A Modern Pixie Dream Girl

In 2007, Nathan Rabin coined a term that would come to change film and literature history: the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. His review of the movie *Elizabethtown* included a critical analysis of Kirsten Dunst's character in which he explained, "the Manic Pixie Dream Girl exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures" (Rabin, 2007). Though he never could have predicted it, this ethereal yet entirely shallow character would become an increasingly popular and increasingly problematic trope.

Despite the Manic Pixie Dream Girl becoming a pop culture icon and making waves in film and literature, over time people grew critical of the ideals the Pixie established. Seven years after first inventing the term, Rabin wrote an article for *Salon* apologizing for his hand in boosting the popular but troublesome trope. He broke down the harmful one-dimensional nature of the MPDG, called for authors to move past the Pixie and "write better, more nuanced and multidimensional female characters," and ultimately suggested society "put [Manic Pixies] to rest" (Rabin, 2014). The heart of the MPDG trope is the idea of a girl whose best attributes are not meant to strengthen her own characterization, but instead to draw in a white male protagonist. Her adventures are never to fulfill her own life goals, but instead to spice up the protagonist's life and teach him a lesson in self-growth. In a world constantly pushing for change, promoting a trope so deeply rooted in patriarchal ideals would be ridiculous, yet modern society still finds itself fascinated with the Pixie. With a much closer look at the MPDG's origins and evolutions in popular culture, I can't help but believe that some form of the Pixie will hold strong in our society.

Yet I believe the key to a world where the Manic Pixie Dream Girl and female empowerment can coexist is the very idea Nathan Rabin himself introduced in his apology article: we must learn to separate the Pixie from the patriarchy to instead create complex, real characters. Can we keep the whimsy without all the misogyny?

Jennifer Gouck, who spent years researching the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG from now on), established a five-stage narrative model for the standard MPDG novel or film (Gouck, 2021). To fully understand this trope, let's take a look at the iconic MPDG film *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*. Based on the comics of the same name, this movie follows Gouck's model to a tee. First, we meet Scott Pilgrim, the sad, white, cishet, male, middle-class protagonist. As Pilgrim goes about his mundane life, the girl of his dreams (quite literally) enters the scene, catching Pilgrim's eye with her shock of hot pink hair. Pilgrim does everything in his power to see Ramona Flowers again, until he is suddenly whisked into a wild adventure all for the sake of winning her over. Flowers disappears several times throughout the film, once immediately following Scott's battle with Ramona's second evil ex, and again when she decides to get back together with her most recent ex, Gideon. Finally, after Scott fights Gideon, and learns a lesson about self-respect in the process, Ramona leaves one last time, telling him she doesn't want another evil ex (Wright, 2010). Now at this point the film deviates from Gouck's last stage of the final goodbyes, but who doesn't love a good happy ending, and regardless, the MPDG trope stands firm.

The main trait that makes a true MPDG is her one-dimensionality. Her characteristics are bright and bold, yet flat and lacking in detail, making her the perfect blank canvas for the protagonist to impose all his fantasies onto. From the moment he lays eyes on her, the protagonist is

taken aback by her uniqueness and we get the sense that there is just something special about her. But after that, we learn very little about who our Pixie really is. We never get her side of the story, so instead our sole understanding of the MPDG is what the protagonist believes—or wishes—her to be. In her multidisciplinary analysis of the MPDG, Lucía Gloria Vázquez expands on the problematic shallow characterization of the Pixie, claiming that "the problem with fantasy, though, is that the moment you get what you seek, you do not want it anymore, because in order for desire to exist it must have its objects perpetually absent" (Vázquez, 2017). This is exactly why the MPDG is designed to leave the protagonist in the end. If she were to stay, that thrill of the chase disappears and suddenly she is no longer the perfect blank slate for the protagonist. Once the Pixie inevitably disappears, sure the protagonist will be sad, but he gets to keep that perfect idealized image of her forever. As Jennifer Gouck puts it in another paper on the impersistence of the MPDG in young adult literature "The Pixie's lack of future means she is also trapped in a state of perpetual girlhood, unable to progress" (Gouck, 2023). Again, once the protagonist has her, she is no longer this perfect thing of his imagination, she becomes three dimensional, she grows. But if she is destined to leave, not only does the desire for that unattainable treasure persist, but she also remains the same person he imagined until the end of time. Thus, there is never any consequence for the protagonist's skewed perception of the Pixie, and to the audience she will forever be the representation of the ideal woman.

Similarly, even before the MPDG leaves, all of her actions and characteristics still add up to a blank canvas for the protagonist. The trick of the MPDG trope is that this one-dimensional characterization is often disguised under small details of the Pixie's life that might at first glance

seem like nuanced personality. But ultimately, our Pixie still finds herself following Gouck's MPDG model, and this little hint of multidimensionality usually comes with the hidden purpose of furthering that model or teaching the protagonist some life lesson.

In the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, we get the perfect example of a Pixie undercover as a dynamic and fully fleshed out character. In what Gouck refers to as the bump in the road stage, Clementine and our protagonist Joel enter a heated argument over the state of their relationship. At this point Clem bursts into arguably the most iconic MPDG speech: "too many guys think I'm a concept or I complete them or I'm going to make them alive, but I'm just a fucked up girl who's looking for my own peace of mind. Don't assign me yours" (Gondry, 2004). We get a little more dimension to Clementine's character as she essentially begs not to be Joel's Pixie, yet she soon disappears from the narrative in true MPDG fashion, allowing Joel to piece together her identity from broken memories alone. Because of this, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* cements Clementine as a MPDG since her entire character is created through the woeful protagonist's ideas of her. Furthermore, when the two ultimately decide to give their relationship a second chance, it is under the firm understanding that, more likely than not, it is destined to fail. So naturally, the two get to have their fun, but more importantly, Joel gets to keep his fantasy ideas of Clem since in the end his Pixie will leave as all MPDGs do.

Alongside constructing a narrative model for the MPDG trope, Jennifer Gouck also conducted case studies of a typical MPDG young adult novel and a interventionist novel. In her analysis of the typical MPDG novel *The Beginning of Everything,* Gouck points out how this book's Pixie comes with deceptively personal character-building moments just like Clementine.

Cassidy, the MPDG of this novel, reveals her tragic backstory that should arguably add depth to her character and pull her away from the standard MPDG. But as Gouck explains, "instead, the Pixie's trauma is positioned in relation to the protagonist and the potential it unlocks in him. The Pixie's battles with her mental health, usually directly related to her tragic backstory, are romanticized by the male protagonist in ways that reinforce masculine ideals of the hero, of saving the damsel in distress" (Gouck, 2021). Thus, even the pieces that seem to add dimension to a Pixie's character are typically discussed only to add to the growing list of reasons the protagonist falls for her. This creates even more problems with the MPDG trope since we not only have a character whose sole purpose is to boost the male protagonist's ego, but we also get an unfortunate romanticization of mental health issues without taking into account the very real struggles people with these conditions face on a daily basis. The even more concerning effect of the MPDG trope is that the subtlety of the Pixie's misogynistic roots keep her likable in the public eye, while her eccentric characterization leads many young girls to idolize her.

This idolization of the Pixie keeps these girls blissfully unaware of the harmful values represented by the MPDG trope. They end up setting unrealistic expectations for themselves since their primary example of the ideal woman is a character trope rooted in fiction and defined by her one-dimensionality. But what exactly makes the Pixie so appealing in the first place? After all, if she were really so shallow and poorly written, young women wouldn't be idolizing her. The problem with the MPDG is that she was designed to fit into young girls' desires to be different; she is the perfect representation of the phrase 'not like other girls'.

In modern pop culture, the 'Pick-me Girl' and the embodiment of the 'not like other girls' stereotype is recognizable as the annoying girl in your high school classes that tried so hard to stand out. But Elio Wilder's article in the *One Woman Project* covers why this irritating personality trait is surprisingly relatable. When girls grow up learning that all girls should be the perfect Barbie, they develop a skewed perception of femininity, and it becomes exceptionally easy for them to believe they really are different from other girls. After all, if this is what other girls are like, I am certainly not like other girls. Wilder notes that "many feminists experience the 'I'm not like other girls' phase in an attempt to escape misogyny, but in doing so, are actually perpetuating it. This is because they are further contributing to the notion that femininity, and those who participate in it, are inferior" (Wilder, 2021). In the case of the MPDG trope, the quirky, less feminine, side of the Pixie that wears thrifted clothes or reads classic literature makes her appealing and draws the protagonist in. Thus, she becomes a pillar of what young girls hope to be. In the age of the MPDG, deviation from the norm is glorified, leading countless girls to adopt the 'not like other girls' mindset. Though this is rooted in a desperate desire to escape the patriarchal ideas of femininity, that mindset ultimately traps girls into perpetuating a problematic trope alongside the misogyny at its core.

In addition, the MPDG trope continues to hide its patriarchal ideals behind a mask of diluted feminism. Melanie Kennedy, whose research centers around feminist media, breaks down the concept of perfect-imperfect-resilience in her essay on the book *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* by Angela McRobbie. The perfect-imperfect-resilience (or p-i-r) is a form of feminism very relevant to modern day society. But according to Kennedy, the p-i-r is this era of feminism that is sometimes mistaken for an evolved or advanced form of postfeminism, when in fact it is a diluted

and even profitable version of feminism. It is "everyday 'feminine pop culture,' which 'bridges the gap between feminism and capitalism, delivering something that is palatable and that will not deter advertisers'" (Kennedy, 2022). The Pixie seems to wedge herself into this idea of the p-i-r. Instead of making real change, the p-i-r only exists to promote the easiest ideas of feminism without making waves in a capitalist society. To that end, the MPDG becomes this symbol of this perfectly quirky girl, a free-spirited and, dare I say, feminist role model for young women, when in fact she is naught more than a tool for the male protagonist's self growth.

The Pixie's core characterization relies on her ability to stand out from the crowd. Vázquez describes this superficial individualism as an appeal to the hipster demographic. As a result, the MPDG "render[s] the gender ideology they carry (which is not so different to Hollywood's) less obvious with such patina of alternativity" (Vázquez, 2017). Although the Pixie is seen as a defiance of the norm, she remains isolated to the ideal femininity as defined by the male protagonist and, by extension, society. Again, this inherently ties the MPDG to the perfect-imperfect-resilience where we get some tiny deviation from the standard followed by a wash of more misogynistic ideals. Furthermore, the fact that the MPDG trope perpetuates Hollywood standards—and does so successfully, considering the success of MPDG media—points to the profitable aspect of the p-i-r. Gouck highlights these flaws, stating that "although she is hailed as being 'quirky' and 'not like other girls,' the MPDG is in fact a cultural steam valve, masquerading as difference while reinforcing the norm" (Gouck, 2021). She makes this claim in the context of the white-dominated nature of the MPDG trope, pinpointing the fact that the very same traits that make the Pixie cute

and endearing would not be interpreted that way if she were instead a person of color. So the danger of the MPDG goes much deeper than promoting patriarchal views of femininity.

However, this particular flaw in the MPDG does offer some room for growth within the trope. I know I have been largely pessimistic about the Pixie thus far, but the fact that the trope is still prominent in a modern society pushing for positive change points to the possibility of evolution for the MPDG. As we begin to recognize the harmful aspects of the MPDG trope, I truly believe the Pixie can shift away from those dangerous ideals. In many interventionist MPDG texts, the pixie escapes her inherent whiteness for once and gets her chance to represent other ethnicities. Even so, while this change is a vital opportunity for evolution within the MPDG trope, authors and readers must remain critical of how race is handled in these interventionist texts. *I'm Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl*, the novel Gouck uses in her case study of interventionist MPDG literature, is a perfect example of an evolving Pixie that is still riddled with flaws. In the book, our half-Filipino protagonist attempts to turn herself into the ideal Pixie, and in doing so she sheds her Filipino culture and embraces the whiteness of the Pixie. A casual read of the novel might lead you to assume it does in fact break down a lot of the issues within the MPDG trope, since the book pokes fun at classic traits of the MPDG and highlights the story of a girl far from the Pixie's usual characteristics. But in her case study, Gouck points out that upon closer inspection, even though our protagonist decides the Pixie is nothing like who she really is, she ultimately ends up trading one harmful idea of femininity for another, losing appreciation for her own culture in the process. Consequently, this book and many other examples of interventionist MPDG media have not been very successful at truly intervening in the MPDG discourse, but I remain hopeful that continued

criticism of the trope may open up further chances for Pixie evolution. As Gouck puts it, modern forms of the MPDG trope "are also indicative of the new kinds of spaces the Pixie occupies in the current cultural imaginary. The continued persistence of the Pixie thus indicates a fascination with her that extends beyond her cinematic and pop-cultural roots" (Gouck, 2023). The fact that these texts exist at all supports the idea that the continued popularity of the Pixie within a changing society points to a future MPDG who is not so rooted in problematic ideals.

Moving forward, I believe if we as a society continue to question the harmful aspects of the MPDG trope, the entertainment industry will eventually have no choice but to follow suit. While some may argue for the complete eradication of the Pixie, I think our cultural fascination with her will keep her alive. Instead, we must simply push for the evolution of the MPDG and continue to educate younger generations on her patriarchal roots while building a new Pixie for the world to adore. As it stands, I believe we are already moving toward that world. In her essay on the persistence of the Pixie in modern pop culture, Gouck points out that "Millennials are approaching its return with what I term 'critical nostalgia,' simultaneously indulging in memories of their first encounter with the aesthetic while also creating videos in which they unpack and dissect that which was, and continues to be, problematic about the [Pixie]" (Gouck, 2023). I think this is exactly the right approach for something like this. Actively engaging with younger generations that may not have experienced the negative sides of the MPDG trope firsthand allows for greater education on the subject, while at the same time not preventing them from experiencing the joys and entertainment that comes with this subsect of media. Keeping the nostalgia alive, while remaining critical of the problematic aspects of the MPDG allows it to stay persistent in our culture even as

we shed its negative features. After all, though I am not a fan of the harmful ideals reinforced by the trope, I would be lying if I didn't admit that Ramona Flowers remains one of my favorite characters, and I will repeatedly fall for Clem and Joel's gushy romance with every watch.

Though past examples of interventionist MPDG media have not been successful, I do believe it to be the right idea when it comes to the evolution of the Pixie. And that isn't to say successful interventionist media does not exist. In 2021, indie pop artist Addison Grace released their song "Manic Pixie Dream Girl," which tells the story of someone coming to terms with the fact that they no longer want to fit the ideal MPDG fantasy their partner fantasized them to be. This song acts as the perfect model of effective interventionist media. In the chorus, Grace sings, "So I cut my hair and dyed it dead / To match the one inside your head / Staring in your made up shitty dream world / I don't wanna be your manic pixie dream girl" (Grace, 2021). This idea that anyone trying to fit the MPDG ideal is destined to dye their hair to the point of ruining it, or in other words destined to constantly change themselves to their partner's whims, perfectly reflects the reality of the MPDG trope. The Pixie is an unattainable fantasy bound to break anyone trying to imitate her. In the next verse Addison Grace highlights the weight of the MPDG trope's consequences in the speaker's life versus the life of their fantasizing partner. According to Grace, the protagonist—or in this case their partner—"just wanted [them] to make [his] life more interesting", but as a result of his supposedly innocent fantasies, even years later the Pixie—or Addison Grace, or anyone else grasping for that ideal femininity—is left picking up the pieces of themselves and trying to repair the damage done. Thus, we get a new perspective on just how detrimental this trope can be. Instead of replacing one bad trope with another, or simply falling

back into existing aspects of the MPDG trope, Grace's song genuinely captures the harm in idolizing the Pixie, all with a catchy tune and an upbeat, Pixie-esque sound. By following this example, I truly feel we can take all the nostalgia and all the fun of the Pixie and transform her into something new and free from her misogynistic roots.

So, is there really a world where the Pixie can exist within pop culture while we continue to move away from the patriarchal values that gave her life? I think we are getting there. Gouck explains that "the continued existence of the (im)persistent Pixie is not, then, as with other modes of girlhood persistence, indicative of the perseverance of teenage girls. Rather, it is demonstrative of the dominance of patriarchal values against which real-life girls must persist" (Gouck, 2021). So to that end, Gouck's idea of 'critical nostalgia' is the only way we can finally fix the MPDG. The internet trends and interventionist media keeping the MPDG alive in pop culture today continue to bring back all of the whimsy of the Pixie while leaving the patriarchal values behind. I suspect if we continue with this mindset, we might see the MPDG hold a place in pop culture not unlike any other era's aesthetics. Take for example historical fashion. We hold dear the bustles and frilly dresses of the 19th century, yet we also take care to address the culture and problematic values of the era.

The problem with the MPDG trope is not with the Pixie herself, and blaming the trope's flaws on her would honestly be yet another example of blaming women for issues with the patriarchy. The Pixie characters of our future are, in Nathan Rabin's words, "women with rich inner lives and complicated emotions and total autonomy, who might strum ukuleles or dance in the rain even when there are no men around to marvel at their free-spiritedness" (Rabin, 2014). So, give her some real dimension and take Scott Pilgrim out of the picture, and I'd bet Ramona and I

could be the best of friends. The problem with the MPDG trope is how she's situated within the plot of her story rather than her traits alone. We could certainly write a cute and quirky character with all the same allure of a Pixie, but give her a real purpose in life beyond building up some mopey male protagonist. Suddenly, she's everything we loved about the Pixie without all the p-i-r deception. This is how I think the Pixie might reach her Final Form.

As our society continues to evolve past outdated views of femininity, we can pick and choose what pieces of the Pixie we hold valuable. You could make the argument that at some point, stripped of the male protagonist that previously made up her sole purpose, can we even consider this new character a MPDG. And maybe we can't. But isn't that what evolution is all about? Changing with time until you're completely unrecognizable, a new species even. Maybe that is the Pixie's destiny: to evolve with time until she's something entirely new, but I don't think that makes her dead. I personally hope the bubblegum hair and colorful personality lives on in whatever her Final Form may be, but it's up to us as a society to push her to her limits and free her from her patriarchal roots.

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