



Lesson Plan

Female Action Heroes

Overview

In this lesson, students identify stereotypical images of girls and women as represented by female action heroes. After viewing an excerpt from children's television programs that feature male or female action heroes, students deconstruct the traits of the main characters and compare the female action heroes to their male counterparts. Students discuss the purpose of television stereotypes, and whether these gender stereotypes influence the attitudes or behaviour of boys or girls. In small groups, students then assume the role of television producers who wish to create a television series about male or female superhero free of gender and other stereotypes.

Level: Grades 6-8

About the Author

Adapted by Jane Tallim, MNet's education specialist, from "Gender Issues in *Sailor Moon*," by Alice Te of the Toronto Board of Education

Preparation and Materials

- For the extension activity, or to use as a teaching background, photocopy the student handout *From Sailor Moon to Powerpuff Girls*
- For more information about television stereotypes, photocopy the *Stereotypes* teaching background
- Locate a short clip of a TV program featuring a female superhero

Procedure

Note: The point of this lesson is for students to articulate what qualities they enjoy or admire in a female action hero, and why. The teacher should point out that it's not "bad" to enjoy such attributes — but that it's important for students to be aware of the ways in which girls and women are (or are not) portrayed.

Explain to students that although cartoons featuring male action heroes have been a staple of children's television for over fifty years, the idea of female action heroes is fairly new: it's only recently that they've achieved any presence on children's TV. As a result, this lesson will focus primarily on the images of girls and women appearing in these programs.

Guided Discussion

- Divide your blackboard into two sections, headed "Male Action Heroes" and "Female Action Heroes."
- Ask students to think of television programs that feature action heroes, and list them under the appropriate heading.
- Have students analyze why they enjoy watching these programs, and get them to pinpoint the characteristics that make male and female protagonists into true action heroes/heroines. List these qualities under the appropriate column heading.

Look at the two headings, and decide:

- What are the similarities between male and female superheroes?
- What are the differences?

Show a short clip of a television program that features a female superhero. Before viewing the clip, ask the students to note down the characteristics that are associated with the girls and women appearing in the program, as well as those of any boys and men. What are some points they might be concerned about? Make sure that they consider aspects such as appearance, behaviour and attitudes.

After the clip, list the students' findings and discuss the characteristics they noted.
Ask:

- Did you find that the characteristics of boys and men, and of girls and women, were stereotypical?
- Which of these characteristics might be limiting? How?
- Which of these characteristics might be positive? How?
- Do any of these characteristics accurately reflect the qualities of real girls and boys?
- What might happen if most children's programs portrayed boys and girls in a stereotypical manner?
- Do the toy action figures of these superheroes counter these stereotypes, or reinforce them?
- If students have younger siblings who play with television action figures, do they create their own stories or stick with the plot lines of the program?

Activity

Divide the class into small groups, with each group assuming the role of television producers who have been asked to create a new superhero cartoon series for kids aged 5-8. These producers want the program to be entertaining, and also to be non-stereotypical: it should provide good role models for young viewers. Tell the students to be creative!

- Make a list of the various positive characteristics your female or male action hero should have. Some examples might be: girls and women leading others, fighting for important causes, showing bravery, caring about their female friends, and being interested in matters other than attracting the attention of boys or men. Examples of positive characteristics for boys and men might be taking care of others, finding ways of solving problems other than fighting, and being sensitive and caring.
- Every heroine or hero needs a trusty sidekick. What might her/his non-stereotypical traits be?
- Draw pictures of your female/male action hero and her/his friends. Remember to incorporate characteristics that challenge conventional stereotypes.
- Create a storyboard for an episode of the new TV program. What happens in it? What action elements are different from a conventional show?
- Have each group present its work to the rest of the class.

Extension Activity: Grades 7 and 8

- Distribute the handout *From Sailor Moon to Powerpuff Girls*
- Have students read the essay, and then complete the accompanying questions.

Evaluation

- Group superhero assignment
- Completed questions for "From Sailor Moon to Powerpuff Girls"

From Sailor Moon to Powerpuff Girls: Female Action Heroes

Before *Sailor Moon* hit North American airwaves in 1995, there were few female heroes in Saturday morning cartoons.



At that time, in TV shows designed specifically for kids, only 23 percent of the characters – and even fewer of the major characters – were female. "In cartoonland, all the girls are sidekicks and there's no doubt who's in charge," said ABC news anchor Carole Simpson. And they were stereotyped, too: the lone Smurfette was blond and all too caring; Scooby Doo's Velma was smart but unattractive; and a female Power Ranger was, of course, dressed in pink.

Source: "From Sidekick to Superwoman: TV's Feminine Mystique" by Shawn Doherty and Nadine Joseph

Because producers of children's television knew that girls were less likely to watch TV, and more likely to listen to CDs, tapes or the radio, they traditionally catered to young boys. But the popularity with young girls of the *Sailor Moon* cartoon series made those producers realize that there was an untapped market of young females that would watch TV – if they had the right program to attract them.

Sailor Moon's appeal to young girls was not just the fact that she and her fellow "sailors" were female, but also the style of storytelling inherent in the Japanese tradition of anime. Unlike traditional North American cartoon characters, *Sailor Moon's* character evolved as the series progressed, rather than remaining static.

*As with a soap opera or a mini-series, each character develops personality and maturity as the series continues. For example, *Sailor Moon* goes from being a frightened teen in the show's initial episode, to developing into a more mature and caring heroine in later shows. She essentially "grows up" on the screen each day, until eventually she becomes a queen and a mother.*

Source: Dr. David Gauntlett
www.theory.org.uk/ctr-rol4.htm



With the success of *Sailor Moon* and other anime cartoons in North America, there has been an increase in female action heroes in children's cartoons. However, increased representation doesn't always guarantee a decrease in gender stereotypes. For example, although *Sailor Moon* achieves maturity and has tremendous powers, most of her young viewers still relate to her as a giddy love-starved girl with superpowers.



"Empowerment" is a common subtext in many recent cartoons geared to girls. The popular series *Powerpuff Girls* also plays on common gender stereotypes: the "sweet little girls" also happen to be "butt-kicking superheroes." In this series, a professor who tries to create a perfect little girl by mixing sugar, spice and everything nice, ends up with more than he expects when a dash of Chemical X falls into the mix. The result is the *Powerpuff Girls*: three "angelic" five-year-olds who fight crime with their super strength, super speed and laser vision. Each character reflects common female cartoon stereotypes: one's smart, one's sweet and one's a tomboy — but together they use the "wham-bam" action traditionally reserved for male superheroes. Their motto: "Saving the world before bedtime."

As one Powerpuff observer notes:

Common superhero ideology dictates that great power brings great responsibility. As superheroes, the Powerpuffs are required to use their abilities for the benefit of mankind — to serve and protect in the tradition of the police and other law enforcement agencies, though on a more fantastic scale. The role of protector is an aggressive position, in direct conflict with the idea of the feminine as passive. For this reason, male superheroes outnumber female heroes in the comic book realm, because a woman cannot fulfill social expectations and still perform the duties required of a superhero. The women are often relegated to the roles of girlfriend or mother, figures in need of protection and the occasional rescue. Powerpuff Girls neatly sidesteps this uncomfortable dichotomy by purging the citizens of Townsville of any social expectations. Thus the Girls are respected and admired for their role as resident superheroes, while still being adored for being sweet and caring little girls.

Source: "The Powerpuff Girls: A Society of Girl Power,"
<http://members.aol.com/Lampbane/powerpuff.html>

Some popular female action/cartoon characters transcend stereotypes by being transgendered — sharing both male and female personas. In the film *X-Men*, an adaptation of the popular comic book series, female heroes (and villains) are equally matched. Even Disney moved with the times in its 1998 animated movie *Mulan*, which was based on a young girl's quest to break out of rigid social sex-role expectations.



The study of gender, action heroes and cartoons offers tremendous opportunities to reflect on cultural gender stereotypes, and what it means to be male or female in today's society. As we explore and compare cartoons, we can deconstruct media messages about gender stereotypes, that perpetuate traditional male and female roles — and contemplate alternatives to them.

From Sailor Moon to Powerpuff Girls: Female Action Heroes

Questions:

1. Why have television producers traditionally been reluctant to create children's programs that feature girls or women as superheroes?
2. If you're familiar with older cartoon series, how would you describe the roles and personalities of characters such as April O'Neil from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, Wilma Flintstone or Betty Rubble from *The Flintstones*, Velma or Daphne from *Scooby Doo*, or Smurfette from *The Smurfs*? (Feel free to list other examples of older cartoon characters you're familiar with.)
3. Stereotypes are common story-telling tools, but they can also be limiting. Explain how the male and female stereotypes that are perpetuated in cartoons can be limiting.
4. How does *Sailor Moon* differ from traditional North American cartoons?
5. In what ways is *Sailor Moon* a non-stereotypical action hero?
6. In what ways is she a stereotypical female action hero?
7. Respond to this statement: *"The role of protector is an aggressive position, in direct conflict with the idea of the feminine as passive."* How does this apply to female action heroes? Can you think of any exceptions?
8. Think of a television show that features a female action hero. In this show, how are men portrayed? What roles do they assume? Are they stereotypical, or non-stereotypical?
9. Do you think that we have achieved equity in how men and women or boys and girls are represented on children's television? Provide examples to support your response.
10. In a short paragraph, respond to the following statement:

"Television clearly makes an impression on kids today, whether it's in what they think they should look like, or the qualities they associate with women and men. The media are powerful tools that can either reinforce negative stereotypes or present strong role models for young girls and boys today."

Matt James
Senior Vice President
Kaiser Family Foundation

Stereotypes

Because most television programs are quite short, the identities of characters must be established as quickly as possible. To do this, television writers often use stereotypes. A stereotype is a fixed or conventional image of a person or group of people. Stereotypes generally conform to a pattern of dress and behavior that is easily recognized and understood. Often, a judgment is made about the person or group being stereotyped. That judgment may be positive or negative.

Generally, stereotypes are less real, more perfect, (or imperfect) and more predictable than their real-life counterparts. A typical male stereotype, for example, is of a "real man" who is adventurous, masterful, intelligent, and unshakable. Such sex-role stereotypes are intended to present viewers with a character they can easily recognize and relate to. Their danger, however, is that, if seen often, they can affect the way a viewer perceives men in general. Male stereotyping can narrow one's notion of what men can be and do; it can affect women's and children's expectations of men; it can even shape men's and boys' own views of themselves and of how they should behave.

While commercial television has improved in its portrayal of females, many of the women featured on TV continue to be depicted as someone's wife (apron-clad) or girlfriend (barely-clad). Television children are generally cast in gender-related roles – the girls playing with dolls while the boys play at sports – and all are "cutesy" and talk as though they were insightful adults. Similarly, the characterization of mothers-in-law, the elderly, gays, police officers, and truck drivers tends toward the stereotypical.

Culture and class stereotypes are also prevalent in television. Traditionally, blacks were portrayed as either happy-go-lucky servants or dangerous criminals, and while these stereotypes linger, we are now seeing what might be described as upright, intelligent, middle-class black characters. Similarly, North American native peoples are now being portrayed as something other than buckskin-wearing teepee dwellers. Too often, however, minorities are portrayed stereotypically and almost never as powerful or rich as the white majority.

Because stereotyping can lead children to form false impressions of various societal groups, it is important that students recognize stereotypes and understand the role they play in television's portrayal of life. To become television-wise, then, students must tune in to the ways television treats people, recognize how they themselves relate to TV characters, and understand how these characters can influence their ideas about the real people in their communities.

Source: TVOntario, *Let's Play TV: Resource Kit For Television Literacy*, © 1995.