

Offensive Stereotypes in Creative Writing

Stereotypes

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a stereotype “is most frequently now employed to refer to an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic.” When we perpetuate stereotypes in writing, we give the impression that these beliefs are facts. This widespread misinformation affects the way that individuals from marginalized groups are perceived and treated. Therefore, it is important to have a working knowledge of existing stereotypes so as not to replicate them in our own creative writing.

Explanation

These depictions are harmful because they perpetuate negative generalizations, parodies, and misconceptions about entire groups of people. This is not to say that writers set out to offend or to demean; on the contrary, many writers are well-intentioned people who want to include diverse characters in their work. However, these earnest attempts can fall short and cause unintentional pain when writers are not aware of existing stereotypes. Furthermore, these portrayals have a real-world impact: they can influence readers and leave them with inaccurate impressions of diverse cultures, genders, and sexualities. Common stereotypes in media include the “white savior,” “spicy Latina,” “sassy Black woman,” and “manic pixie dream girl,” amongst many others.

Specific Examples of Stereotypes in Media

White savior: A narrative that outwardly appears to be about the accomplishments of a BIPOC character (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color), yet features a white person as an integral part of this success. What makes this narrative so damaging is that it implicitly tells audiences that BIPOC individuals, rather than standing up for themselves, require benevolent white people to rescue them; moreover, issues of prejudice and inequality are often solved by the end of the book or movie. This downplays the devastating impact of systemic racism by presenting audiences with a neat and easy solution, wherein the white person saves the day at the end of the story. Many films are guilty of this stereotype. One well-known example is the novel-turned-film *The Help*. This narrative focuses on a white woman in the 1960s South who writes a book on the abusive conditions that Black women faced in their work as housekeepers and nannies for white families. Many critics (including some of the actors who were involved with the movie) have pointed out that this story makes it appear as if social change only happens because of liberal white individuals.

Fantasy “race” based on an ethnic identity: While basing fantasy species off real-life groups of people is not inherently offensive, it frequently leads to hurtful caricatures of real-life ethnicities and physical characteristics. Examples can include non-human characters, such as

orcs, goblins, dwarves, and aliens. Some writers might give these species physical traits that resemble racist images of Black individuals, Jewish individuals, Arab individuals, and more. Other writers might closely base a fantasy religion off a real-life culture and include disrespectful or inaccurate details that are harmful to real-world members of that culture/religion. One example of this is the alien slave owner Watto from the *Star Wars* prequel films. Various critics have noted that Watto embodies racist ideas about both Jewish and Arab people, both in his physical appearance and in his personality traits. Furthermore, the fantasy genre in general tends to associate the color white with forces of good and the color black with the forces of evil; this is reflected in implicitly racist dichotomies, such as blond elves and dark-skinned goblins or orcs.

Disability superpower: This stereotype refers to the tendency to depict fictional people with physical disabilities as having some kind of superpower that minimizes or negates their disability. Writers might intend for this depiction to empower people with disabilities; however, these kinds of stories can send the implicit message that these individuals are only valuable members of society if they have a “gift” to make up for their physical disability. Similar narratives exist around people with mental illnesses. Such stories sometimes portray the specific mental illness inaccurately and often indicate that individuals with mental illness must have extraordinary abilities to make up for their impairment. Various books and movies feature a “tortured artist” or “tortured genius.” These stories can be problematic because they romanticize illness and often indicate that creativity is the direct result of pain; furthermore, these narratives falsely imply that people who seek therapy will become less creative as a result of treatment. One example of a disability superpower is the titular character in Marvel’s *Daredevil* comics, who is blind but has miraculously enhanced senses. While this story does portray a disabled person in a heroic light, some audiences have argued that it does not accurately depict the real-life experiences of blind individuals. Instead, *Daredevil*’s powers make his blindness practically a non-issue.

Token BIPOC or LGBTQ+ characters: These characters lack a personality outside of their cultural identity or LGBTQ+ sexuality and/or gender. Examples can include the “Black best friend” trope, where the character embodies all the stereotypes associated with Black individuals and exists only to support the white protagonist. Teen movies and rom-coms alike feature a peppy blond protagonist and her supportive Black friend, who exists to give advice and tell jokes. Similarly, the “gay best friend” trope generally features a gay man who acts as a sassy companion to the female protagonist and has no complexity outside of his stereotypical traits. The 2013 film *G.B.F.* spoofs this stereotype with a narrative about three high school girls competing for the attention of their gay classmate in the hopes that he’ll increase their popularity.

Alternative Ways to Write Characters and Plots

- Write multiple characters from the same group, so there isn’t one token representative. Additionally, people are often friends with those whom they can relate to. So for

instance, rather than having a single gay character in a group of straight characters, a friend group might be made up of multiple LGBTQ+ individuals.

- Write BIPOC characters who have agency, complexity, and the ability to fight their own battles. Instead of having a white character advocate for, speak for, and fight for people of color, give characters of color the opportunity to speak and advocate for themselves.
- Write characters who live with their disability, rather than giving them a superpower that effectively takes away their disability.
- Write disabled characters who have their own character arc and do not exist purely as a source of inspiration for able-bodied people.
- Write fantasy characters that are not based on real-world groups of people, or write characters that are based off groups you are more familiar with (so they can have the necessary complexity).
- Give BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals their own character arcs, with their own goals and desires, rather than making their entire lives revolve around white and straight characters.
- Run your book by the Bechdel test. Named after Alison Bechdel, this test measures representation of women in the media. A story passes the Bechdel test if it has at least two female characters who have names and talk about something other than a man.
- Run your book by a sensitivity reader. Sensitivity readers will read unpublished manuscripts and give feedback on cultural inaccuracies, biases, and stereotypes.
- Don't make your villain the sole BIPOC person in the entire story. Similarly, don't make your villain the sole gay character or sole disabled character.
- Don't kill every BIPOC, LGBTQ+, or disabled character. This sends the message that these characters—and by extension real-life people who are members of these groups—are unimportant.
- Overall, make sure that your characters are complex, realistic individuals who are not defined by stereotype.

Activity

Examine these passages and identify what kind of stereotype is at play.

1. A white woman shows up in medieval China and single-handedly rescues an entire village from invaders. She marries the village magistrate.
2. The book centers on a group of four friends: Cora, a cisgender woman; Agatha, a trans woman; Jupiter, a cisgender man; and Jim, a cisgender man. The story is about Cora's love triangle with Jim and Jupiter. Agatha just pops up whenever someone is talking about issues pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community.
3. In a new animated fantasy TV show, there are various fairy protagonists and antagonists. Most of the protagonists are elves and are portrayed as blond and blue-eyed; most of the antagonists are demons with dark skin.
4. This Oscar-nominated film is about the incredible journey of a Black civil rights activist, from the perspective of the white man who gave her a job at his company.

5. My latest novel is about a woman with OCD. As a result of her fixation on tiny details, she becomes America's most famous consulting detective.

Answer Key for Activity

1. White Savior. While some might argue that this story is progressive because it features a powerful female lead, it ultimately falls back on the idea that BIPOC individuals are passive and require a white person to rescue them.
2. Tokenism. Agatha has no characterization outside of her gender. Even though the author was probably trying to be inclusive and sensitive, they created a stock representation of the transgender community, rather than a complex person.
3. Fantasy "race" based on an ethnic identity. These characters associated with evil are reinforcing negative ideas about BIPOC individuals.
4. White Savior. This film attempts to celebrate Black woman's accomplishments, but the story is not told through her voice. Therefore, it ceases to be about her. Furthermore, it pushes the narrative that white people are key to BIPOC individuals' success.
5. Disability Superpower. The author displays a superficial knowledge about this mental illness and implies that people with OCD are blessed by their condition. This author does not acknowledge the complexities of the illness.

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