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Parables in Pop Culture

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Midsommar: A Parable for Grief and Reckoning in Sweden

Ari Aster's provocative film *Midsommar* (2019) tells the story of a young woman, Dani (played by Florence Pugh), and her journey through the different stages of grief, loneliness, love, and self-discovery. We as the audience watch as Dani, having just lost her sister and parents to suicide, embarks on a journey to Switzerland for a midsummer festival held in an ancestral commune, alongside her boyfriend, Christian and his friends Pelle (who is part of the Harga), Mark and Josh, all of which are working towards their PhDs. Dani chooses to accept the invitation to regain control of her tumultuous life, having never fully recovered from the horrific events from months prior. Aster uses Dani as our first-person narrator with insight into the attitudes of the Harga and the effect an outsider has on sacred tradition.

The first sequence of the movie starkly contrasts the tone of the remaining two hours and fifteen minutes, especially concerning the pivot from a dark, wintry landscape to a sun-ridden, idyllic and floral backslash. These first eleven minutes are what invoke the strongest feelings of sorrow throughout the whole movie. Dani wails in agony for what feels like hours—director Ari Aster allows the audience to grieve with her while simultaneously feeling the discomfort of her partner. The low-key lighting in this sequence is equally as unsettling. For the duration of about 11 minutes, most of the light comes from low-lit lamps or cell phone light. Christian is visibly

uncomfortable during most interactions with his almost-ex-girlfriend who he ultimately brings along to Sweden.

Relationships in *Midsommar*

The relationship between Dani and Christian is disheartening at best; superficially, we witness a dejected, bored partner that sticks around because “what if I regret it later and want her back?” As the film progresses, it becomes more evident that this relationship is built on guilt, codependency, and patronization from one toxic partner to a vulnerable one. The story of *Midsommar*, of course, is as Aster describes, “a breakup movie dressed in the clothes of a folk horror film.” Herein lies one of the key parabolic elements within the story: reckoning. The events that lead up to the, er, breakup, are less than subtle. A birthday forgotten. Flirtatious motions made. Gaslighting tendencies from the first scene to the final. Additionally, the relationship between Dani and Christian is not the only one plagued with a toxic overtone.

For example, we witness Josh and Christian have an altercation about the sole reason for the trip—for Josh to learn and ultimately defend his thesis on the Harga and the culture behind this ancestral commune. In a frustrating conversation, we see as Christian takes on a new enemy in a friend.

Christian: “I’ve been thinking about something I’ve been wanting to ask you—or, tell you actually. I’ve been thinking a lot about my thesis. I’ve decided I’m going to do it here. On Harga, and I wanted to tell you first just to it didn’t seem like I wasn’t telling you.”

Josh: “I feel like I can’t tell if you’re joking. I mean, you know I’ve been doing my thesis on [gestures] Midsummer. That’s the reason why I’m here. I mean you knew I was going to want to do this?”

Following a series of comments made back and forth about where the idea originated, one of Christian's cheekier lines comes as, "I'm going to do my thesis here. If you are too, I'm open to collaborating." The nature of this conversation demands a conclusion, one that Josh doesn't find and is certainly not pleased about. Christian uses phrases such as "you didn't even know," and "well I am doing it on *this* community" to remove the power of Josh's argument. It is a condescending and otherwise frustrating conversation to be part of. Aster uses interesting lighting to portray conversations like this one, as well as future scenes, to depict more serious, bare-bones content. There is nothing entrancing about the landscape. The colors of the cabin are a muted blue with Josh sitting in a corner. Immediately, he has the lower hand. Christian does not allow him an "out" until he makes the motion to leave otherwise. This is an interesting comparison to the resolution of the film, to be discussed further.

Another relationship that is not as prevalent but finds itself as a sub-focal point to Dani and Christian is that between Dani and her sister Terri. We see while Dani speaks on the phone to an off-screen friend over the phone about her sister (and Christian). "He said himself this one seems different." The relationship between Dani and Terri mostly surrounds the conversation of mental illness. As the younger of two sisters, I empathize with the (assumed) involvement of Dani in Terri's life, including her triumphs and roadblocks. Dani evidently carries many of her own burdens but manages herself as well as her transparent relationship with Terri. Dani's grief and her reaction to her family's death is visceral; she was manipulated into downplaying the situation at hand and ended up losing three people central to raising and contributing to her.

Lighting and Mis-en-scene

Aster rarely leans on dark lighting and muted tones to guide the horror elements of this story. They are supplementary and do not necessarily dictate the mood of the scene, but rather,

the tone. In a film such as *Hereditary* (2018), Aster uses darkness and accentual lighting to highlight fear in a movie of the horror genre. The high-key lighting in *Midsommar*, though, is equally as impactful in its juxtaposition from the content of the film. There is gruesome death and violence, though not always explicitly shown.

Aster has commented on his manipulation of lighting in his films. Alongside cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski, the two were at the mercy of nature's elements to create a didactic fairytale about recovery of self.

With "Hereditary," we were pursuing this look that was almost too dark. We wanted to push ourselves to be ballsy about how dark scenes would be... Here we were kind of doing the opposite. Let's really commit to making this very bright movie and stopping ourselves when the instinct is to pull back, because it's more eloquent and maintains a certain balance. (Via IndieWire)

The camera direction in *Midsommar* is as disorienting as the storyline. For example, before the trip to Sweden, Pelle and Dani sit while he makes a sincere comment of condolence. Dani excuses herself to the bathroom, and as the door shuts behind her, the camera pans upward and overhead to her in the bathroom on the plane. In both instances, Dani is crying over her loss, showing her refusal to portray vulnerability in front of Christian and his friends any longer. With a close watch of the film, audiences can see Aster's inclusion of small "easter eggs" that call on the total experience. These include: Dani's sister's eyes during a nightmare, the depiction of Dani's sister in the trees as she is being carried away from Christian (and arguably, the last part of her "old life"), Dani's mother walking by Dani after the May Queen dance, and a painting of a bear in Dani's apartment, foreshadowing to the final scene. Additionally, the manipulation of the

environment allows for the audience to understand what both Dani and Christian are seeing during their psychedelic trips.

Themes of mental illness

Mental illness is a guiding theme in *Midsommar*. Though not distasteful, it is a graphic depiction of the cycle of identification, management, grief, and recovery. We begin with the devastating end of Dani's family at the hands of her sister, who we know to have suffered from her mental illness. Dani, who is not explicitly identified under any diagnosis, makes this journey throughout the movie. We watch as Dani "worries and gets sucked into" her sister's frantic statements and worrisome patterns. An unnamed friend to Dani, over the phone makes a comment that her boyfriend should not treat her as a burden, but rather, acknowledge her fears and help her to rationalize her reactions. This is the beginning of a long cycle of manipulative language that brushes off Dani's sincere worry.

Pugh's character shows distinct elements that define major depressive disorder (MDD), such as a depressed mood that lasts for weeks to months, sleep disturbance, loss of energy, diminished ability to think, and feelings of worthlessness. Aster shows how these affect Dani, with the use of close-ups and slow-motion filming to give insight into her narration. Additionally, Dani is an extremely vulnerable character and manipulation is especially prevalent in her story. She is easily guided, which accounts for her diminished ability to really think for herself and makes split-decision choices to catch up with what she lost. Dani's character arc shows her gradually becoming more confident, standing up for herself, and coping through the release of her grief with others instead of full-blown isolation tactics.

The use of psychedelics and hypnotics is a prominent feature of the film. Not only does Aster disorient his characters, but the audience mirrors these feelings on more than one occasions. Most prominently is in the final half of the film, in which Dani is dancing with the other women for the chance to be crowned May Queen. Disorienting elements such as an uptick in the use of Swedish, a shift in the sound volume between speakers, and a dizzying dance are enough to heighten the anxiety of the viewer as well. Christian makes a comment prior to this, “No thanks. I don’t want to have a bad trip.” While the two consume the same water with “special properties,” both Dani and Christian take very different paths down the rabbit hole. This contrasts the first time Dani consumes the psychedelic alongside everyone else after having been pressured by Mark and Christian. She disappears into the woods and falls asleep after having a major breakdown over the events that have changed her life over the past few months.

Christian themes

Midsommar’s use of spiritual and ritualistic beliefs are shadows of the entire film. It is inherent in every ritual performed and culminates in the final, “ninth day” of the ceremonial burning. One comparison to Christian literature to be drawn is the off-hand comment made by Pelle early on. The fact that Midsommar is a nine-day festival is not just a statement to create a setting. The book of Genesis in the bible parabolically shows the creation of the world in seven days. On the seventh day, God rests. Similarly, Dani’s personal journey of self-discovery is filled with work: she addresses long-standing grievances with Christian, allows herself to be welcomed into a community, and ultimately accepts life as it is hers. It can be argued that her acceptance to this community relies heavily on her lack of foundation, though. Nonetheless, Pugh’s performance in the film gives the audience something to be desired: relief. In the final scene of the film, we watch as the yellow temple burns down, signifying renewal as well as reckoning.

For the Harga, this reckoning comes against the “banished spirits” who bathe their community in darkness. For Dani, it is freedom from a life that has held her underwater with minutes of airtime.

Significant individuals in the bible are recognized for sacrifice for the sake of their beliefs. For example, Abraham offers his son when the Lord requests, Moses sacrifices his previous life for the freedom of his people (and the covenant), and ultimately, Jesus’ immortal sacrifice on the crucifix. Aster’s idea of sacrifice comes more selfishly, though. Dani certainly provides a sacrifice to the ritual ceremony, but it is more of a sacrifice for the sake of self-improvement. She expels herself of her most looming demon, the loss of her family, through the expulsion of one that has slowly taken small pieces of life from her. Does this justify murder? No, it does not. Aster’s point is not about the justice behind Dani’s choice; it is a point of revelation in our titular character.

An outsider’s effect

The horror genre, specifically horror-fiction in this case, encompasses a slew of aspects to draw viewers in. Within the horror genre are 6 sub-genres, each with their own defining characteristics. These are gothic, paranormal, occult, dark fantasy, survival, and science fiction horror (MasterClass). *Midsommar* falls under the category of occult horror, with ritual sacrifice and taboo practice as the dominating elements. Aster offers comedic relief in calculated parts, making a statement on the culturally sacrilegious nature of the film. For example, this comment made by Christian to one of the elder “mentors:”

CHRISTIAN: On the subject of couples actually, um, is there ever an issue with incest?

Sorry, I mean, you know, small communities.

VALENTIN: Well, the bloodlines are very well-preserved. So, u, the elders must approve mates. Cousins can sometimes mate, but we do accept their incest taboo.

The scene shows a bewildered Dani looking on as Christian disregards a comment about one member of their group having gone missing entirely. We watch as Christian further alienates himself from both the Harga and his immediate group of trusted individuals. Thus, he becomes an obvious example of “the outsider.” Throughout the two-hour screen time, it is clear that those who are “outsiders” of the Harga’s ideologies are then regarded as enemies. Subsequently, these individuals are killed off one-by-one for the sake of the climactic sacrifice in the film’s end. It is of note that Dani is an outsider but is quick to adopt the Harga ideologies after the first event. She is seeking a refuge, one that Pelle and the rest of the commune encourage her to accept. My opinion on the series of events leading to Dani’s reckoning are just as manipulative as a four-year relationship was with the man she chooses to forgo for a new family.

Sound

As we read in Sikov chapter 5, sound is a multi-layered accompaniment to every cinematic creation. Much of the work is done in post-production, leaning heavily on artists to manipulate real-time sounds to fit the scene recorded on site. The sound used in film helps to create another dimension of the narrative at hand. An example of sound supplementing the elements of dread in this film are the moments following the first sacrificial event: the ritual suicide of the two 72-year-old elders. We watch as the woman plummets from the cliff, but the camera quickly cuts to Dani’s reaction. After the second man is dead, the muffled cried of Connie and Simon (friends of Pelle’s brother, Ingemar) are heard. However, the focus is still on Dani’s face. As our first-person narrator, we listen to what she hears and sees. An almost blinding light encompasses her body as she looks on blankly. At the conclusion of the event,

Dani walks off alone, crying about the impact of suicide on her life. There is no dramatic composition that follows. We listen to the crunching of grass under her feet and a large intake of breath before the scene cuts away.

This is not the last time the audience sees breath used as a plot device. Later on in the film, we see Pelle's sister take a large breath of confidence before leaving her chambers. Also, we see as Dani is taught a traditional intake prior to the start of the May Queen dance. I interpret the use of breath as a sign of renewal. Dani is first floundering beneath the water, unable to catch more than a minute's worth of time to fill her lungs. As she moves through the film and on her journey of self-discovery, she becomes more relaxed and allows herself to taste the release that this air could bring her. In her moments of grief following the May Queen ceremony, she unleashes a wail of grief, surrounded by women matching her short breaths and encouraging recovery. She wails, like the first sequence, but the difference is that she is no longer alone.

The ninth day

The entire film comes to fruition in the final fifteen minutes. Christian, after having been caught cheating on Dani (for another ritual), runs out of the building naked and vulnerable, desperately trying to find a spot to hide from this horrifying group of people. He walks into a shed that holds the body of a ritually strung-up Simon, with Christian visualizing his lungs "breathing." In fear, he turns to leave. However, he is followed by people of the Harga and is paralyzed in both movement and sound, while we see him look out at Pelle looking in. The scene cuts to Christian's eyes being opened to witness the choosing ceremony, in which Dani silently elects to have her boyfriend of four years sacrificed in the yellow temple.

One theme in many horror films is the presence of multiple villains. In Dani's life, she is consistently overshadowed by toxic figures such as Christian. In a personal sense, Christian is the ultimate villain in this story. However, the audience must forgo the superficial idea of a "man to blame" and acknowledge the equally manipulative and horrific traits that the Hargas possess. From the conclusion of the first event to the ceremonial picking, we see Pelle immediately comfort Dani and encourage her to question her relationship. She is gradually welcomed into this commune and witnesses her closest companion there disregard their relationship. While there is fault on Christian, most, if not all these events leading up to the ninth day are perfect orchestrated to tie up loose ends in a very selective community. Dani's story has a very childlike appearance. The use of drawings to tell a story as well as the bright tones to juxtapose the dark themes is quite reminiscent of a juvenile retelling of a darker tale.

Dani's story allows for her to heal and take revenge on a life that has wronged her. Rather than take her own life in an attempt to reconcile the events of months past, she finds new characteristics to define and choose a life that she is truly alive in. As stated previously, she arguably does not come to these choices alone. It is up to subjective interpretation of whether Dani chooses to remain with the commune or not. The final shot of the film, a close-up of Dani with a shadow of the collapsed and burning temple in front of her, is a culmination of the expulsion of the two hours' worth of grief for the character. She smiles as she watches her old life leave her with the sound of the Hargas wailing overhead. This is the strongest we see our titular character at. The story of grief that Aster tells, though presented as a dreamscape, is nothing short of a nightmare. Dani's cycle through the stages of grief and ultimate reconciliation with loss allows us to understand the importance of healing, too.