, 269

**KEY TERMS**

- MEMOIR, 263
- AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL, 263
- POETRY, 263
- SEQUENCE OF EVENTS, 263
- PLOT, 263
- TONE, 265
- CLUSTER CHART, 265
- NARRATOR, 265
- SENSORY DETAIL, 265
- CHARACTER, 265
I remember the green coat that I wore in fifth and sixth grades when you either danced like a champ or pressed yourself against a greasy wall, bitter as a penny toward the happy couples.

When I needed a new jacket and my mother asked what kind I wanted, I described something like bikers wear: black leather and silver studs with enough belts to hold down a small town. We were in the kitchen, steam on the windows from her cooking. She listened so long while stirring dinner that I thought she understood for sure the kind I wanted. The next day when I got home from school, I discovered draped on my bedpost a jacket the color of day-old guacamole.

I threw my books on the bed and approached the jacket slowly, as if it were a stranger whose hand I had to shake. I touched the vinyl sleeve, the collar, and peeked at the mustard-colored lining.

From the kitchen mother yelled that my jacket was in the closet. I closed the door to her voice and pulled at the rack of clothes in the closet, hoping the jacket on the bedpost wasn't for me but my mean brother. No luck. I gave up. From my bed, I stared at the jacket. I wanted to cry because it was so ugly and so big that I knew I'd have to wear it a long time. I was a small kid, thin as a young tree, and it would be years before I'd have a new one. I stared at the jacket, like an enemy, thinking bad things before I took off my old jacket whose sleeves climbed halfway to my elbow.

I put the big jacket on. I zipped it up and down several times, and rolled the cuffs up so they didn't cover my hands. I put my hands in the pockets and flapped the jacket like a bird's wings. I stood in front of the mirror, full face, then profile, and then looked over my shoulder as if someone had called me. I sat on the bed, stood against the bed, and combed my hair to see what I would look like doing something natural. I looked ugly. I threw it on my brother's bed and looked at it for a long time before I slipped it on and went out to the backyard, smiling a "thank you" to my mom as I passed her in the kitchen. With my hands in my pockets I kicked a ball against the fence, and then climbed it to sit looking into the alley. I hurled orange peels at the mouth of an open garbage can and when the peels were gone I watched the white puffs of my breath thin to nothing.
My clothes have failed me. I remember the green coat that I wore in fifth and sixth grades when you either danced like a champ or pressed yourself against a greasy wall, bitter as a penny toward the happy couples.

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1. studs. Nails with large heads
2. guacamole. Dip or spread made from mashed avocado with spices
I jumped down, hands in my pockets, and in the backyard on my knees I teased my dog, Brownie, by swooping my arms while making bird calls. He jumped at me and missed. He jumped again and again, until a tooth sunk deep, ripping an L-shaped tear on my left sleeve. I pushed Brownie away to study the tear as I would a cut on my arm. There was no blood, only a few loose pieces of fuzz. Dumb dog, I thought, and pushed him away hard when he tried to bite again. I got up from my knees and went to my bedroom to sit with my jacket on my lap, with the lights out.

That was the first afternoon with my new jacket. The next day I wore it to sixth grade and got a D on a math quiz. During the morning recess Frankie T., the playground terrorist, pushed me to the ground and told me to stay there until recess was over. My best friend, Steve Negrete, ate an apple while looking at me, and the girls turned away to whisper on the monkey bars. The teachers were no help: they looked my way and talked about how foolish I looked in my new jacket. I saw their heads bob with laughter, their hands half-covering their mouths.

Even though it was cold, I took off the jacket during lunch and played kickball in a thin shirt, my arms feeling like Braille from goose bumps. But when I returned to class I slipped the jacket on and shivered until I was warm. I sat on my hands, heating them up, while my teeth chattered like a cup of crooked dice. Finally warm, I slid out of the jacket but a few minutes later put it back on when the fire bell rang. We paraded out into the yard where we, the sixth graders, walked past all the other grades to stand against the back fence. Everybody saw me. Although they didn’t say out loud,
“Man, that’s ugly,” I heard the buzz-buzz of gossip and even laughter that I knew was meant for me.

And so I went, in my guacamole-colored jacket. So embarrassed, so hurt, I couldn’t even do my homework. I received Cs on quizzes, and forgot the state capitals and the rivers of South America, our friendly neighbor. Even the girls who had been friendly blew away like loose flowers to follow the boys in neat jackets.

I wore that thing for three years until the sleeves grew short and my forearms stuck out like the necks of turtles. All during that time no love came to me—no little dark girl in a Sunday dress she wore on Monday. At lunchtime I stayed with the ugly boys who leaned against the chainlink fence and looked around with propellers of grass spinning in our mouths. We saw girls walk by alone, saw couples, hand in hand, their heads like hookends pressing air together. We saw them and spun our propellers so fast our faces were blurred.

I blame that jacket for those bad years. I blame my mother for her bad taste and her cheap ways. It was a sad time for the heart. With a friend I spent my sixth-grade year in a tree in the alley, waiting for something good to happen to me in that jacket, which had become the ugly brother who tagged along wherever I went. And it was about that time that I began to grow. My chest puffed up with muscle and, strangely, a few more ribs. Even my hands, those fleshy hammers, showed bravely through the cuffs, the fingers already hardening for the coming fights. But that L-shaped rip on the left sleeve got bigger, bits of stuffing coughed out from its wound after a hard day of play. I finally Scotch-taped it closed, but in rain or cold weather the tape peeled off like a scab and more stuffing fell out until that sleeve shriveled into a palsied arm. That winter the elbows began to crack and whole chunks of green began to fall off.

I showed the cracks to my mother, who always seemed to be at the stove with steamed-up glasses, and she said that there were children in Mexico who would love that jacket. I told her that this was America and yelled that Debbie, my sister, didn’t have a jacket like mine. I ran outside, ready to cry, and climbed the tree by the alley to return the entire year? How does this statement affect the tone of the writing?” Have students find other examples of hyperbole in the memoir.

Analyse Literature

Hyperbole Explain that when a writer wildly exaggerates something on purpose, he or she is using hyperbole. Say, “When Soto says he spent his sixth grade year in a tree in the alley with a friend, do you think he really stayed there the entire year? How does this statement affect the tone of the writing?” Have students find other examples of hyperbole in the memoir.

Use Reading Strategies

Visualize Answer: Words that describe the way the jacket looks now include: “stuffing coughed out from its wound,” “Scotch-taped,” “tape peeled off like a scab,” and “sleeve shriveled into a palsied arm.”

Make Connections

Answer: Answers will vary. A possible answer might be that the student feels sorry for the narrator because he or she knows how it feels to be laughed at.

Characterization Ask students: “Gary says his mother was cheap. Do you think that was true? Why do you think Mrs. Soto bought the jacket?” Have students discuss other details from the story that relate to his growing up poor.

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Use Reading Skills
Identify Cause and Effect  Point out that Soto thought he was unpopular because of his ugly jacket. Ask: “Do you think that is the real reason he was unpopular? For what other reasons might a person feel unpopular?” Point out that there can be many reasons. Have the class collaborate on a cause-and-effect chart brainstorming some reasons a middle school student might not feel popular.

Analyze Literature
Memoir  Answer: Students may say the tone has grown more accepting or less angry.  

Moirrors & Windows
You may want to ask students to write a journal entry or quick write, or divide students into discussion groups or lead a whole-class discussion about this question. Answer: Answers will vary. Students may have experienced something that would have totally changed their lives if it had gone differently. The reasons for this might include that we are often faced by choices that will lead us down one path in life rather than another.

vi·cious (vi’shəs) adj.
• cruel, hectic

mope (mōp) v.
- be gloomy or in low spots

DURING READING
Analyze Literature
Memoir  How has Soto’s tone changed since the beginning of the selection?

6. camouflage  Color pattern of green and brown shades designed to blend in with the background, often used in military clothing and equipment
7. tortilla  Round, thin, flat bread usually eaten with meat or cheese

In this story, Soto says he blames the ugly jacket “for those bad years.” Think of a time when you have felt that a situation or experience would have been better if only one thing had been different. Why do you think we allow ourselves to believe that about our pasts?

But whole pieces still casually flew off my jacket when I played hard, read quietly, or took vicious spelling tests at school. When it became so spotted that my brother began to call me “camouflage,” I flung it over the fence into the alley. Later, however, I swiped the jacket off the ground and went inside to drape it across my lap and

Warning
mope.

I was called to dinner: steam silvered my mother’s glasses as she said grace; my brother and sister with their heads bowed made ugly faces at their glasses of powdered milk. I gagged too, but eagerly ate big rips of buttered tortilla that held scooped-up beans. Finished, I went outside with my jacket across my arm. It was a cold sky. The faces of clouds were piled up, hurting. I climbed the fence, jumping over the fence into the alley. Later, however, I swiped the jacket off the ground and went inside to drape it across my lap and

TEACHING NOTE
Ask the Author
Divide the class into small groups. Have each group brainstorm and list some questions they would like to ask Gary Soto. Have each group pass its questions to another group, which will then pretend to be the author and answer in the way they think Soto would. Have groups share some of the questions and answers with the class. Model a question: “What other clothing item have you owned that deeply affected your life?”

Differentiated Instruction
Reading Proficiency
Have students review their completed story strips. Explain that the strips show details from the story. To be sure students have the big picture, help them create a statement of the main idea of the memoir based on the story details they have recorded.
Find Meaning
1. (a) What kind of jacket does the narrator want? (b) How does the jacket he receives compare to the jacket he wanted?
2. (a) List some of the unfortunate things that happen to the narrator during the years he wears the jacket. (b) How many of these things does the jacket cause?

Make Judgments
3. (a) Why do you think the narrator teases his dog? (b) Does teasing Brownie help the situation? Explain.
4. Why doesn’t the narrator tell his mother that he does not like the jacket?
5. At the end of the memoir, how have the narrator’s feelings about the jacket changed?

Analyze Literature
Memoir In autobiographical writing, an author uses tone and word choice to express his or her feelings. How does Soto’s use of humor affect the tone of this memoir? Use a cluster chart to record specific details or examples of Soto’s word choice that contribute to the tone. Record each detail or example in the outer circles, and write in the center what you think is the overall tone.

Extend Understanding
Writing Options
Creative Writing Imagine that you are the narrator in “The Jacket.” You have finally outgrown your jacket. Write a diary entry explaining how you feel about getting rid of the jacket at last. Add your own sensory details when describing the jacket and your feelings.
Expository Writing “The Jacket” vividly re-creates events in Soto’s life and reveals his personal feelings. Write a literary analysis of how Soto’s tone in this memoir reveals his true feelings about that time in his life. Support your thesis with details from your cluster chart.

Collaborative Learning
Compare Opinions Discuss as a class whether the narrator of “The Jacket” would have felt differently if his mother had given him an ugly pair of pants. Form groups based on your opinion and debate your reasons. Consider the other side’s reasoning as you listen.

Critical Literacy
Read to Interpret In small groups, analyze how the story’s meaning would change if the elements of humor were not present in the selection. What does Soto’s inclusion of humor indicate about his character and personality?

Rubrics for Writing Options
You can adapt this as a checklist for students to use as they write.

Creative Writing
☐ Is the diary clearly written from the perspective of a sixth grade boy?
☐ Does the diary entry clearly set out the writer’s feelings about getting rid of his old jacket and buying a new one?
☐ Does the diary entry include original examples of colorful language and hyperbole?

Expository Writing
☐ Does the paragraph indicate a grasp of how Soto’s tone reveals his feelings?
☐ Does the paragraph give examples of how Soto creates the humorous tone?
☐ Does the paragraph indicate that the narrator’s feelings may have changed over time?

Program Resources
For further instruction, refer students to the following extension activity: Collaborative Learning: Compare Opinions, Exceeding the Standards: Extension Activities, p. 8.

THE JACKET

Find Meaning
1. (a) He wants a jacket like a biker’s, black with lots of studs and belts. (b) The narrator thinks the jacket is ugly and not at all like the biker’s jacket he wanted.
2. (a) Answers may include he got Cs and Ds on quizzes, was bullied and stared at, and could not do his homework. (b) It is unlikely that the jacket caused any of these things.

Make Judgments
3. (a) The narrator is unhappy about his jacket but does not feel he can complain. He takes out his unhappiness on his dog. (b) Teasing Brownie made things worse because the dog tore a hole in the jacket.
4. Answers will vary. Students may infer that he does not want to hurt her feelings or that he knows she can’t replace the jacket.
5. The narrator still does not like his jacket and sometimes tries to go without it, but he has accepted the fact that it is in his life.

Analyze Literature
Memoir Answer: Student charts may include examples of Soto’s use of exaggeration and sensory details that add to the humorous tone, such as describing the color of the jacket as “day-old guacamole.”