

Real Women Without Stereotypes?

Written by mImoment

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In more than one research survey conducted for the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, female characters in television and film frequently appeared as "eye candy" for the audience and for the lead male. What about female characters played by plus-sized actresses? How are they portrayed? They seem to run the gamut, from the Gabourey Sibideh's entirely serious portrayal of a young single mother in *Precious*, to Kirstie Alley's role in the pseudo-reality show *Fat Actress*, which practically makes Alley an object of audience ridicule.

In this MediaLit Moment, your high school students will have the chance to identify stereotypes of plus-sized actresses that they might have taken for granted, and a chance to develop their own criteria for roles which cast larger women in a realistic or positive light.

Ask students to identify stereotypical roles for plus-sized actresses

The entertainment industry has its own definition of plus-size. See example of how the term can vary: <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/news/a18375/plus-sized-models/>

AHA!: Plus-sized actresses are typecast most of the time!

Grade Level: 9-12

Key Question #4: What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view

Materials: DVD player and/or computer with high-speed Internet connection

Activity: You may want to ask if any students have seen *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. If they have seen it, what impression did they have of Ms. Suggs (Jennifer Coolidge), the driving instructor? Did her weight or body size seem to have anything to do with her character?

Next, play clips of two or more television or film characters played by plus-sized actresses, and offer students a glimpse of a variety of roles. Here's a sample list: America Ferrara as Ana in *Real Women Have Curves*

; Melissa McCarthy as Mullins in *The Heat*

; Ricki Lake as Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*

; Queen Latifah as Mama Morton in *Chicago*

. You will need to be judicious with your choice of excerpts, as plus-sized actresses are cast in R-rated films with some frequency. What kinds of characters do they play? Make sure to ask, can they imagine this actress playing any other kind of character? If not, why not? Introduce students to the concept of typecasting/stereotyping. Draw students' attention to KQ#4 and keep asking questions to help them unravel the social assumptions embedded in these stereotypes. If time permits, hold a discussion on the kinds of roles these actresses might play that are not based on stereotypes. What might be a serious, realistic or positive role for them?

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