

The Bathing Suit and Gender Equality

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It is November 2018 at The Bishop Strachan School (BSS). BSS is a single gendered girl's school in Toronto, Canada. On the walls of room 224 hang posters of the Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movements that pertain to the Equity and Social Justice course. As the girls filter into the room, they spot a mannequin dressed in a piece of antique clothing. They are curiously drawn to it, not knowing why a mannequin has made its way into their grade 10 History classroom. This is the artefact that will spark our class inquiry into women's roles in the 1920s.



The first question they are tasked with is to decipher what exactly this piece of clothing was, who might have worn it and for what purpose. Almost immediately some girls state that this was female attire, pointing to the frills on the collar on the artefact. Other students suggest this was an outfit that women wore in public during the day. Some students are a bit confused because the lower part of the outfit looks like bloomers. They say that women would not have worn bloomers because it was too masculine. They all seem to agree that women wearing pants in public would not come until a bit later in the century. After numerous guesses, one student suggests that this could have been a bathing suit. She is told that she is correct, and they are now off on their second inquiry – the time period of this piece of clothing. They have some knowledge about the portrayal of women at the turn of the century from their studies earlier in the year. This got them questioning further as to whether women could actually do any swimming in this outfit. They thought that perhaps it may have been for wading in the water since the heavy material was not conducive to swimming and would weight women down. They soon began to realize how fashion also played into the theme of women being passive individuals who needed to convey ladylike qualities at all times, even on an excursion to the beach. Women in the 1890s were expected to look and behave a certain way that promoted this domestic and ladylike comportment, and fashion played a large point in reinforcing the societal construction of gender. By the time the 1920s rolled around, women were wearing different bathing suits. The students understood from their studies of the First World War that women gained a temporary independence as they took on various roles that were traditionally reserved for males. As a political strategy designed to secure an election victory, the Borden government also granted some women the right to vote, which would further encourage suffragists to continue their fight for emancipation.

Once the students realized that this was a Victorian bathing suit, they began their research online by looking at images of bathing suits from the 1920s on the City of Toronto archives. They also turned to *The Globe* newspaper archives and studied advertisements in the 1920s. The *BSS Museum and Archives*, the school archives, also had photographs of girls with shorter hair and shorter skirt lengths. Even the activities they did in the 1920s indicated that young women were beginning to break out of their shell. One student said women in the 1920s were being quite rebellious. In a way, they were having their own version of their #MeToo movement. This newfound freedom for young women in the 1920s would later lead the Famous Five on the path toward personhood. By 1929, Canada's highest court would finally recognize women as persons under the law. The bathing suit of the Victorian era, and all that came with it was soon just a memory for younger women in the 1920s.

By 1918, most women in Canada received the right to vote with the exception of Chinese, Indian, and Japanese women, and Aboriginal women who did not get the vote in Canada until the late 1940s and 1960, respectively. A century later, the fight for gender equality is far from over. Students in our classrooms hear the calls to action by women in our world today whether it be through the #MeToo movement or through lack of education for young women in less developed countries. They know that this struggle continues today, in the everyday lives of women. A simple artefact from the not too distant past – a bathing suit – showed them that a century later, gender equality is still something that has yet to be fully achieved.