

# **“Is She the Right Amount of Crazy?”: Mythologization of Fictional Women in Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

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**Abstract:** In her novel *A Visit from the Good Squad* (2011), Jennifer Egan constructs a diverse facet of female characters that explore the ramifications of archetypal compartmentalisation in pop culture and literature. Cultural tropes such as the manic pixie dream girl and the trophy wife can be analyzed within the novel to show their long-term effects on women. The novel creates a template to analyze the hierarchical nature of female archetypes in pop culture, and by extension, the dehumanization of women as these archetypes transcend from literary tropes to cultural expectations of a woman’s place in society.

To celebrate winning the Pulitzer Prize for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011), Jennifer Egan conducted an interview with the Scottish Book Trust, explaining how “the more you can suggest without spelling out, the more you can encompass in the same space ... fiction is always about compression and suggestion” (Gallagher 2011). Throughout the novel, Egan toys with her female characters’ interiority, creating a seductive grasp on the elusiveness of her female characters, and slowly creating a mythological aura around characters Sasha, Jocelyn, and Mindy. Egan constructs a diverse panel of female characters that explore the ramifications of stereotypical compartmentalization of women in pop culture and literature. In particular, Egan juxtaposes Sasha’s mysterious, elusive character with the characters of Jocelyn and Mindy, who revolve around the powerful, wealthy, and un-

apologetically philandering Lou. The novel partially focuses on Jocelyn and Mindy to reveal the abuse they experienced at the hands of Lou, something that is absent from Sasha's character. These internal focalizations position Jocelyn and Mindy as false dichotomies of female portrayals in pop culture and of the reader's perception of such characters, thus complicating the tropes they embody. Through her use of narrative forms—specifically third person omniscience and narrative temporality—Egan critiques the cultural phenomenon of compartmentalizing female characters with the use of popular character tropes that undermine the complexity of their experiences as women. This essay will examine the characterization of Sasha, Jocelyn, and Mindy to illuminate the way in which Egan deconstructs these tropes.

### ***Fantaisie Fatale: The Death of the Mythological Sasha***

In a review of *Elizabethtown* (2005), a movie known for its lacklustre attempt at a classic romantic tragicomedy, Nathan Rabin coined the now infamous term manic pixie dream girl (MPDG). Rabin describes this character trope as a woman who exists solely to “teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin n.p.). These female tropes are consistently used in movies and literature as pre-assembled characters who are ascribed certain alluring yet two-dimensional qualities that highlight their femininity (i.e., being mysterious, elegant, a femme fatale, etc.), but deny the audience any hint at their subjectivity and complexity. Commenting on the cultural phenomenon of the MPDG, Laurie Penny details how these female characters are “never a point of view character ... instead of a personality, [they have] eccentricities, a vaguely-offbeat favourite band, a funky fringe” (Penny n.p.). This phenomenon is exemplified through Sasha's lack of focalization in the novel despite her many dedicated chapters. This trope dehumanizes fictional women by limiting their characterization while simultaneously mythologizing their stories and experiences to seduce the audience. Such movies and literature fail to acknowledge the disappointment

experienced by audiences around these women when time reveals their imperfect humanity. Penny expresses that “the worst thing about being [a] MPDG is the look of disappointment on the face of someone you really care about when they find out you’re not their fantasy at all—you’re a real human who breaks wind and has a job” (Penny n.p.). In Sasha’s last chapter, written in PowerPoint format from the point of view of her daughter, Egan reveals her evolution from a wild, young, and mysterious women in New York to a tame, married mother of two kids living in Arizona—the change seems drastic, almost disappointing to the reader. The novel offers readers closure to Sasha’s storyline but this closure shatters her mythical characterization by revealing her mundane trajectory. Egan constructs Sasha to fulfill readerly expectations (of the MPDG) to critique this two-dimensional woman who exists only in the fantasies of her audience.

Egan deconstructs the idealization of women for the audience by using Sasha to manipulate the audience and ultimately to shatter their perception of two-dimensional women characters. Sasha is the character with the most dedicated chapters, yet none of them are written from her point of view. Our first introduction to Sasha finds her in the process of stealing a woman’s wallet while on a date. Egan constructs a sense of mythology around Sasha’s character by being selective about Sasha’s subjectivity while simultaneously emphasizing the effect she has on the men around her. In fact, the last lines of the book depict these two men reminiscing about Sasha at her old apartment:

“A sound of clicking heels on the pavement punctured the quiet. Alex snapped open his eyes, and he and Bennie both turned—whirled, really, peering for Sasha in the ashy dark. But it was another girl, young and new to the city, fiddling with her keys.”  
(Egan 340)

These final lines indicate the power of female mythology as both men possess an idealized and pre-constructed perception of Sasha that remains preserved in their minds for years. However, it also indicates the disposability of these

women as they are not idolized for their individuality but for the quirky trope they embody. Egan parallels Sasha's thievery with memories from her past therapy sessions that attempt to work through her kleptomania. Egan thus juxtaposes Sasha's seductive quality and her acute awareness of the male gaze as she "[feels] the waiters eyeing her as she sidle[s] back to the table" with her kleptomania (4). *Goon Squad* thereby hints at the complexities of her interiority without having the opportunity to further delve into Sasha's inner world. Thus, this juxtaposition of her date with Alex and her memories of a therapy session highlight the contrast of the MPDG trope with her hidden interiority. Moreover, Sasha's kleptomania is not revealed to the men who fantasize about her until the very end of the novel. In this instance, her mysterious aura is only heightened by Bennie and Alex's reminiscing conversation about Sasha: Bennie reveals her kleptomania to Alex, but nonetheless insists that he was "crazy about her" (338). Alex's thoughts on Sasha show how the formation of her mysterious aura is heightened by the revelation of her kleptomania, and how his fantasy of her endures after years: "A connection was trying to form in Alex's mind, but he couldn't complete it. Had he known Sasha was a thief?" (338). While standing outside Sasha's old apartment, Alex's adoration for her only grows as "the fantasy imbued him with careening hope" (339). However, during these moments, the two men never wonder what might have caused the kleptomania, nor are they curious about her interiority; instead, they merely wish to preserve the MPDG fantasy.

David Cowart has written on the parallels between Sasha and the Greek mythos of Eurydice, furthering the idea that Sasha is a mythologized woman. Cowart argues how, in the chapter "Good-bye, My Love," against the backdrop of Naples, Sasha and her uncle Ted re-enact their own version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Once again, Egan positions Sasha as the mythologized woman with no interiority and whose stories are told merely through the eyes of a man. Ted is "the searcher for Sasha [who] stumbles into a dangerous milieu with a complex, devious woman at its cen-

ter” (Coward 246). In addition to the ancient Eurydice myth, Sasha’s mythology also mirrors modern characterizations of fictional women. In the popular television show *Gossip Girl* (released in 2007, four years prior to the publication of *Goon Squad*), protagonist Serena van der Woodsen embodies a similar mythology to Sasha’s character. In the episode “Desperately Seeking Serena,” Serena’s character appeals to the male gaze. Along with her beauty, Serena struggles with alcohol and drug consumption, but those issues were only an unexplored attribute that emphasize her mystery, her “damaged” character, and her mythology. These issues, such as kleptomania or drug consumption, are used as narrative devices to add to the aura of mystery of a female character, not to expand on the complexity of their interiority. Bennie and Alex’s conversations about Sasha gloss over the issue of her kleptomania, and the motivations behind such actions are not further elaborated on; rather, the emphasis is on the fantasy Sasha holds within the mind of the two men. The extensive problem of mythologizing women such as Sasha, Serena in *Gossip Girl*, or even Greek myths of Eurydice, shows how their personhood is formed and understood purely through the male gaze. These women do not have agency over their own narrative. To mythologize these women is to remove power from their voice and their story—to mythologize these women is to exert power and control over them.

### **“You said you were a fairy princess”<sup>1</sup>: Tropes Transgressing Innocence**

The novel’s third chapter, “Ask Me If I Care,” is narrated by Rhea, a young (wannabe) punk girl living in the suburbs of San Francisco. Rhea’s description of her friend Jocelyn portrays her breath smelling of “cherry gum covering up the five hundred cigarettes [they] smoked” (Egan 40). The innocence of cherry-flavoured bubble gum overlapped with the harshness of nicotine—the dark allure of adulthood reflected in the initiatory act of smoking—is a reflection of Joce-

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<sup>1</sup> Egan 45.

lyn's transgressive innocence. Jocelyn, at the age of seventeen, begins a sexual relationship with Lou, a middle-aged man whose marital status is vague, yet whose philandering tendencies are glaringly obvious and whose moral compass seems skewed by most standards. Jocelyn embodies many tropes found throughout literature and pop culture: the teenage runaway and the naïve woman taken advantage of by an older man. These female tropes serve to mould a female character into a two-dimensional persona; Jocelyn's interiority and experiences are confined and understood within the reader's conception of her associated tropes. Thus, Jocelyn's experiences and the abuse she suffers at the hands of Lou are not her own but become an expected narrative consequently dealt due to her stereotypical storyline.

Jocelyn's tropes are created through the juxtaposition of her naïveté and the harshness of her reality. The quick evolution of Jocelyn and Rhea's mature activities highlights not just their loss of teenage innocence but also the naïve outlook they preserve through their experimentations with drugs and sex. Rhea states that "Jocelyn and I have done everything together since fourth grade: hopscotch, jump rope, charm bracelets, buried treasure, Harriet the Spying, blood sisters, crank calls, pot, coke, quaaludes" (43). Furthermore, Rhea's diction when describing Jocelyn's sexual experiences with Lou reveals their true naïve nature: "Lou did some lines off Jocelyn's bare butt and they went all the way twice, not including when she went down on him" (43). Rhea's use of the euphemism "[go] all the way" instead of saying "sex" reveals her and Jocelyn's inexperienced and innocent approach to sex. This inexperience is to the detriment of Jocelyn, who is lured by Lou's charm but fails to see the abusive nature of their relationship.

In Jocelyn's second chapter, "You (Plural)," written entirely from her point of view, Egan uses Jocelyn's interiority to deconstruct her tropes and show how damaging they can be to a young, impressionable woman. In this chapter, readers finally understand Jocelyn's thoughts and emotional process: "Rhea shakes her head at me—my voice is too loud. I feel a kind of anger that fills up my head sometimes and

rub out my thoughts like chalk" (Egan 89). Egan critiques female tropes throughout the novel, but she also emphasizes the characters' willingness to adopt these tropes as a means to get what they desire (which, for Jocelyn, is the status, experience, and the adventure of sleeping with an older man). The absence of women's subjectivity and personal thoughts concerning these tropes in pop culture creates an allure to adopt these tropes—Jocelyn's chapter deconstructs that very problem by providing the consequences of adopting cultural tropes into one's reality. These female tropes are heavily abundant within popular culture, which creates a possibility for men like Lou to take advantage of this cultural phenomenon. Jocelyn's storyline is a template for the damaging effects of tropes on young women; her youth has been lost during her "desultory twenties" (86), and the rest of her life has been focused on healing her mind from the suffering caused so early on. In "You (Plural)," it becomes obvious how the overdone trope of a young teenage runaway with a powerful older man has only caused damage to Jocelyn. Lou holds no accountability for the effect of his actions (or lack thereof) on a young woman's life. Jocelyn regrets how she has gained nothing positive from her time with Lou and how "what cost her all that time [was] a man who turned out to be old, a house that turned out to be empty" (87). *Goon Squad* breaks down pop-culture narratives and lifts the curtain to show the realities of time, of archetypes, and of the damages caused by tightly held tropes in popular culture. These tropes inevitably seep into the consciousness of entire societies, and the damages acquired by characters like Jocelyn can be a warning to young readers.

### **The Old Man and the Trophy Wife: Deconstructing Stereotypes**

The young wife of a powerful wealthy man is a long-held stereotype often projected onto characters or people in literature, movies, and even politics. In literature we can observe the protagonist in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* or Mrs. McCoy in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*; in cinema we have the example of Jenny Mellor in *An Education*, and in

politics multiple examples such as Melania Trump or Louise Linton, the wife of the current United States Secretary of the Treasury who is eighteen years her senior. Through its overuse in pop culture, the trope has become a laughable cliché. However, the laughingstock is not the man but the young woman by his side whose depiction is often bleak and unmerciful. These women are often labelled as shallow, stupid, beautiful, gold-digging, and unhappy, which has been used as a form of misogynistic humour to make fun of women in positions of submission. In *Goon Squad*, Lou's twenty-three year-old girlfriend, and soon-to-be wife, Mindy, is no exception to the trope, as even Lou's young son questions whether she is "the right amount of crazy" (Egan 78). In the novel, Mindy is pursuing a PhD in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Despite this academic achievement, she never seems to be reading her books and only uses the people around her as objects of anthropological research. Thus, her intellect is not truly explored. In fact, one of the first introductions the readers have to Mindy is her explaining why an older female character who "wear[s] high-collared shirts to conceal the thread sinews of her neck" feels threatened and "despise[s]" her, a "twenty-three-year-old girlfriend of a powerful male" (Egan 63–64). Thus, almost instantly, Mindy is perceived as a beautiful, albeit shallow, young girlfriend of a shallow, harsh man.

Furthermore, Mindy and Lou's relationship is described almost purely as sexual and competitive. Their activities as a couple are confined to "mak[ing] love on the narrow rickety cot [of the tent]" (Egan 60) or walking on the beach where Mindy's appearance is on everyone's radar, and their "expectations are high" for her (76). The idea that people expect Mindy's body to uphold their social standards of beauty reinforces the narrative that her intellect is not acknowledged by the people surrounding her; instead, her youthfulness and sexual appeal is what matters within the context of her position as a trophy wife. Lou is not portrayed as an affectionate partner, referring to women as "cunts" (78) to his own son, in what seems to be an attempt at a life lesson. Even Mindy accepts the shortcomings of their

off-kilter relationship and understands that “[Lou] will be unable to acknowledge, much less sanction, the ambitions of a much younger female mate ... their relationship will be temporary” (65). Thus far, Mindy seems to fit all the stereotypes of a trophy wife: shallow, beautiful, unhappy, and vapid (despite hints at her intellect). Even her motives for staying with Lou seem strange considering her infidelities with Albert, their young Kenyan tour guide. However, when she returns home from Kenya, Egan reveals why: “returning to circumstances that once pleased you, having experienced a more thrilling or opulent way of life, and finding that you can no longer tolerate them” (81)—thus, the trophy wife’s final stereotype of “gold-digger” is fulfilled. Egan indulges the reader’s presumptions and societal prejudices right until the end when she describes Mindy’s future, wherein she will only fully complete her studies at the age of forty-five (82).

Egan’s novel is thematically focused on time and the aging of her female characters. Through this theme, Egan deconstructs our collective understanding and fascination with female archetypes; the women upon whom archetypes are imposed are either denied their interiority or cannot embody this trope indefinitely. Mindy’s academic career only truly takes off at forty-five because she spends the majority of her twenties fulfilling an archetype that does not bring her any sense of purpose, ambition, or intellectual fulfillment. Egan’s critique of female tropes is that they are not indicative of a woman’s interiority, nor her long-term reality. Tropes do not create complex characters but impose upon them two-dimensional qualities that fail to reflect the complex interiority of the characters’ worlds, as well as undermining the abuse they suffer at the hands of men like Lou.

Egan’s juxtaposition of Sasha’s, Jocelyn’s, and Mindy’s tropes significantly critiques the damaging effects of tropes in popular culture. Egan proposes that some female archetypes are more accepted than others; they are more attractive to the male gaze and more alluring to the audience. Yet the one thing they all have in common is their narrow tem-

porality. Sasha's character, and the archetypes she embodies, seduces readers by neglecting her interiority. However, this dehumanizing trope is not sustainable, and a woman cannot embody this trope for long—eventually she will be revealed as human and complex, or audiences will become bored and ultimately disappointed. Egan purposefully juxtaposes Sasha's initial characterization with Jocelyn's and Mindy's narratives, creating a comparative lens between different popular female archetypes and identifying these archetypes as being hierarchical in terms of social acceptability. Whatever their effect on audiences, archetypes are damaging tropes that do not reflect the female experience, nor educate audiences on such experiences. This compartmentalization of the female experience only serves to contain women and the audience's perception of them. Through her use of form, Egan successfully critiques this cultural phenomenon, and by extension, critiques the compartmentalization of women in society.

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