

## **“Undressing” (or Whatever) a Poet**

This assignment asks students to “undress” their poet as Billy Collins does in his poem, “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes.” In that poem, Collins uses the suggestive metaphor as an extended metaphor for getting to know a poet well, i.e. to get intimate with a poet. After I read the poem aloud as provocatively as I can, I tease them about how they must have misunderstood Billy, since he has such respect for Emily, he would never really undress her in public, but...

As a culminating activity for their own Poet Research Project, I ask students to write a similar poem to express their own familiarity with their poet. I suggest that the best poems will reference works by the poet and might even go so far as to imitate the style of their poet as an homage.

I require them to submit a digital version of the poem, as well as an illustrated print copy, and to present the poem aloud to the class. Then I run off all the poems and bind them in a class anthology that the librarian catalogues and keeps for future reference. Following you will find the title page for a student anthology of poems inspired by the assignment and the handout itself, based on a page on my website from the Poem-a-Day links for National Poetry Month.

from MsEffie’s LifeSavers Poem-a-Day National Poetry Month Assignments  
<http://homepage.mac.com/mseffie/assignments/poem-a-day/daily.html>

The Poet Research Project can also be found on my website –

[http://homepage.mac.com/mseffie/assignments/research\\_paper/sophomorepaper.html](http://homepage.mac.com/mseffie/assignments/research_paper/sophomorepaper.html)

Though more appropriate to Literature than Language, Collins’s poem is a great one to approach rhetorically, because of its humor and style.

## Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes by Billy Collins

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

5 And her bonnet,  
the bow undone with a light forward pull.

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  
10 before my hands can part the fabric,  
like a swimmer's dividing water,  
and slip inside.

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

20 The complexity of women's undergarments  
in nineteenth-century America  
is not to be waved off,  
and I proceeded like a polar explorer  
through clips, clasps, and moorings,  
25 catches, straps, and whalebone stays,  
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--  
30 the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,  
how her hair tumbled free of its pins,  
how there were sudden dashes  
whenever we spoke.

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

So I could plainly hear her inhale  
40 when I undid the very top  
hook-and-eye fastener 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,  
45 that reason is a plank,  
that life is a loaded gun  
that looks right at you with a yellow eye.



**Your Turn:** It's your turn to get intimate with a poet. Pick someone whose poetry inspires you and "undress" them. Or dress them, or take them for a walk, have tea, go shopping – whatever metaphor works best for getting to know your poet.