Mary Wollstonecraft as Anti-Manic Pixie Dream Girl: Sexuality, Melancholia, and the Death Sequence in Godwin’s *Memoirs*

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**ABSTRACT**

During the nineteenth century, William Godwin’s contemporaries criticized his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a biography chronicling the life of his late wife Mary Wollstonecraft, as an insult to Wollstonecraft’s memory. Godwin’s biography, illustrating Wollstonecraft’s scandalous affairs, suicide attempts, and brutal death, caused some readers to question why Godwin would release such disreputable information. However, Godwin’s inclusion of these events in Wollstonecraft’s life serves a purpose. Eighteenth-century women’s conduct books portray the “proper lady” as a sexually subdued, weak, and subservient woman, a description that anticipates a modern trope critic that Nathan Rabin calls the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl.” Both the “proper lady” and “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” emphasize a lack of sexual power and agency, asserting that the ideal woman must strive to satisfy her male counterpart rather than pursue independent goals. Yet, by emphasizing Wollstonecraft’s sexual liberation, emotional instability, and imperfection, Godwin subverts the unattainable feminine ideal—constructed in eighteenth-century conduct books—that continues to haunt even modern interpretations.

In the 1798 *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, William Godwin describes the unsettling details of Mary Wollstonecraft’s life, including her suspected affair with Henry Fuseli, illegitimate child with Gilbert Imlay, suicide attempts, and agonizing death. As a result, Godwin’s biography subverts the female archetype in eighteenth-century women’s conduct books that portray the ideal woman as sexually inhibited and subservient to her husband. Godwin’s *Memoirs* argues that this eighteenth-century archetype suppressed socially unacceptable emotions and experiences, thus inhibiting a woman’s potential development. In spite of Godwin’s critique, the ideal woman of eighteenth-century conduct books continued to thrive in alternate uses through the nineteenth and into the twenty-first centuries; her most recent incarnation is the modern Manic Pixie Dream Girl of contemporary independent film fame. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl—a trope defined by critic Nathan Rabin—is a quirky, sexually subdued love interest meant to bring happiness to her male counterpart. In the pages that follow, I discuss the similarities between the ideal woman of eighteenth-century conduct books and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, and then I show how Godwin’s biography...
Defoe, the eighteenth-century ideal woman lacks individuality, sexual desires, and qualities that might evoke controversy, which are expectations realized in the modern Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope.

Film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” (MPDG) in his 2007 review of *Elizabethtown*: “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.” *Elizabethtown*’s MPDG is Claire, who exhibits her complete devotion to Drew—the brooding male lead—by “keeping [him] awake and giddy during an all-night cell-phone verbal duet” and “sending him on an intricately mapped-out road trip” (Rabin 4). The model Manic Pixie Dream Girl, Claire is a stock female character whose sole purpose is to help the male protagonist find himself. Throughout the film, Claire tries to assist Drew with platitudes like “You want to be really great? Then have the courage to fail big and stick around. Make ’em wonder why you’re still smiling. That’s true greatness to me. But don’t listen to me, I’m a Claire.”

Vaguely self-deprecating, charismatic, and concerned with helping her brooding male, Claire lacks personal identity, goals, and sexual desires.

An earlier example of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is Holly Golightly from the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961). According to film critics Rabin, Noel Murray, Amelie Gillette, Donna Bowman, Steven Hyden, and Leonard Pierce, in Truman Capote’s 1958 novel, Holly Golightly is a “sexually adventurous woman who jumps from man to man, living off the gifts she extorts from them, and changing casually with the seasons.” The film adaptation, unlike Capote’s novel, captures the Manic Pixie ideal. Film Holly is “a chaste party girl who shares her opinions easily, but keeps her affections to herself (and her cat).” Holly’s virginal innocence “charms writer George Peppard to such an extent that he’s able to give up the rich older woman who helps subsidize his work, and instead offer...
his devotion to his erratic dream woman…” (Rabin et al.). The fictional, romantic success of Hepburn’s Holly Golightly suggests the Manic Pixie is endearing. Although the Manic Pixie Dream Girl may seem to be a harmless, fictional model, feminist critics Michelle Orange and Laurie Penny fear that she is destructive to real women.

In *This is Running for Your Life*, Orange devotes a chapter solely to analyzing the MPDG, which she calls “the banal absence—of stability, of ambition, of selfhood, of sexual threat, of skirts that pass midthigh” and a “fun-house reflection of millennial masculinity in crisis” (Orange 50). The Manic Pixie Dream Girl suppresses feminine power by glorifying the overly-simplistic woman meant to help the brooding male discover his identity. The trope deprives the woman of self-perpetuating motivations and reinforces compulsory, conventional femininity à la Holly Golightly. I concur with Orange that the MPDG is more than a whimsical, recurring trope and is actually a reductive model of femininity.

In her article “I Was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” Laurie Penny claims the ideal has practical consequences because “fiction creates real life,” and “[w]omen behave in ways that they find sanctioned in stories written by men” (Penny). If the Manic Pixie Dream Girl continues as an ideal female archetype, Penny fears young girls will be driven to enact the trope—suppressing identity, sexuality, and personal objectives.

Recently, Rabin apologized for “coining the phrase ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl,’” saying he “created 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.” Rabin challenges writers to “create better, more nuanced and multidimensional female characters” with “complicated emotions and total autonomy” (“I’m sorry for coining the phrase ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl.’”). Rabin’s solution—that the trope should be eliminated from discourse—fails to acknowledge that discussion of the term has created awareness and criticism of such patriarchal standards of femininity. As demonstrated by the eighteenth-century proper lady, the idealization of submissive women did not begin with the Manic Pixie, and its increased prevalence in cultural discussion is not an indulgence in the trope. Indeed, one should look to and at the stereotype, its history, and its implications.

Laurie Penny suggests another answer to the question about the trope’s enduring popularity, calling for the “opening of space in the collective imagination for women who have not been permitted such space before, for women who don’t exist to please, to delight, to attract men, for women who have more on our minds” (Penny). Her solution to the Manic Pixie trope recalls Godwin’s portrayal of Wollstonecraft, which focuses on his wife’s “sexual relationships, suicide attempts, and other unorthodox life choices” (Monsam 127). However, critics of *Memoirs*, at the time it was published, viewed Godwin’s biography as offensive to Wollstonecraft’s memory.

Early critics of Godwin’s *Memoirs* questioned the writer’s motivation for portraying his wife as sexually deviant and depressed. Mitzi Myers writes,

> Many who admired Wollstonecraft were also offended and, like some modern biographers, puzzled at Godwin’s motivation for such candor. [Robert] Southey expressed his disgust at Godwin’s “want of all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked,” and another friend jotted verses which conclude, “mourn’d by Godwin with a heart of stone.” (Myers 302)

Critics like Southey rejected Godwin’s account of Wollstonecraft’s personal traumas and failings. But, Godwin emphasizes Wollstonecraft’s sexuality and intimate relationships, illustrates her melancholia, and depicts her death in great detail to portray his wife as a woman who transcends the reductive and anti-feminist ideals of the eighteenth-century equivalent of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl.
Wollstonecraft’s Intimate Relationships

Godwin’s intention for including his wife’s scandalous sexual history while re-lying little of his own intimate relations with Wollstonecraft warrants suspicion. Yet Godwin’s articulation of Wollstonecraft’s relationships demonstrates how he views her suspected affair with the married Henry Fuseli and conception of an illegitimate child as vital to her self-defined identity. These experiences foster intellectualism, sensibility, and one of her greatest obstacles: melancholia.

In Memoirs, one of Wollstonecraft’s first romantic interests is Henry Fuseli, the celebrated painter. Wollstonecraft, being a “person perhaps more susceptible of the emotions painting is calculated to excite,” indulges in an emotionally complex relationship with Fuseli, a married man. Godwin notes, “It cannot be doubted, but that this was the species of exercise very conducive to the improvement of Mary’s mind” (77). Godwin’s most obvious goal in underscoring Wollstonecraft’s relationship with Fuseli is demonstrating her need for self-improvement and self-education. But Wollstonecraft and Fuseli’s relationship, according to Godwin, degrades as it moves transitions from platonic to romantic.

Godwin concedes that Fuseli and Wollstonecraft’s initial companionship is platonic and, rather than defending Wollstonecraft from accusations of promiscuity, reaffirms Wollstonecraft’s self-perpetuating motive to improve her mind and appreciation of the aesthetic. Godwin writes that “if Mr. Fuseli had been disengaged at the period of their acquaintance, he would have been the man of her choice” and that Wollstonecraft “conceived it both practicable and eligible, to cultivate a distinguishing affection for him… without departing in the smallest degree from the rules she prescribed to herself” (79). Godwin reiterates Wollstonecraft’s motivation to improve herself and her situation by cultivating a relationship with Fuseli, taking the initiative to educate herself by way of his presence. Godwin also lingers on this aspect of Fuseli and Wollstonecraft’s relationship, rather than on their romantic relationship, to show Wollstonecraft’s prioritizing of intellectualism and artistic sensibility over mere affection, though she gained both from Fuseli.

Godwin interrupts his telling of Wollstonecraft’s relations with Fuseli to acknowledge the first time that he, her future husband, meets Wollstonecraft. At a dinner party with Thomas Paine, Godwin and Wollstonecraft leave “mutually displeased with each other” (81). This non-romantic encounter helps to legitimize Godwin as an unbiased writer of Wollstonecraft’s biography. One might assume Wollstonecraft’s future husband would hyper-romanticize this moment between them, implying their love is pre-destined. However, Godwin does the opposite. He writes about this instance frankly, revealing his initial disinterest in Wollstonecraft and his annoyance with her. By conveying their first encounter with almost brutal honesty, Godwin establishes himself as a reliable narrator rather than as a man acknowledging the wrongs that other men do to his beloved wife. Additionally, Godwin’s rational rather than romantic views toward his Wollstonecraft’s love interests reflect his equally rational view of marriage. In Political Justice, Godwin describes marriage as a “legal institution and social practice” that “presupposes mutual understanding between husband and wife for life, and is entered following a romantic, usually deceptive, decision based on inexperience” (Pérez 219). This analytical opinion of marriage permeates Godwin’s biography as he dissects events with candid storytelling.

Godwin explains that Wollstonecraft’s return to France to visit Fuseli is not due to “a Platonic affection” but to enjoy “pleasure in his society” and Wollstonecraft’s “ardent imagination was continually conjuring up pictures of the happiness she should have found.” Her relationship with Fuseli then becomes a “perpetual torment to her” (81). By writing of Wollstonecraft’s desire for Fuseli, Godwin acknowledges the whole woman as
an adult with complex feelings. Emphasizing Wollstonecraft’s ability to overcome her desire, Godwin demonstrates how she acquires agency from her failed pursuit of Fuseli. However, Wollstonecraft only grows melancholic following her next relationship with Gilbert Imlay.

Another controversy addressed by Godwin is Wollstonecraft’s cohabitation with Imlay and illegitimate child. A skeptical reader might question Godwin’s intent for emphasizing this relationship. But I believe that Godwin, by including Wollstonecraft’s relationship with Imlay, reiterates how her sexuality, motherly capabilities, and melancholia result from her lived experiences.

Because both the eighteenth-century proper lady and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl ideal are defined by their virginal qualities—encapsulated by the virtuous and pure Holly Golightly from the film Breakfast at Tiffany’s—Wollstonecraft’s sexual activity still may surprise some readers expecting a conventional heroine. For Godwin, Wollstonecraft is a woman, not a dream girl. Her very identity, strength, and wisdom demand sexual experience. Godwin chooses to acknowledge Wollstonecraft’s sexuality and romantic partners in terms of how they help her discover and better herself. Wollstonecraft grows as an intellectual as a result of failed romances, one of the most prominent being her permanent separation from Gilbert Imlay.

The end of Wollstonecraft’s intimate relationship with Imlay catalyzes her “desperate purpose to die”—beginning her battle with melancholia, which the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines as “severe endogenous depression, with loss of interest and pleasure in normal activities, disturbance of sleep and appetite, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, and thoughts of death or suicide” (“melancholia”). But, Godwin notes, this is not due to Wollstonecraft’s dependence on Imlay. He writes, “While she was absent from Mr. Imlay, she could talk of purposes of separation and independence” (93). Overwhelmed by his presence, her ideas of independence are suppressed. Wollstonecraft is then not a one-dimensional and needy woman. Instead, Wollstonecraft’s residual feelings of unrequited love for Fuseli and Imlay build and are released in the form of melancholia.

**Wollstonecraft’s Melancholia**

In Memoirs, William Godwin continues his seemingly unflattering portrayal of his late wife by illustrating Wollstonecraft’s battle with melancholia and her subsequent suicide attempts. Instead of perceiving this depressive state as tarnishing her reputation or as an unveiling of precious, personal issues, Godwin utilizes the melancholia to illustrate why he fell in love with Wollstonecraft; he reads her prose and is inspired by the intellectualism and sensibility she displays in her relationships with Fuseli and Imlay. Wollstonecraft’s experiences with melancholia and her ability to learn from them distinguish her from the eighteenth-century conduct books’ ideal woman and the contemporary Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

In Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, Wollstonecraft describes the landscape as the cure for depression:

I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion…made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself—not, perhaps, for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence which loses its charms in proportion as the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart. (17)

The “beauty of the northern summer’s evening and night” evoke in her an “involuntary sympathetic emotion,” suggesting travel and the landscape help heal her melancholic, suicidal tendencies (16). Wollstonecraft articulates that it is not other people who ultimately heal her; instead, she is saved by the absence of others, the powers of the picturesque landscape, and the pursuit of self-identification.
It is *Letters* that finally attracts Godwin to Wollstonecraft, showing his affinity for the independent, sensitive, and intelligent female.

Godwin explains that he falls in love with Wollstonecraft, not because she is virginal or manic but rather because she is melancholic. In *Memoirs*, Godwin describes Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*:

> If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration. (95)

Godwin stresses Wollstonecraft’s sensibility, power, and intelligence—“a genius which commands all our admiration.” Instead of criticizing her melancholic experience, he describes it as a commendable trait and a sign of intelligence. It is also surprising that, in *Memoirs*, Godwin does not characterize traditional expectations of eighteenth-century women as solely feminine, as medical experts of Godwin’s time believed that possessing sensibility and intellectualism resulted in male melancholia (95).

In eighteenth-century Britain, medical experts believed melancholia resulted from the “coexistence of great rational intelligence and refined sensibility”—rationality being innate to men and sensibility naturally instilled in women. Even success in the literary field was “associated with male melancholía” (Kautz 38). Godwin elaborates on Wollstonecraft’s melancholia and intelligence, expressing her power to transcend the arbitrary confines of gender and medical categorization established by physician and writer William Buchan.

Buchan, in his 1769 health guide *Domestic Medicine*, “associates melancholia with men and masculine activities, and hysteria with women and feminine activities” (38). The OED defines “hysteria” as “a functional disturbance of the nervous system...usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties” (“hysteria”). Hysteria is characterized by compromised intelligence and overwhelming sensibility; Godwin asserts that Wollstonecraft’s strength is her ability to overcome such obstacles and to attain both intelligence and sensibility.

Explaining his intentions for including Wollstonecraft’s melancholic travels in *Memoirs*, Godwin writes, “Depicting her intelligent and perceptive interactions with the landscape is one way about making her mind’s functioning visible.” He also underscores the “great emotive and mental capabilities that [Wollstonecraft] possessed” (39). By continuing to note Wollstonecraft’s intelligence and sensibility, Godwin establishes Wollstonecraft as exceeding the confines of traditional gender stereotypes.

Godwin’s candid portrayal of Mary Wollstonecraft’s melancholia and suicidal tendencies proved abusive to her reputation. According to Ildiko Csengei, “After the publication of the Memoirs, Wollstonecraft’s work was largely ignored and her name only invoked as a warning until the end of the following century. Her reputation suffered intensely from what the public saw as tasteless exposure” (492). Yet Godwin was trying to liberate Wollstonecraft; in *Memoirs*, he emphasizes intellectualism and the female capability to experience melancholia instead of hysteria to challenge the reductive perception of female intellect. Godwin’s Wollstonecraft is capable of both stereotypical feminine sensibility and male intellectualism, though admittedly, he romanticizes the notion of the empowered woman of influence and education who is still tender-hearted. Godwin also stresses Wollstonecraft’s depression to show how she overcomes such severe emotions through her observations and writings.

Throughout *Memoirs*, Godwin emphasizes Wollstonecraft’s ability to conquer obstacles. Unlike her “timid and irresolute” friend Fanny Blood, Godwin says Wollstonecraft has a “firmness of mind, an
This performance of Manic Pixie Dream Girl characteristics by a mentally-impaired woman exhibits the possible real-life consequences of the trope. As Penny asserts, the trope exists in the real world because “fiction creates real life.” Vivian’s decision to perform the role of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl demonstrates her need to be socially acceptable by resembling the feminine ideal. Just as nineteenth-century critics viewed Godwin’s portrayal of Wollstonecraft’s own struggles with mental illness as insulting, Vivian fears the same kind of critical judgment. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope becomes a coping mechanism to hide Vivian’s Asperger’s. As Jack reveals with this study, the mania of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl that Vivian adopts works to reinforce the traditional gender expectations that Godwin’s portrayal of Wollstonecraft attempts to subvert.

Because she rejects feminized hysteria and opts for bouts of melancholia and happiness, Wollstonecraft becomes more than a one-dimensional woman defined by her mental state; she transitions between sadness and happiness, but she does so with good reason. She suffers trauma and pain. She contemplates death, and the extended death sequence William Godwin describes in *Memoirs* is his final attempt at humanizing Wollstonecraft.

**Wollstonecraft’s Death**

Godwin’s final section of *Memoirs* chronicles Wollstonecraft’s prolonged death sequence after the birth of Mary Godwin—later to become Frankenstein author Mary Shelley. Angela Monsam compares Godwin’s biographical approach to Wollstonecraft to a dissection, arguing that Godwin highlights the deterioration of Wollstonecraft’s health to preserve her in an act of “literary embalming” (117).

While Godwin uses unaffected language to describe Wollstonecraft, mimicking medical analysis, he also uses this language to situate his late wife on a plane of reality where she

This role does not seem like one Vivian has “made up” out of nowhere; instead, it seems to be an amalgam of her observations of others (in life and in film), and of the expectations required of women in different social situations. Her language shows that she does not view her chosen role fully as embodied, a product of repeated stylized acts that she has imbibed since childhood. Instead, she views Manic Pixie Dream Girl much more as a performance, a rhetorical device and a coping mechanism: Manic Pixie Dream Girl offers “the only acceptable way for a girl to be weird” and “the only way of synthesizing my AS [Asperger’s syndrome] into a reasonably acceptable personality. (11)
is not idolized or pristine. In effect, Godwin lays out Wollstonecraft’s death factually much like the open casket at a wake—open to viewers in its morbidity—to solidify her existence, to humanize her, and to dispel the idea of Wollstonecraft as a damsel in distress who can be saved by her dominant, masculine counterpart.

Observing the deterioration of Wollstonecraft’s condition after giving birth, Godwin writes, “Every muscle of the body trembled, the teeth chattered, and the bed shook under her…She told me, after it was over, that it had been a struggle between life and death, and that she had been more than once…at the point of expiring.” His observation of Wollstonecraft may seem cold and unfeeling due to the wording of “the body” and “the teeth,” instead of “[her] body” and “[her] teeth,” but Godwin’s description also emphasizes how Wollstonecraft’s mind is in competition with her body (115). In this instance, Wollstonecraft’s existence is not dependent on her body and her health.

Wollstonecraft’s body “tremble[s],” and because trembling has feminine connotations, one could consider Godwin’s description as indicative of the stereotypical feeble female. However, Godwin counters his depiction when he adds, “I intreated her to recover; I dwelt with trembled fondness on every favourable circumstance; and, as far as it was possible in so dreadful a situation, she, by her smiles and kind speeches, rewarded my affection” (116). Godwin trembles too, and he suffers as Wollstonecraft does. If trembling is feminine, Godwin projects this femininity on himself, which demonstrates his views of fluctuating gender roles.

Wollstonecraft’s extended death sequence contrasts with the Manic Pixie Dream Girl because the Manic Pixie Dream Girl does not exist outside of the troubled male’s fantasy, and she exists only as long as he desires. The male chooses to prolong the life of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, and in Memoirs, that is the one thing Godwin cannot do—save Mary Wollstonecraft from a death caused by medical malpractice. While it is true that Godwin can not save Wollstonecraft because she is not fictional, it must also be remembered that his gruesome depiction of her death contradicts the trope of the proper lady and the Manic Pixie. The ultimate failing of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is that she cannot live without a strong male. Evidenced by Wollstonecraft’s ability to move from one unfortunate relationship to the next and die despite Godwin’s desire for her to live, Wollstonecraft both exists without the first object of her affection and dies in the presence of her great love; severance and death act as consequences of being a real woman.

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl—a child-like, male-oriented fantasy—contrasts with Godwin’s portrayal of his late wife, Mary Wollstonecraft. His controversial choices to illustrate her life underscore these important differences, though Godwin suffered harsh criticism and backlash for these authorial decisions. As evidenced by Godwin’s love of Wollstonecraft’s melancholic writings and his acceptance of her various affairs, what most observers considered as abusive and cruel toward his dead wife, Godwin sees as liberating and progressive. Godwin discusses Mary’s relationships with Fuseli and Imlay to express her adult sexuality and to provide context for her melancholia. Then, Godwin reveals the extent of Wollstonecraft’s melancholia to reinforce her role as a depressed intellectual transcending the gender binaries of eighteenth-century medicine. Finally, Godwin refutes the idea that Wollstonecraft is his dream—that she can exist as long as he wishes. Instead, he chronicles her death in detail, noting her role in reality and his inability to rescue her.

What can be derived from the contrast between Godwin’s portrayal of Mary Wollstonecraft and the female standards idealized by eighteenth-century conduct books and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope is that liberation is not synonymous with the preservation of an un tarnished reputation. Hiding sexual deviances, depressive states, and perhaps mortifying experiences condones unrealistic expectations of women, thus echoing
the sentiments of eighteenth-century conduct books and modern portrayals of femininity. Encouraging a woman to be perfect deprives her of identity, as she suppresses the characteristics which distinguish her from the “proper” woman.

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope is without dimension; the effects of this idealization for modern women are potentially devastating. Because the similarities between the eighteenth-century proper lady and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl are so striking, the lasting quality of this ideal of the perfect, overly-simplified woman must be addressed. One does so by following Godwin’s example—examining the entirety of the individual, rather than hiding the aspects and actions that are not societally palatable or acceptable. As William Godwin adds to the complexity of his late wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, it is important to interpret the actions of others and contemplate their so-called faults to combat the over-simplification of women in both reality and fiction.

Works Cited


