The Manic Pixie Dream Girls in John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns*

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the function of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope in John Green’s young adult novels Looking for Alaska and Paper Towns is researched using feminist criticism and postfeminist theory. My claim is that The Manic Pixie Dream Girls in Looking for Alaska and Paper Towns perpetuate stereotypical gender roles and thereby help maintain a glorified image of the muse. I support this claim by researching how Alaska and Margo fit into the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope and, as such, how they perpetuate stereotypical gender roles. Furthermore, this study shows how the MPDG is connected to the traditional archetype of the muse.

**Keywords:** Looking for Alaska, Paper Towns, Manic Pixie Dream Girl, Muse
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1 INTRODUCTION

It all starts with a male protagonist in a desolate state, incapable of finding his purpose. Then he meets her, a female catalyst who will change it all. She is constructed to fulfil his fantasies and perfect in his eyes. She is mysterious, making him discover new things about himself while forgetting all about the miserable state that he was in. She always seems just out of reach, even before being completely gone, forcing him to constantly push forward and struggle to reach her. When her mission to spark a fire in the hero is complete, she vanishes. Leaving behind a crushed but altered hero who is now ready to go out and save the day, at least right after he is done obsessing over why she has left him. She is the Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG in short) is a type of character first described in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin after observing the movie Elizabethtown. He wrote: “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, n.p.). The term Manic Pixie Dream Girl has since then continued to be mostly used when talking about on-screen characters, but can also be found in a literary context. This trope, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is described as quirky, bubbly, fascinating, dreamy, mysterious, slightly crazy and beautiful. The main purpose of this girl, in any type of story, seems to be to fulfil the romantic dreams of the male main character and/or to rescue him from his dreary state. She is as a sort of modern day muse, or a catalyst, for his benefit.

In this project I will study the young adult novels Looking for Alaska and Paper Towns by John Green and see how the MPDG is present in the form of the female characters Alaska Young and Margo Roth Spiegelman. Green claims that he does not create Manic Pixie Dream Girls. For example, in a Q and A on his Tumblr page he writes that: “Paper towns is devoted IN ITS ENTIRETY to destroying the lie of the manic pixie dream girl”. However, I argue that Alaska Young and Margo Roth Spiegelman can be interpreted as MPDGs because they both work as catalysts for their male protagonist, they are “dream
girls” in their protagonist’s eyes, their own stories are not central in the plots and they both embody traditional female stereotypical traits. Also, the novels have more than the presence of a MPDG in common; the plots are centred around high-school-aged kids and they both have protagonists who are defined as male, white and heterosexual. All of these components combined speak to why I have chosen these specific novels for comparison. *Looking for Alaska* is the first novel published by John Green and I therefore think that it is relevant to compare the evolvement, when looking at the later published *Paper Towns*. *Looking for Alaska* was first published in 2005, pre-dating the coining of the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl, in 2007. *Paper Towns*, however, was published in 2008. I argue that there is some development in the portrayal of the MPDG character, where Margo has more of a story and dreams of her own. However, there are more similarities than differences when comparing her to Alaska.

I claim that the Manic Pixie Dream Girls in *Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns* perpetuate stereotypical gender roles and thereby help maintain a glorified image of the muse. I will research how Alaska and Margo fit into the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope and, as such, what their functions are. Furthermore, if there is any development of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl character in *Paper Towns* compared to how she was portrayed in *Looking for Alaska*. I will also analyse in what ways the MPDG can be seen as perpetuating stereotypical gender roles and how the MPDG is connected to the traditional archetype of the muse.

I analyse my chosen novels from a feminist point of view. I argue that it is a relevant perspective since some of the traits assigned to the MPDG, such as childishness or caregiving (in the way that she is there to fix whatever is wrong in the male character’s life), are also traditional stereotypical roles applied to women. Feminist criticism provides a useful critical lens when analysing stereotypical representations of women and feminine themes in literature. Feminism in itself is a vast area of theories, ideas and knowledge constantly changing and evolving. However, postfeminism is where I have decided to place my focus while researching the MPDG. For this project, I will be using
Angela McRobbie’s theories on postfeminism as described in “The Aftermath of Feminism: gender, culture and social change”.

In order to support my claims in this essay, I will present the MPDG and the relationship between the MPDG trope and feminism, feminine themes and stereotypical images. I will then proceed to tie the traits ascribed to the MPDG together with my findings from each perspective novel, first separately and then comparing the two portrayals. Finally, after presenting my views on the MPDG function and clarifying why I think that Alaska and Margo are MPDGs, I will tie it all together with postfeminist theory, how the MPDGs perpetuate stereotypical gender roles and the relationship between the catalyst function and the muse.

### 1.1 Defining the Manic Pixie Dream Girl

Writing about the MPDG trope is not entirely unproblematic. The coining of the term was by Rabin in 2007, as I have previously mentioned. However, in 2014 Rabin says that he regrets coming up with the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* all together after seeing it explode and being frequently used in the world of popular culture in ways he had never been able to imagine when first coming up with the term. Rabin said: “I coined the phrase to call out cultural sexism and to make it harder for male writers to posit reductive, condescending male fantasies of ideal women as realistic characters. But I looked on queasily as the phrase was increasingly accused of being sexist itself”.

In an honours thesis from 2014, Meredith Metcalf argues that the MPDG is just a new name for a trope that has been present throughout film history. Metcalf also claims that when used in a non-derogatory way, the term can be useful in critical discourse if it is clearly defined (2), which she does as follows:

> a secondary female character whose personality has male fantasy wish fulfillment elements, which are in some way girlish or impish, and whose function within the plot is to aid in the male protagonist’s development, with her own growth and back story largely removed from the plot (3).
Subsequently, I felt the need to define what it is that I am looking for while researching the female characters Alaska and Margo in the novels I have chosen. Much like in the definition by Metcalf, my focus will be on the catalyst, or muse, function of the character’s as well as the fantasy element and the lack of their own purpose in the plot, besides sparking the growth of the protagonist. I will also address the references to traditional female stereotypes such as being childlike or caregiving, as well as what I call the “crazy factor”, which entails the daring, disregard for rules and conventions as well as the mischievous behaviour. The “dream girl” fantasy, at least in my interpretation, implicates physical traits as well as personality. It basically entails all of the components which make a girl seem like the “perfect girl” in the eyes of the protagonist, this means that there could be variations of how a MPDG is presented when it comes to her looks, for example.

Naturally, there can be no MPDG without a protagonist to inspire. In all the material I have read on the MPDG trope, in movies as well as in literature, the protagonist is always male, white and defined as hetero sexual.

1.2 Previous Research

Since the coining of the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl, in 2007, there have been several mentions of this trope in articles and different forums online. A simple Google search will provide numerous references to the MPDG, which has become well-known in popular culture. Despite this, there is very little published about the MPDG in the academic world and what I have found is some research on this type of character in movies rather than literature. One example is the above mentioned honours thesis by Metcalf where the MPDG is researched mostly in the comedy genre, for example in Annie Hall (1977), There’s something like Mary (1998) and Garden State (2004). Overall, the MPDG trope seems commonly present within romantic comedy and some of the other films frequently mentioned in connection with the MPDG are: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), Elizabethtown (2005) and (500) days of Summer (2009). On the topic of the MPDG specifically in the books of John Green, I have mainly found blog
posts or columns in online magazines touching the subject, as well as a couple of book reviews. Therefore, I feel there is a place in literary research for further exploration of the MPDG trope.

2 MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRLS AND FEMINISM

Feminist criticism of literature is a vast area where focus can be on a number of different components from researching representation of gender to traditional feminine themes, relationships, masculinity, narrative voices, power, class, race and what impact the author’s gender has on different aspects of the characters. In *Women in Literature: Reading through the Lens of Gender*, Fisher and Silber write:

Feminist Criticism, as it is practiced today, critiques inequalities and oppressions in the context of various and diverse interpersonal, sexual and social relations. Feminist critics move easily from analysis of the female into examination of images of oppression in its various forms, connecting gender bias to other forms of domination. While feminist critics may emphasize the study of women in literary works, because women and men coexist in innumerable and intimate ways, a fresh view of one gender necessitates heightened awareness of the other (Fisher and Silber xxxiii)

For this study, I have chosen a feminist criticism perspective while close reading *Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns* because it will give some more in-depth understanding of the MPDG trope and her relationship with the male protagonist. Some of the critique against using this trope is due to her being described in a way that can be perceived as degrading towards women by objectifying them and also by restricting their existence to be solely about helping a male protagonist grow. One example of this is the care giving side to the MPDG, which Julianna Joyce writes about:

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl perpetuates the care-giving stereotype, in which women exist simply to cater to men, with her mythos and the subsequent characters existing in a realm of post-femininity, which subverts female progress by glorifying the role of the caretaker and typical women’s roles (n. p.).
Historically, the relevance of biological differences between the sexes has been discussed and used in order to justify separated roles in society for women and men. The caregiving role ascribed to women, simply because they had the biological ability to give birth and were generally not as physically strong as men, was also a reason to keep women out of the public sphere. Furthermore, women were described as being more controlled by their emotions and less reasonable than men, deeming them incapable of making, for example, political decisions (Freedman 23). Joyce also writes about the “realm of post-femininity” which is an interesting aspect to consider in relation to the MPDG. Postfeminism is a term not easily defined and it has been interpreted in many different ways. However, the core of postfeminism seems to entail transcending the need for absolute gender equality, and more striving towards individuality and choice, even if that choice means perpetuating stereotypical sexist gender roles. Angela McRobbie writes about postfeminism in popular culture, where she looks at examples of how romance is brought back in a postfeminist context. McRobbie’s examples are taken from the movies about Bridget Jones as well as the TV-shows Ally McBeal and Sex and the City, and for all three of them McRobbie claims that they have taken feminism into account and then asked “what now?”(21). McRobbie writes:

There is a strong sense in all three that young women somehow want to reclaim their femininity, without stating exactly why it has been taken away from them. [...] Feminism, it seems, robbed women of their most treasured pleasures, i.e. romance, gossip and obsessive concerns about how to catch a husband [...] (21)

The views on postfeminism that McRobbie describes entails the presumed wish to take traditional feminist values into consideration, for example equal rights, while still upholding more traditional, stereotypical and sexist female roles and attributes. Furthermore, McRobbie refers to postfeminism as undermining of the gains of feminism during the 1970s and 1980s. While continuing to write about the tropes of freedom and choice as being directly connected with young women as a category, McRobbie states: “Feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, where it might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must, in more public venues, stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition”
The publication of McRobbie’s ideas I have referenced for my essay came out in 2009 (she also previously published on the topic in 2004), in fairly close proximity to the novels I have studied which are published in 2005 and 2007. The postfeminist arena within popular culture that McRobbie describes is therefore relevant to the time period.

2.1 Gender representation in literature

In a study published in 2004, Amanda B. Diekman and Sarah K. Murnen present a model for researching gender roles and representation in children’s literature. They also claim that this model should be effective for other categories of literature, as well as movies or TV (381). In their study, they looked at personality characteristics, social roles, status inequality, gender segregation, traditional feminine ideal, unequal representation as well as different domains where the characters would be situated such as job, domestic and leisure. The purpose of the study was to:” explore whether the gender equality represented in nonsexist books was truly ‘equal’—that is, do nonsexist books show equality in female-stereotypic domains as often as in male-stereotypic domains?” (374). Twenty books were included in this study, ten labelled as sexist and the other ten labelled as non-sexist. The result showed at best a narrow vision of gender equality, even in books praised as non-sexist, where women adopt male stereotypic attributes and roles but men, on the other hand, do not adopt aspects of feminine attributes and roles. I find this study to be a relevant tool to use while close reading my chosen novels, since it provides clearly defined areas to consider when reading with a gender perspective in mind. For example, whether or not both male and female characters are portrayed as affectionate, if men are portrayed as having greater status and if there was a romanticized description of women’s traditional roles saying that love and marriage should be considered as goals. There are also other aspects to consider, according to this study, such as how many men and women are portrayed in the story, how much place they take up and what sex the main character identifies with. The study concludes that many books had
succeeded in showing girls that they can be assertive and independent, but very few books show boys that they can be nurturing and caring (382).

2.2 Female characters in young adult literature

According to Terri Suico, in an essay about portrayal of female characters in young adult literature (YAL), there has been an increase in demand for books targeted towards young adults since the beginning of the 2000s (18). Suico continues to write that although the novels targeted towards young adults have evolved in the way that the stories are longer, more complex and more similar to those written for an older audience (compared to the books from this genre from the 1970’s-90’s), the portrayal of the characters in these books have not gone through any similar evolution. Suico writes:

[...] rather than becoming more nuanced and thoughtful, the female characters of the beginning of the YAL renaissance are extensions of their predecessors. Themes on what it means to be female, including the importance of appearances, the contrasting roles of the good girl and the “other girl”, and the often complex, competitive, and unsupportive entity that is female friendship, are just as prominent in the books from the early 2000s as they were in books from decades earlier (Suico 19).

Speaking about themes on femininity, Suico mentions the importance of appearance which is a reoccurring factor in the description of traditional female stereotypes and also present in the traits ascribed to the MPDG. Although the novels I have studied are not based on themes of female friendship or the “good girl and the other girl”, I find this essay to be interesting because it does also address the reoccurrence of traditional female roles in YAL literature.

2.3 Women as muses, the historical context of the MPDG

Feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, founder of the website Feminist Frequenzy, which hosts analyses of women in popular culture, talks about the MPDG in an episode of her video series called “Tropes vs. Women”. Focusing on the childishness of the character, Sarkeesian says the trope is like “A shiny beacon of childlike joy”.

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Furthermore, she talks about how the MPDG is there for the white straight male character’s benefit, in order to save him from his troubled state. Sarkeesian goes on to briefly touch on the subject of seeing the MPDG as a modern day muse. I find this to be an interesting perspective, since it might help to place the MPDG in her historical context.

Women being the inspiration for the creations of men is a notion dating back as far as ancient Greece. In a collection of essays from 2015 called *Muses, Mistresses and Mates: Creative Collaborations in Literature, Art and Life*, Anna Suwalsk- Kolecka (editor) and Izabella Penier (author and editor) address the relationship between the old archetype of the muse and the person she inspired. Suwalska-Kolecka and Penier write that muses were believed to be the source of knowledge and also referenced to as being the inspiration of literature, science and arts. As time passes by, the muse keeps on being referenced by authors, poets and painters. In the literary context, there are many tales of how women have inspired great novels, characters and other texts written, usually, by men. Although the portrayals of the muse have varied, from glorified beings to passionate mistresses or even looked upon as obsolete or sexist in modern time, her function remains the same no matter what shape or form she takes. Furthermore, Suwalska-Kolecka and Penier describe the muse like this:

> She is usually a representation of an idealized woman – blessed with beauty and creativity and exerting irresistible attraction for any man. She is thought to ignite an erotic spark and some sort of alchemy in those people she becomes attached to, which, in turn, enables them to fulfil their true potential (1).

This description of the muse from Suwalska-Kolecka and Penier, could also be a description of the MPDG. Undoubtedly, there are similarities between the two which is why I have chosen to include this perspective in my study.
3 THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRLS IN LOOKING FOR ALASKA AND PAPER TOWNS

I claim that the female characters Alaska Young in Looking for Alaska and Margo Roth Spiegelman in Paper Towns both fulfil the criteria necessary in order to be labelled as MPDG. In my studies of these novels and their main characters, the male protagonists and female catalysts, I have specifically looked at the traits ascribed to the MPDG trope and her relationship with the protagonist which are; the “dream girl” fantasy, the catalyst function, the lack of a purpose of her own, the crazy factor, the mystery component and the references to traditional female stereotypes such as being childlike and/or caregiving. In order to support my claim, I will now proceed to tie the traits ascribed to the MPDG together with my findings from each perspective novel, starting with Looking for Alaska.

3.1 Alaska Young in Looking for Alaska

Miles Halter, the protagonist in Looking for Alaska, is the typical male character in need of a MPDG (Sarkeesian n.p). He is white, described as straight and also in somewhat of a gloomy state when leaving his family home in Florida for boarding school in Alabama. His parents assume that he wants to go to this specific school only because his father once did, but Miles proclaims that he is going to seek “the great perhaps” (Green, Looking for Alaska 11). Upon arrival at his new boarding school, Culver Creek, Miles meets a girl named Alaska Young. The novel goes on to be divided into two parts, where one is simply called “Before” and the other “After”. This is relevant to mention because it refers to the time before and after Alaska Young dies and consequently, after her death, she is part of the story only in the form of memories and flashbacks. However, her death has a large impact on the male main character and it is also the mystery component commonly ascribed to the MPDG. The fact that she dies in a somewhat unclear way drives Miles to search for the reason why and to keep obsessing over her even after her passing. To say that Miles is infatuated with Alaska Young is putting it mildly. “If people were rain, I was a drizzle and she was a hurricane” (Green, Looking for
Alaska 109), is a quote that speaks to his glorification of Alaska. Miles is written as a follower, proven by the fact that he goes to the same school his dad once did, he makes some friends there and starts following them around, taking part in their pranks, starts smoking because they do (25) and he especially focuses his time and energy keeping track of Alaska. This even after he finds out that she has a boyfriend and she even states that she can be of no romantic interest to him (56). Furthermore, there are several referrals to how appealing Alaska’s physical appearance is to Miles and what effects they have on him. For example:

She had the kind of eyes that predisposed you to supporting her every endeavour. And not just beautiful, but hot too, with her breasts straining against her tight tank top, her curved legs swinging back and forth beneath the swing, flip-flops dangling from her electric-blue-painted toes. It was right then, between when I asked about the labyrinth and when she answered me, that I realised the importance of curves, of the thousand times where girls’ bodies ease from one place to another, from arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski-slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back to the butt to the etc. I’d noticed curves before, of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance (Green, *Looking for Alaska* 27–28).

This can be connected back to what Suico wrote about characters in YAL and the importance of appearance when it comes to portrayals of femininity (1). Also, the description from Sowalska-Kolycka and Penier which addressed both the beauty and the erotic part of the muse. In another section of the novel, Green writes even more about how Miles is distracted by Alaska’s body, mostly her “sizeable cleavage” (p 53). Green thereby chooses stereotypical female traits, also upheld by society and patriarchy, to describe Alaska as pretty, or hot, in the eyes of Miles.

The caregiving, or even motherly, side to the MPDG can be seen as contradictory to the childishness. However, there are references to both of these qualities in Alaska Young. At one point, for example, Miles thinks to himself: “She’s cute, [...], but you don’t need to like a girl who treats you like you’re ten: you’ve already got a mom” (Green, *Looking for Alaska* 45). Alaska also comforts Miles when he feels homesick (98), and she
encourages him to find another girl to like and gives him pointers in order to succeed. The pointers entail both getting close to another girl and more elaborate instructions, for example on how to enjoy oral sex with his new girlfriend (Green, Looking for Alaska 155). Other traits ascribed to the MPDG are those of being adventurous, daring and not really caring about rules and conventions. In Looking for Alaska, the setting is a boarding school and so besides the rules of society and perhaps their parents/guardians, the kids are also supposed to obey by school policies and rules. Alaska Young, however, breaks several of these by smoking, drinking and pulling off pranks. She is also one of the instigators behind an elaborate plan to mess with other students as well as the head of the school and when Miles expresses a concern about getting caught she says she will take the fall if that happens (Green, Looking for Alaska 134), thus illustrating that she does not care for the consequences for herself and she will step up and take the blame for Miles and the others. By “the others”, I am referring to a group of friends surrounding both Alaska and Miles, a group that becomes even more significant after Alaska is gone and the remaining friends support each other through the loss but also bond over trying to figure out what actually happened on the night Alaska died.

My findings show that Alaska made an immense impact on Miles, in life and after, but he made little or no impact on her. This speaks to the fact that she is in the story as a catalyst, only to spark his growth. Towards the end of the story, Miles thinks about the ways that Alaska has changed him; “She taught me everything I knew about crawfish and kissing and pink wine and poetry. She made me different” (Green, Looking for Alaska 205). This illustrates one of the main traits of a MPDG and I also argue that it is one of the most defining ones. If we take away the fact that this trope is only in the story as a catalyst for the male protagonist, we are left with a type of character that could go many different ways. For example, a woman written as daring and unconventional in combination with being quirky, crazy, mysterious and childish could make for an interesting heroine if she is allowed to be the protagonist of a story. For these reasons I would like to point out that the catalyst, or muse, part of a MPDG should be seen as an essential factor. Going back to the story of Miles and Alaska, there are continuous
references to what Miles calls “the Great Perhaps” in the novel. This is because Miles has a thing for famous last words and he had read the ones of a poet called Francois Rabelais who said: “I go to seek a Great Perhaps” (11). To quickly sum it up, Miles says that this is the reason for him wanting to go away to boarding school, why he seeks to explore the unknown so that he does not have to wait until he dies to do so. Therefore, I find the following quote to be of importance: “She didn’t leave me enough to discover her, but she left me enough to discover the Great Perhaps” (252). This is how Miles speaks about Alaska at the end of the story and my interpretation is that he is connecting her with the very reason for his whole journey. He went out looking for something, not knowing what, and she turned out to be the one who could get him there. By “there” I am referring to more of a state of mind than an actual place in time or geography. She became what he needed, maybe because he moulded the memory of her to suit his quest. Miles is asked by one of his friends: “Do you even remember the person she actually was? Do you remember how she could be a selfish bitch? That was part of her and you used to know it. It’s like now you only care about the Alaska that you made up” (197). This references how the importance of Mile’s made-up version of Alaska is perhaps more important to him than the real life version ever was. The mystery she left behind gave him purpose, direction and last but not least, it gave him close friends and the feeling of belonging.

3.2 Margo Roth Spiegelman in Paper Towns

Although John Green specifically claims that Paper Towns is intended to destroy this trope, I argue that there are still traits assigned to the female character Margo Roth Spiegelman that define her as a MPDG. In one way, I see where John Green could be going with his statement because Margo does have a plan of her own, an agenda. She has dreams and she travels, we learn these things through other’s stories about her. Margo leaves everything behind including Quentin (the male, straight, white main character) who finds the mystery of her disappearance irresistible. Unlike Alaska Young in Looking for Alaska, Margo Roth Spiegelman does not die, she simply vanishes. However, just like Alaska, she leaves one confused and truth-seeking young man behind.
If we rewind to the very beginning of *Paper Towns*, the plot kicks off when Margo takes her next door neighbour and childhood friend Quentin on a wild nightly tour with the intent to pull pranks on a friend and ex-boyfriend in order to get revenge on them for cheating and lying to her. Quentin goes along with Margo although he seems weary of just how far she will go with her pranks. For instance, he declares that he will not commit any felonies and Margo laughs it off by asking if breaking and entering counts as a felony (Green, *Paper Towns* 26). This simple question posed by Margo embraces many of the traits ascribed to the MPDG such as; adventurous, daring, wacky, crazy, childlike and nonconforming. She definitely has the “crazy factor”.

The plot continues to centre around what happens after the night of pranks. This, the main part of the novel, is all about how Margo has disappeared and left Quentin behind to wonder why and where she has gone. He quickly starts to see what he interprets as clues or signs left for him to follow in order to find Margo. While searching for answers he thinks: “[...] I had my hopes: maybe Margo needed to see my confidence. Maybe this time she wanted to be found, and to be found by me. Maybe – just as she had chosen me on the longest night, she had chosen me again. And maybe untold riches awaited he who found her”(115). After a while, Quentin becomes convinced that she means for him to follow her and that she is creating a mystery instead of just asking him to come along. However, I would argue that the above quote illustrates how Quentin himself creates the mystery. He is desperate for clues so he finds them. Drawing back to the MPDG stereotype, this behaviour certainly goes hand in hand with the catalyst function and the fantasy of a girl being more important than the girl herself. The idea of Margo wanting him to follow her sparks a flame in Quentin pushing him forward. He also enrolls a few others in his search for Margo, which actually takes them all on a road trip further along in the plot, bringing them closer as friends in the end. Margo, as a MPDG, brings Quentin purpose, new experiences and closer relationships than he had before. All this without ever really being present, besides in the mind of the protagonist.
Similarly, as he did with Alaska, Green puts emphasis on Margo’s physical appearance. Green writes the following on Quentin’s thoughts of Margo: “You can’t divorce Margo the person from Margo the body. You can’t see one without seeing the other. [...] Margo’s beauty was a kind of sealed vessel of perfection – uncracked and uncrackable” (50). Furthermore, there is reference to Margo’s breasts in a conversation between Quentin and some of his male friends, after Quentin tells them about the night of adventure he spent with Margo. The friends immediately ask if they had “hooked up” and continue to ask Quentin to reveal details, for example by saying: “I would like you to write a term paper on the look and feel of Margo Roth Spiegelman’s breasts” (88). Once again, Green perpetuates the stereotypical importance of a girl’s, or woman’s, appearance, especially when it comes to stereotypical importance of feminine traits.

In the case of Margo, a character Green clearly states he did not write as a MPDG (Green, “John Green’s Tumblr” n.p), I argue that there were several opportunities for Green to keep her further away from the MPDG if that was something he intended to do. Margo did, in fact, not leave clues for Quentin to follow, she did not even want to be found (Green, Paper Towns 285). So when Quentin found her, she did not have to include him in her agenda at that point, she had already gotten there without him. At least that would make her less of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl and more of a girl following her own dreams. Diekman and Murnen wrote about the need for romance to be part of a happy ending:

> The traditional feminine ideal may be rife in both sexist and nonsexist children’s literature because marriage and romance are often requisite for “happy endings.” For example, although the female protagonists in Little Women and Caddie Woodlawn model independence and assertiveness, they ultimately decide to pursue more traditional caretaking roles. Sextist as well as nonsexist stories may thus perpetuate gender inequity through the reinforcement of the traditional feminine ideal (375).

Although this passage talks about examples from novels other than the ones I have studied, it still might explain the need to keep a romantic ending as an option. By doing this, Green upholds traditional feminine ideals saying that a girl, or woman, should consider romance (and ultimately marriage) as a goal in life. This also relates to the
postfeminist ideas of being able to “pick and choose” from feminist ideals combined with more traditional female stereotypes. For example, when McRobbie writes about popular culture and how the character Bridget Jones is an independent woman living in a city, drinking, smoking, having fun and not economically dependent on anyone. However, she still dreams of romance, finding the right partner and puts emphasis on girlishness (12).

Margo, much like Alaska, also has a care-giving factor to her. Perhaps it is not clearly directed towards Quentin, but she does care about her little sister who she leaves clues and messages for whenever she goes away (in this case not imagined ones). Also, her little sister is the person she mostly wants to talk to when Quentin catches up with her towards the end of the story and convinces her to call home in order to let her family know that she is ok (Green, *Paper Towns* 296). Even though the character Margo is not precisely described as a caregiving person, the simple fact of her being in the story only to help Quentin’s development is caregiving in itself. She needs to have this impact on Quentin in order for him to end up where he does. He does not, however, have any apparent impact on what happens to Margo.

I claim that Margo would make an intriguing character if she was the protagonist in her own story. Green created this girl who steers clear of many, but not all, conventions and pretty much does whatever she likes. She is mysterious and daring, and hard to figure out. “Margo always loved mysteries. And in everything that came after-ward, I could never stop thinking that maybe she loved mysteries so much that she became one” (Green, *Paper Towns* 8). I find her character to be much more interesting than Quentin, the protagonist, and I am sorry that the story does not let the reader follow Margo on her trip out of town after that night full of pranks instead of staying behind with Quentin. Instead, we get the story of a boy growing into a man and the effects that Margo has on him. Or in the words of Akilah Hughes: “The true problem is that people don’t write stories about *Manic Pixie Dream Girls* being the protagonist of the story, but rather, make her a secondary, supporting character” (n. p.).
3.3 The development of the MPDG character, from Alaska to Margo

At this point I have found many similarities between the portrayals of the female catalysts in *Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns* and their relationships with, or effect on, their perspective protagonists. However, there are also differences between the two and perhaps what I would call certain developments between the Manic Pixie Dream Girls in these two novels. Initially, I would like to talk about the endings. In both novels the protagonists, Miles and Quentin, come to realizations about the effects the catalysts have had on them. While Miles is questioned by a friend if he is holding on to the real Alaska, or just the version of her he has made up in his mind (Green, *Looking for Alaska* 197), Quentin seems to more ready to let go of his fantasy version of Margo. “The fundamental mistake I had always made – and that she had, in fairness, always led me to make – was this: Margo was not a miracle. She was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl.” (Green, *Paper Towns* 199). The following quote from Laurie Penny also discusses women as fantasies:

> The one abiding secret about us is that we’re not fantasies, and we weren’t made to save you: we’re real people, with flaws and cracked personalities and big dreams and digestive tracts. It’s no actual mystery, but it remains a fact that the half of the human race with a tendency to daydream about a submissive, exploitable, transcendent ideal of the other seems perversely unwilling to discover (n.p).

The theme of the fantasy girl is very much connected with the MPDG trope, where a big part of the portrayal of the catalyst is actually what the protagonist has made up in his mind and not any actual back story about the girl herself. At least Quentin finally did come to this conclusion that Margo is more than the fantasy girl he has created in his mind, after putting her on a pedestal for the main part of the story. This points in the direction that he would not continue to keep the fantasy version of Margo alive in his head. However, this does not entail that he would let go of the hope that they could one day end up together. It could also be argued that it would be easier for Quentin to maintain a more grounded idea of Margo after getting to talk to her and lifting the vail of mystery. In Mile’s case, he could never get the same kind of closure
since Alaska is dead and although he does get some of answers as to why Alaska is
gone he can never get all of them.

Margo, in \textit{Paper Towns}, also has more of a purpose of her own than Alaska does. Margo
goes away looking for her own dream, leaving her family and her friends behind.
However, the very fact that she does leave has somewhat the same effect as Alaska’s
passing has in \textit{Looking for Alaska}. In both cases, the vanishing of the girl is what pushes
the protagonist to develop and what drives the whole story forward. Neither one of the
catalysts choses to leave because of anything that has to do with the protagonist, and
still the impact on them is severe. Focusing on the development though, there is perhaps
more of a purpose in Margo’s leaving since she wants a different life for herself and she
is not written out of the story. We are at least left with glimpses of what happens to her
and what direction she is going in.

### 3.4 Perpetuating stereotypes and glorifying muses

Having argued that Alaska and Margo both fit into the MPDG trope, I will focus on how
they, as MPDGs, perpetuate stereotypical gender roles and help to uphold the glorified
image of the muse. Going back to what McRobbie writes about postfeminism, I argue
that the MPDGs in the novels I have studied both fit into the category of girls, or young
women, written as wanting to enjoy the perks of the gains of feminism such as freedom
and choice while still holding on to more traditional romantic ideals of relationships and
also being portrayed as girlish and embodying stereotypical female traits.

As I have written in previous sections of this essay, Alaska and Margo are girls portrayed
as independent, wilful and tendencies to break rules. They drink, smoke and pull
pranks. Still, as MPDGs, they are objectified and put in a position of submission, where
the protagonist has a position of power over them. The objectification is proven by the
fact that both of these girls are portrayed as being both physically and otherwise perfect
fantasy beings in the eyes of the protagonist’s and also by the fact that they mainly
function as catalysts. They are a means to a goal, more than they are portrayed as
people. Joyce wrote that the mythos of MPDG subverts female progress by embracing
traditional roles such as women being caretakers, a role that I have found to be related to the catalyst function since it is caregiving in itself.

On the topic of being submissive, the MPDG characters might seem like girls with power over the protagonists, in the way that she inspires him to try new things and he follows her, but I claim that it is still mostly the other way around. Since the MPDG character exists for the protagonist’s benefit, anything she does is really for him. Joyce writes about “women catering to men” (n.p.), which the MPDG function is an example of. Furthermore, the MPDG is not portrayed as adventurous and independent because her adventures matter, she is portrayed as such because there is something within being adventurous that the protagonist has to discover in order to grow. This draws back to the description of the muse by Suwalska-Kolecka and Penier who wrote about the muse being irresistible to the person she inspires and helping them fulfil their true potential. The MPDG trope helps to uphold the image of the glorified muse by embracing both the fantasy girl element and the catalyst function.

4 CONCLUSION

My findings show that Alaska Young and Margo Roth Spiegelman both fit into the MPDG trope. They are the prospective “dream girls” of the male protagonists in their story, they function as catalysts, they both have huge impact on their protagonist’s development, they each have the crazy factor and the mystery component and they seem to be there only for the protagonist’s benefit. Alaska and Margo have similar effects on the protagonists in their stories. In both cases they are idolized at first, and then later on described as more understandable and less mysterious. This development is seen in both stories when the protagonists start to realize and reflect on what effects the catalyst has had on them. Furthermore, both protagonists are left with more close relationships than they had before meeting the “girl of their dreams”, resulting in them feeling less alone even though the girl herself is gone (in once case more definitely than the other). Both protagonists have broken out of their shells, taken more risks and discovered profound things about themselves, because of their involvement with the
female catalyst in their stories. In both novels, it seems like these girls had larger impacts on their protagonists while in the form of fantasies in their minds, than they did when actually present in real life. Furthermore, I have presented connections between the MPDG and the traditional portrayal of the muse, and showed that Alaska and Margo do perpetuate stereotypical gender roles in their functions as MPDGs.
5 WORKS CITED


