There is a saying, "Clothes maketh the man". Mark Twain's version continues, "Naked people have little or no influence on society." (Twain, online). I'm not sure that the latter part is always true, but I do agree that clothing is a significant factor in the impression we make on others, intended or not.

I have been researching the ways in which the motifs of weddings are used in short fiction and poetry. Here, I am focussing on the wedding gown and poetry, in particular. Perhaps then we should consider recasting the earlier quote as "Clothes maketh the woman".

Andrew Motion wrote a striking poem, ‘In the attic’, about recollecting a person through their stored clothing (1997, p.43). It emphasises the significance of clothing, particularly that which has been worn on special occasions, as a device to imagine (recreate) the wearer. It, therefore, emphasises the power of association between garment and individual. The clothing has a life beyond the wearer.

**In the attic**

Even though we know now
your clothes will never
be needed, we keep them,
upstairs in a locked trunk.

Sometimes I kneel there,
touching them, trying to relive
time you wore them, to remember
the actual shape of arm and wrist.

My hands push down between
hollow, invisible sleeves,
hesitate, then take hold
and lift:

a green holiday; a red christening;
all your unfinished lives
fading through dark summers,
entering my head as dust.

Which single item of clothing in the Twentieth Century would you say has the highest recognition factor now? I don't mean a generic type of clothing but a particular garment. As we’ve just left the Twentieth Century you might be inclined to choose something from the latter end of it, but that’s a bias which is difficult to adjust out, so we’ll have to live with it for the moment. What would you choose?
If you’re old enough, the contenders might include the Beatles’ collarless suits. I think we’d have to eliminate them, however; though very recognisable there were at least four such suits and I’m not sure that they had the breadth of recognition of a couple of other contenders. Staying in the realm of popular Western music, how about Elvis’ Las Vegas suit; the white one with the studs and flared trousers? I’m positive that if you put that garment on a dummy and stood it out in a car park, away from any friendly contextual hints, it would still reek of old swivel hips.

No, my money is on a third garment, Princess Di’s wedding gown. Given the millions of people who were glued to TV sets watching the fairytale procession and wedding of Charles and Di, and who then clamoured for the press’s glossy images of the occasion, it’s a wonder there weren’t more Di look-alikes jamming the aisles shortly after; perhaps with shorter trains, and fewer attendants.

I want to sketch some of the issues concerning the wedding gown as a key feature of marriage ceremonies and, indeed, of pre and post wedding activities. Then I will outline some ways that the imagery and conceptual messages in recent poems have relied on common knowledge of these to increase their ‘value’ to readers.

Of course it is impossible to speak of weddings without, by implication, speaking of marriage. My focus, however, is not primarily on that estate but its trappings; the symbols and customs, the rituals and ceremonies, that have largely become cliché. Their high recognition factor tends to be used as shorthand for some critical element of the wedding process. And it is a process because we are dealing with more than objects and paraphernalia. The scope of this wedding process takes in the earliest thoughts one might have of the wedding as a future event of note in one’s life (a significant station on the journey), to mourning long after the event occurred; or failed to happen. In between are the artefacts.

One of the pleasures of reading poetry and short fiction about weddings has been to discover the ways in which the symbols and rituals have been used by writers. The incidence is not high. I made a rough calculation once that a wedding reference cropped up in about 1 in 100 poems or short stories. It’s just as well that the creative connections are sometimes very satisfying when they do occur.

The meaning of the objects and ceremonies is determined by their potential for connection to hope or fear (illusory or real), and to satisfaction or disappointment, however momentary. In other words, it is all about emotional investment, and this produces great dramatic potential for writers.

Stylistically, the wedding gown in traditional Western ceremony has become a quite predictable garment, though there are variations. Culturally, it occupies a peculiar place. It is still typically white and presents the bride as a kind of kewpie doll, something toylike and unreal. Princess Di’s gown was an extravagant representation of the dress that carries great symbolic weight in the weddings of lesser mortals also. The whiteness is said to symbolise purity and the gown itself offers a version of woman as an idealised abstraction of femininity, one that is often derided. It is hardly a practical garment, but one designed for show; to announce the special status of the wearer. It is the uniform of the bride, the costume of her initiation, and some would say of her surrender. That’s not to say that the bride is unhappy about it. On the contrary, the gown is usually a key emblem of the joy in the celebration.
What if a white wedding gown is not worn? The non-standard wedding is just that, still defined by the norm, the white wedding. So that to whatever extent alternative choices are made, they are still corrallled into a space reserved for ‘other’, exceptional, even strange.

Weddings, and the wedding dress no less, present the players with different, largely gender-based roles. There is a layering of wedding gown processes and sub-processes, a culture of costume that determines who should do what. It is often varied but seldom subverted. The selection and fitting process is a dominant one. It is expected that the Western groom-to-be will not see the bride-to-be in her dress before they finally meet in the aisle of the church. This custom is more relaxed than before but still prevalent. Grooms do not wear gowns to their own weddings, for instance; or not so it is acknowledged.

I once wrote a short story about the seduction of a groom-to-be caught trying on his fiancee’s wedding gown. A few months later I saw an advertisement on TV that featured three men of the ‘bloke’ persuasion hanging around the house. One wanders upstairs and is then discovered by his friends as he jumps up and down on the bed in a wedding gown. I’m in the habit of turning the sound off when there is an advertisement break on TV, so I missed the audio storyline. I imagine it was something about a gathering of Aussie hetero mates fooling about before one of them was to be married. Given the somewhat alarming predilection for footballers and other boofy blokes to don women’s apparel when they’re skylarking, perhaps there is some fuel in the idea of a cross-dress wedding after all.

All sorts of clothing are conjured in poems that use wedding references. In ‘To My Husband’, Sharon Olds (1999, p.92) dwells on the colour of the bridesmaids’ clothing in detail, producing a setting of richness and sensual appeal for her meditation on what might have been - had her husband married someone else; had she not married at all, and other variations. Michael Donaghy (1997, p.5) writes of a brother who is the only man not wearing a tie at the narrator’s wedding (‘The Brother’), using the expectation of wedding formality as a frame for the rebellious or careless one to tilt. Joyce Lee gives us seemingly Bo-Peepish bridesmaids “all mauve, beribboned/shepherd crooks and lampshade hats” in ‘Double Wedding’ (1994, p.92). But it is the wedding gown itself that provides the most potential for representation that is either squarely connected to the traditional image of the bride or at a tangent to that.

For a simple and traditional version we have ‘Degas’s Laundresses’ by Eavan Boland (1984, pp. 37-38). Boland presents the work-chatter of the women, before she moves on to the issue of Degas hovering in the background to produce his sketches. In the early stages of the poem, the laundresses are absorbed in discussing domestic topics: “Your chat’s sabbatical: / Brides, wedding outfits”.

It is as if the working class women are expected to be absorbed in gossip, dialogue about dress and other social matters that would not be out of place in a modern ‘soap’. This is language adjusted to a particular view of women’s interests.

Returning to the Joyce Lee poem, ‘Double Wedding’ (1994, p.92), that I have already briefly mentioned, there is a duplication of players.

My grandfather, trailing bridesmaids
and flower girls, a cream silk bride
on each arm, in his proudest moment
Photographers arrange “... long-trained brides”, though as time passes, only “one of twenty pictures survives.” Apart from the doubling of brides, there is no unexpected element.

Many poems venture very little, if at all, from the safe depiction of a familiar topic, so it is not surprising to find this in those which are about weddings.

In John Foulcher’s ‘After the Stars’ (1996, pp. 91-92), a couple attends a wedding, then makes love in a hotel. The narrator sees his partner in the hotel room: “on the bed, your body fresh / as a bridal gown”.

This is a 'safe' rendering; it does not offer a startling or challenging new perspective. The parallel between the woman on the bed and a wedding gown is a clear and striking but obvious one. It associates the image with newness, possibilities, and promise.

A little more adventurous is Seamus Heaney's ‘A Pillowed Head’ (1991, pp. 38-39), in which a woman is depicted giving birth:

In your cut-off white cotton gown,
You were more bride than earth-mother
Up on the stirrup-rigged bed

Her clothing is obviously being likened to a wedding gown; she has something of a bride's appearance.

The track I have been following so far has been one beginning with rather straightforward references to the wedding gown, moving then towards more vivid and imaginative associations. Let’s now travel into the territory of more unexpected connections, of less than realist imagery and concepts. There are more troubled references to wedding gowns.

Matthew Sweeney’s poem, ‘The Bridal Suite’ (1997, p.5), is one about frustration. A bridegroom spends three nights in the bridal suite without his bride; the reason is not explained. In the end, he gives up waiting.

On the third night he could take no more -
he dressed, to the smell of her perfume,
and leaving her clothes there,
the wedding dress in a pile in the wardrobe,
he walked past the deaf night porter,
out to his car.

If her wedding dress was there, presumably so must she have been, at some stage. What happened? How were they parted? We don’t know. When did she leave? On the first night? After consummating her marriage? We don’t know. The poem doesn’t hint at the reason, only that the groom gives up wondering and leaves. The idea of the wedding dress being left “in a pile in the wardrobe” is a key one. It indicates disrespect; hers for the sanctity of the marriage and, ultimately, his also for leaving the dress in that state. The marriage itself is crumpled and discarded.
And though this is a step back to an older poem, it is worth mentioning John Shaw Neilson’s ‘The Moon was Seven Days Down’ (1998, pp. 283-284) for a darker association. This sombre poem revolves around a premonition by a farmer’s wife that she should die.

I think too much of the flowers. I dreamed
I walked in a wedding gown,
Or was it a shroud?

Then, revealing a foretelling to her husband, she says:

...’twas told to me...
That I should go in a plain coffin
And lie in a plain gown

This double mention of gowns seems to interweave the two garments, as if her wedding was part of an arc that would bring her to death. It is meant, I think, to be a troubling association, redolent of superstition and ritual. It is no coincidence that in some cultures a woman is buried in her wedding dress.

Some poems, however, take more risks than that. They may verge on the surreal, but contain a dose of the real that can be simultaneously amusing and worrying.

In ‘The Man who Thought he was Miss Havisham’, Paul Durcan (1985, pp. 18-19) presents a woman’s reaction to her transvestite husband dressing as a bride. The wedding gown is a central feature, since his wearing this usurps a significant gender role.

I simply could not bear to watch him
Moping there in front of the ape-faced TV
In his wedding-dress,
Forever readjusting his trousseau,
Forever caressing the confetti on his shoulders,
Forever casting glances at the rose in his bosom.

Much more fanciful is Andrew Motion’s ‘A dream of peace’ (1997, pp. 86-93). The poem is a long one about war and the narrator’s relationship with his father. Posing a series of events as those in a dream world allows much that could otherwise be dismissed as simply illogical. In one section, the narrator dreams: “...a woman made me take off my ring/(my father’s ring)…”

Then he imagines smoke:

and I was aloft, catching the woman…
up in my arms so we flew like a wounded gull,
me in my black, her in a rippling wedding-dress.

They fly above the countryside, knowing it as home, searching “for the intimate, beautiful details in things”. But then they become tired and know it is too late, they cannot land, and can only circle like a:

frivolous smidgin of paper blown up in a fire,
which twiddles away from the earth and cannot return.
For a complete flight of fancy, however, the ride to take is Charles Simic’s ‘Marina’s Epic’ (1995, p.91). Simic’s poems are so often full of portent; ominous events that are oddly sinister yet almost comfortably familiar, as if such signs will at least show the way in a muddled landscape. Augury and reading the signs is important; there is a Middle-European flavour to the use of allegory. The tone of the poem is clearly set at the beginning.

The Eskimos were ravaging Peru.
    Grandfather fought the Hittites.
    Mother sold firecrackers to the Bedouins.

It is a concoction of fabulous meetings and unlikely revelations; a conflation of Munchausen heroics and achievements of Biblical/Hollywood proportions; adventures and tall tales. It is then hardly surprising to find the family that is at the centre of the poem out on the ocean:

    On the back of a sleeping shark
    We sailed the stormy Atlantic
    Taking turns to mend the rips in grandmother’s wedding dress
    We used as a sail.

Why does Grandma still have the dress? Is it so important that she would retain it even when she would be expected to travel light, in such difficult circumstances? But then, does she really still have the dress? Maybe she’s not there but her dress has been carried by the family as an heirloom, a significant item never to be left behind.

Simic is self-aware and comic, even in the darker moments of his poetry. There is always the larger story outside what we see in the poem; something happening before or after or alongside it. His imagery sometimes has a Punch and Judy obviousness about it. It can be cryptic and is often heavily symbolic, even surreally dense. The use of a wedding dress entirely suits this style.

And, finally, for a moment of Pan idyll, there is Jena Woodhouse and her ‘The Bride of Byfield’ (1994, p.241). This poem provides an intermingling of nature and humanity; the bride transmuted with forest and dressed with feathers of birds. It is a transcendent marriage, the bride who might be pictured by a mind that confuses trees with angels.

    The bride is marrying flamboyants:
    see her standing where their limbs
    brand her dress with fiery tokens,
    nimbus her with crimson fronds.

The wedding gown constitutes a rich motif, suggesting social occasions we are likely to have experienced as well as perhaps very personal ones. It is a symbol of a binding community practice that also prompts an individual response, serious or frivolous, experimental or reverent. In the examples I have presented, the wedding gown is rendered not only as a straightforward and conventional aspect of the wedding process, but also symbolically, as a more creative factor in engagement with the reader.
References

Durcan, Paul 1985, 'The Man who Thought he was Miss Havisham', *The Berlin Wall Café*,
       The Blackstaff Press Limited, Belfast.
       London.
Twain, Mark, *The Quotations Page* [Online; accessed 18 April 2001]