



HOW MODERN UNDERWEAR HAS COME INTO BEING



Underwear has not always been as comfortable and easy to remove as it is nowadays. After the precursor of trousers, the **braccae**¹ (later called *braies*) had been imported to Latin Europe by the Gauls, this item of clothing was perfected in the late Renaissance through the addition of a front flap enabling men to urinate without having to remove them completely – the so-called ‘**codpiece**’² that Henry VIII used to highlight in his official portraits.

Women, by contrast, used to wear **petticoats**³ under their dresses, topped by corsets. In time corsets (stiffened by **whalebones**⁴ or **reed straws**⁵) would become increasingly tight on the waist, thus damaging internal organs and posing a serious risk to women's health – a practice known as tightlacing. Health problems associated with the use of **corsets**⁶ eventually led to the creation of the modern **brassiere**⁷ (better-known in its shortened form ‘bra’) in the New Jersey of the 1920s. Women's current **panties**⁸, on the other hand, have developed from the **pantalettes**⁹ of the 19th century, which were pretty toilsome to remove for bodily functions because of all the loosening, unfastening and unpinning they entailed. The Italian word ‘slip’ refers precisely to the easiness with which this undergarment is taken off as opposed to earlier pantalettes. In English, though, ‘**slip**’¹⁰ has come to design a skirt or strapped frock worn to prevent the show-through of intimate undergarments such as panties or brassieres, and it owes its name to the fact that clothes smoothly glide onto it without ruffling.



1. Braccae



2. Codpiece



3. Petticoat



4. Whalebone



5. Reed straws



6. Corset



7. Bra(ssiere)



8. Panties



9. Pantalettes



10. Slip



GRAMMAR FOCUS

Analyze verbal tenses in the text: why the past? Why the present perfect?



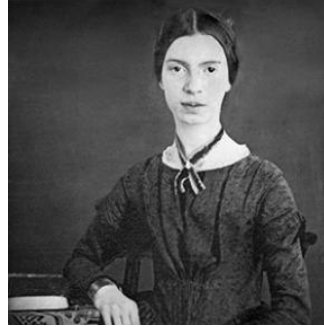
VOCABULARY FOCUS

Figure out the meaning of ‘toilsome’ (line 18) from the context



Taking off Emily Dickinson's Clothes

by Billy Collins



Hope is the thing with feathers

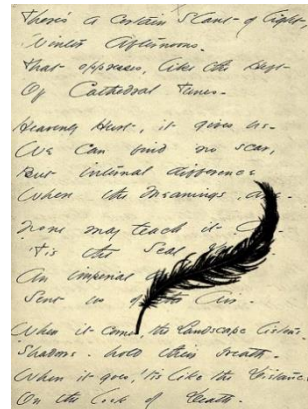
That perches in the soul

And sings the tune –

Without the words

And never steps at all

Emily Dickinson



Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is nowadays regarded as the Founding Mother of American poetry (the Founding Father unquestionably being Walt Whitman). Yet, her fame began to spread only subsequent to the efforts of her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who – after being entrusted with a chest of manuscripts by her late aunt – edited and published some of them in **1914** under the title ***The Single Hound: Poems of Emily Dickinson***.

During her lifetime, which she spent without hardly ever venturing out of the premises of her parents' house in **Amherst, Massachusetts**, Emily had been regarded as a quirky spinster who would always wear white, bar visitors and friends from seeing either her or her handwriting, and entertain kids by dropping them baskets of apples from behind the curtains of her bedroom. She would spend her days writing poems for herself and the members of her family, but never meant them for publication – reading her poems often feels like intruding on a soul baring herself in the privacy of her bedroom. New York poet **Billy Collins (born 1941)** perfectly captures this sense of intimacy the reader feels while reading Emily Dickinson's poems in the beautiful ***Taking off Emily Dickinson's Clothes***.



Practice reading the poem yourself,

then compare your own interpretation with actor Tom O'Bedlam's:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5oUS3_3Dsg

1. Does he emphasize the same words as you do?
2. How does he call the listener's attention to a given key word?

First, her **tippet**¹ made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

1



And her **bonnet**²,
the **bow**³ undone with a light forward pull.

2



Then the long white dress, a more
complicated matter with mother-of-pearl
buttons down the back,
so tiny and numerous that it takes forever
before my hands can part the fabric,
like a swimmer's dividing water,
and slip inside.

3



You will want to know
that she was standing
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,
motionless, a little wide-eyed,
looking out at the **orchard**⁴ below,
the white dress puddled at her feet
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

4



5



The complexity of women's **undergarments**⁵
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, **clasps**⁶, and **moorings**⁷,

6



7



8



9





READING & VOCABULARY

catches⁸, **straps**⁹, and **whalebone stays**¹⁰,
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything -
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,
how her hair tumbled free of its **pins**¹¹,
how there were sudden **dashes**¹²
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is
it was terribly quiet in Amherst
that **Sabbath**¹³ afternoon,
nothing but a carriage passing the house,
a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale
when I undid the very top
hook-and-eye fastener¹⁴ of her corset

and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,
the way some readers sigh when they realize
that Hope has feathers,
that reason is a plank,
that life is a loaded gun
that looks right at you with a yellow eye¹⁵.

10



11



12 Emily Dickinson's poems
are spangled with dashes
(-): See quote on p.1.

13 Quote from one of Emily
Dickinson's poems.

14



15 Quotes from one of Emily
Dickinson's poems.

Do you wish to learn more about Emily Dickinson? Watch *The Poet in Her Bedroom*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrb-tMNq6yo>