

Dumplin': A Film Analysis

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“The world is filled with people who are going to try to tell you who you are”, this is a quote from the 2018 Netflix film *Dumplin'* that highlights the impact society has on how an individual may feel about themselves. This is true for many people but especially higher weight people who may deal with weightism. This film follows the story of Willowdean Dickson, more commonly known as Dumplin, a nickname her mother gave her. She is a teenage girl growing up in a small town in Texas living under the shadow of her former beauty queen mother. Her mother holds the title of 1991 Miss. Teen Bluebonnet. Willowdean not only has to live up to the expectations of her mother, but she must face those challenges as an overweight teenager. Willowdean decides to compete in the pageant to prove a point that higher weight girls can break barriers in the pageant world and to protest the traditional idea of beauty queens. This sparks interest from other girls who do not fit the typical beauty pageant standards which includes another overweight teenager and a gothic tomboy. The film follows Willowdean through the many obstacles and judgements from not only society but her own mother as she goes through the process of becoming a beauty queen.

The film portrays the many challenges an overweight individual may face in everyday life such as bullying, discrimination and stereotyping. In addition, the film showcases what happens when an overweight person steps out of social norms and does something deemed unacceptable such as joining a beauty pageant. There are many scenes throughout the film that showcase the bullying and stereotyping of an obese person. These include Willowdean being called a “whale” by boys at her school. Or being snorted at like a pig when she was buying donuts. One of the scenes that stood out the most was when Willowdean and her mother, Rosie, were arguing about her being expelled from school. Willowdean was expelled because she stood up for herself when a boy was making fun of her weight. Willowdean starts by saying “I know

you can't stand that your daughter looks like this, like a round little dumpling". Rosie replies "That is not true". Willowdean states "I don't fit in your world, I get it!" Rosie yells back "Listen I just want you to have opportunities, it is harder for big girls". This entire scene displays the emotion of people on both sides of weightism. It also is an example of weight bias internalization. The book *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity* defines weight bias internalization as "when higher-weight individuals endorse the negative stereotypes and attitudes about themselves based on their weight" (Blaine 172). This can be seen through the way Willowdean speaks about herself and the belief that her mom is ashamed of the way her body looks. The way Willowdean speaks about herself also displays low self-esteem and she is feeding into the stereotypes that society has placed on obese people. Another scene that represents the difficulties an overweight person faces is when Willowdean's love interest, Bo Larson confronts her for pushing him away after they share a meaningful kiss. Willowdean is upset and doesn't understand why a guy like Bo, who is attractive, thin, and popular wants to be with a girl like her. Bo says, "never took you as the type to care what people think" and Willowdean replies "I can't Bo and that might make me a coward". This scene depicts the challenges overweight people face when finding romantic relationships. Willowdean's insecurities of being overweight have made her scared of the opinions people might have towards their relationship. This depicts the negative attributions of dating for an overweight person and how they cope with the possibility of rejection. "Higher-weight women who were led to believe that weight is uncontrollable attributed their rejection from a male to his weight prejudice. In turn, these attributions protected their self-esteem from the threat of being turned down by prospective dating partner". (Blaine 172) This excerpt from the text supports how Willowdean was feeling when she was talking to Bo. She felt as though she was not worthy of

being with someone like him solely based on her weight. This was a form of self-protection and saved her from dealing with discrimination and prejudices of society. Both of these scenes depict the challenges that overweight people may encounter. They can be faced with judgement and criticism from their community, friends and even family. Additionally, obese and overweight people can put up walls to protect themselves. Just as Willowdean did in her romantic life, she pushed away a good man because she was afraid of the treatment they might have received from society.

Overall, the film Dumplin' does a great job representing the situations an overweight person may experience. The struggles of bullying, criticism, judgement, and discrimination are all shown through Willowdean's journey. Willowdean tries to break the cycle of weightism and pushes for the idea that overweight people are much more than their bodies. She successfully competes in the beauty pageant with her other nontraditional beauty queen friends. Even though Willowdean does not win she makes an everlasting change in the pageant world. She changes the views that many people have on overweight individuals and most importantly she shows her mom she is much more than her weight.

References

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