



6 Female Character Stereotypes to Avoid

StoryEmbers.org



6 Common Female Character Stereotypes to Avoid

A Guide by Rose Sheffler

People believe many generalizations about women (and men, but more on them later). Some are true. Others are not.

Here at Story Embers, we've debunked [the biggest lie people believe about strong female protagonists](#). Assumptions and stereotypes like that are easy to fall into when writing a female character. But six more female stereotypes tend to be a problem in fiction, and this short guide will help you identify and fix them.

A Quick Disclaimer

These stereotypes can be subtle and easy to miss. In an effort to make them more obvious, we'll be exaggerating their characteristics.



#1: The Mary Sue

Who She Is

A female character who can do it all. She's beautiful, graceful, and has perfect hair, teeth, and clothes. She runs a charity, is a master scientist, paints watercolors every evening, scuba dives, and speaks ancient Latin (and more!). She possesses every virtue, and her only flaws are surface level and fleeting at best.

Why She's a Problem

Any character who is overly competent in everything she attempts is unrealistic and lacks a compelling personality. She's alienating rather than inviting. Readers want stories about real people, not perfect robots.

Example

Rey from the new *Star Wars* trilogy is the Mary Poppins of the galaxy far, far away—practically perfect in every way. She has mad lightsaber skills (with zero training, mind you), can fly any spaceship you throw at her, is kind and caring, and even takes out Kylo Ren. She'd be a far more interesting character if she failed, but she doesn't, and that makes her boring.



How to Avoid Her

Humans are imperfect and fallen. When creating any character, pick two (or three) strengths and one (or two) weaknesses. Dig deep into her personality and wrestle with why she has those strengths and weaknesses and how they affect her. Having both virtues and vices gives a character balance and believability that readers will connect with.



#2: The Damsel in Distress

Who She Is

The opposite of the Mary Sue. She's incapable of doing anything for herself, especially when a more capable male character is around to do it for her. She exists to give the other characters someone to save.

Why She's a Problem

A character who can't accomplish any goals on her own is flat and ultimately uninteresting. Weaknesses provide moments for character growth and interaction, but complete helplessness only frustrates and annoys readers.

Example

Gwen Stacy in Sam Raimi's *Spiderman III* doesn't have much to do besides getting rescued from a collapsing building. Perhaps the writers didn't have time to develop her more than that in the short space of the film, but it still makes her a bland character.



How to Avoid Her

Agency is captivating. Your character's responses to the plot are half the story. She ought to have a goal and a means of plausibly pursuing it. That doesn't mean she *has* to accomplish it, but the possibility of her succeeding has to be believable.



#3: The Trust Issues Chick

Who She Is

The hard-knock girl on the street who doesn't need anyone and doesn't want anyone to need her. She's scarred and wounded, but it's totally fine. She's tough, she's cool, she's got this. Trust issues aren't *really* an issue for her—they're just a complexity to her personality that makes her mysterious.

Why She's a Problem

Trust issues are deep and often debilitating for the people who struggle with them. In order for characters to interact fluidly and meaningfully, they have to possess a layer of trust, so a character with trust issues can't and shouldn't skate her way through the plot. Portraying these problems as no big deal strips away the consequences of broken trust and makes it trite.

Example

Eleven from the popular Netflix show *Stranger Things* risked falling into this trap during the first season. While future seasons developed her more, certain episodes occasionally drifted in this direction.



How to Avoid Her

Brokenness is never light, casual, or without consequences. When you choose to create a character with a serious emotional, psychological, or physical trauma, educate yourself on the various ways that such problems impact real people and how they find healing.



#4: The Mom-zilla

Who She Is

The Mom-zilla is the monstrous, overbearing, out-of-touch mother who only gets in the way of her Super Mature Teenagers. They know what's up with the plot. Mom? Not so much. But don't worry, they'll show her, and by the end of the story she'll admit her ignorance and profusely apologize. It'll be awesome.

Why She's a Problem

Reducing a character to a single trait creates a caricature, which is neither engaging nor entertaining (unless you're writing satire). Parents aren't perfect, but they're not stupid either. And although a few evil stepmothers probably *do* exist in the world, most moms are normal, broken humans trying their best.

Example

Aunt Petunia from *Harry Potter* (and her husband, Vernon, and son, Dudley) only serve as obtuse obstacles to Harry Potter in his adventures to survive high school and defeat Lord Voldemort. She hates Harry because she hated his mother, and her character has no other definition than this single-minded dislike of her nephew.



How to Avoid Her

Remember that parents were once protagonists of their own stories. Sketch out a loose timeline in your mind of how your mom character became who she is. Even if your audience never reads this information, knowing it when you write your character will deepen her humanity and personality.



#5: The Manic Pixie Girl

Who She Is

A female protagonist who's super-duper quirky, unique, and oh-so-special. Almost to a fault. She probably wears converse high-top sneakers, listens to vinyl, and definitely has a tattoo. And she definitely breaks *all* the rules, because rules are for normal people (duh). It's her job to befriend the dull boy and remake him into a vibrant, life-loving human being.

Why She's a Problem

When a character is composed of so many quirky, unique traits, she ends up having no identifiable personality at all. Being quirky becomes *who* she is, rather than *part* of who she is. The more you pile on the drama, the more readers will feel slapped in the face with your “special” character, which robs her of her potential to make a real impact. Readers will stop seeing her as a person and instead only see her quirks.

Example

Many of John Green's female protagonists fall into this camp, but most notably Alaska from *Looking for Alaska*. She has the potential to be an interesting character, but that potential is lost amidst the tangle of quirks.



How to Avoid Her

Adding quirk after quirk can be tempting when you're trying to make your characters memorable. But too many prevent readers from engaging with who your protagonist actually is and how she's going to grow in your story. Resist the temptation and keep the crazy quirks to a minimum. Like one. Or none.



#6: The Girl in the Love Triangle

Who She Is

A female protagonist whose singular purpose is to choose which of the two massively hot guys vying for her attention she ought to make out with in the current chapter. She'll probably make out with the *other* guy in the next chapter. And then she'll feel guilty and go back to the first guy. Love, kiss (a lot), switch, repeat. Until the story ends.

Why She's a Problem

There's more to life, and to a story, than who gets the girl. A character's identity isn't composed of who she's attracted to and why. While it's an important and influential detail, it's only *one part* of her. When romance is the only defining aspect of your female protagonist, she'll feel flat.

Example

Bella Swan from *Twilight* is forever flitting back and forth between bad-boy vampire Edward and good-hearted werewolf Jacob. This kind of characterization cheapens real romance and is insulting, not only to the portrayal of men (fighting over the hot girl) but also to the woman whose only worth in the story is being fought over.



How to Avoid Her

If your female protagonist has to decide between two men (steamy or not), ask yourself *why* that's essential to her journey and her overall development as a character. Identify how the romance moves her toward her goal. If romance *is* her goal, pinpoint how it specifically changes her for better or for worse.