

## Exploring Stereotypes with *Aladdin*

**Objectives/Abstract:** This versatile lesson can be used with classes from middle through high school to enable students to understand how stereotypical images and assumptions can be buried in the most common and innocuous-seeming social artifacts. Classes will use the Disney film *Aladdin* as a vehicle for uncovering and discussing the effect of stereotypes in society.

**Skills Addressed:** Critical thinking, media literacy, anti-bias, visual discernment

**Grade Level:** 6-12

**Time:** 1/2-1 hour

**Procedure:**

1. Begin by asking the class what a stereotype is. Have a student write down class suggestions on definitions of stereotype on one side of the board. You may want to use the Global Connections activity on stereotypes at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/educators/types/lesson1.html>.
2. Once the class has reached a consensus on what stereotyping is, elicit commentary on the possible effects of stereotyping on individuals and society. Have the student continue to record class responses.
3. Have *Aladdin* cued to the very beginning of the opening song. Watch the opening of the film for approximately ten minutes, until after Aladdin escapes from the palace guards. Ask a new student recorder to write down student responses. Ask the students to call out stereotypical images or impressions they notice as the film runs (for example, heat/desert climate, skin color/features of Arabs, good characters have American accents while evil ones sound more Arab). Turn off the film.
4. Make sure that students have noted or introduce the following sets of stereotypes:
  - a. Climate/region: What does the setting look like? All desert, camels, with onion-domed roofs and minarets. Point out that the Middle East has enormous geographical and architectural diversity.
  - b. Timeless/magical: Note that the current time blends with magical time and the distant past. Here one should point out that in the original version of the film, which was to be released just after the first Gulf War, the city was called Baghdad—but because of the war, Baghdad was too “real” and the name of the city was changed to Agrabah—a construct which in Arabic means “most strange.”
  - c. Race/foreignness: Generally, bad characters are darker in skin color with larger noses and coarser features (interestingly, typically anti-Semitic stereotyping) with very heavy accents, while the good characters, like Aladdin and Jasmine, have Americanized accents and facial features.
  - d. Moral characteristics—Middle Easterners are seen as violent, thieving, arbitrary and despotic, deceitful and treacherous. Women are either veiled or wear “I Dream of Jeannie” costumes, and seem either oppressed or lecherous.
  - e. Mixed exoticism: Note out-of-place elements like the monkey, turbaned Indian fakir on bed of nails and snake charmer.
5. Allow class to discuss what value judgments underlie the use of these stereotypes in *Aladdin*. Ask students to give examples of similar stereotypes of Middle Easterners or other groups used in other commercial films or other media. Why do you think filmmakers resort to stereotypes in their films? How or how not is this effective storytelling? Does understanding how stereotyping is used “spoil” a movie? Why or why not?
6. As homework, ask students to write a brief reaction paper on how they might now watch *Aladdin* or a similar film differently.

Please make sure that the group understandings address the following:

- a. Stereotypes are generalizations that are assigned to groups of people. These groupings can be by race, class, gender, religion, country of origin etc.
- b. These generalizations (whether negative or positive) are used to limit a group. For example **all** African American men can play basketball, **all** Asians are good in math and science.
- c. There is often a grain of truth insofar as you can usually find examples of people who have that characteristics or ability. For example, there are many African American men who are good at basketball and there are many Asians that are good in math and science; however, that is not true for all people from those groups.
- d. Stereotyping tells people that they can't do or be something because of the stereotype. For example, Asian students might be advised to study math and science when they may be interested in drama.
- e. People can be mistrusted because of the stereotype associated with their group; for example, racial profiling of young African American men or Muslims.
- f. One can also note that stereotyping is in some ways a natural mode of human learning—we often use overly broad categorization when we don't have enough information about a subject. However, our generalizations and simplistic understandings need to change as we are exposed to more complex information on a subject.