

Choose a high-tension scene from a horror/sci-film/TV programme/animation you have seen. Locate and read the script of the scene (if available) and analyse the sub-text, the narrative shape of the scene, colour, light and shadow, sound, character positioning and dominance, etc. Provide evidence through your analysis of the narrative and use secondary research to support your theory of toward the subtext of your case study.

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Ari Aster's *Midsommar* is an allegorical folk horror film about a group of college students who travel to their friend's ancestral commune in Sweden for its midsummer festival, however this retreat turns into a terrifying ordeal at the hands of a pagan cult. I have chosen to explore the ending where the Hårga (the Swedish pagan cult and main antagonists) burns down the temple along with nine human sacrifices as the cult and Dani (Florence Pugh, the main protagonist) watch. Aster explained it was his 'breakup movie' (Birth.Movies.Death., 2019) – it could be interpreted as the emotional journey of a woman's emancipation from a toxic and deteriorating relationship or dealing with grief.

Dani's emotional journey to emancipation could be split into three sections: the first involves the trauma from her sister's suicide – her boyfriend, Christian, does not break up with her yet only because she suffered an immense loss. The second section is the festival. In the script, her Hårgan friend, Pelle asks, 'do you feel HELD by him... Does he feel like a HOME to you?' (Aster, 2017, pp. 78). She rather feels *she* has been constantly holding him back. In a toxic relationship,

As a woman's views are devalued by her partner, she becomes a passive member of the couple... they become unable to trust in their own decisions and abilities (Tierney and Fox, 2011).

Pelle reveals he lost his parents in a fire (foreshadowing the deaths in the end), but the community gave him a home – something Dani needs. After witnessing two elders commit suicide, she is further traumatized and begs Christian to leave but recognizes the emotional abuse when he dismisses her. The final section being his death buries her past life and marks a new beginning for her in the cult. The name 'Hårga' has a morbid origin about villagers dancing to death when the devil comes. This haunting ending stages the ritual human sacrifices: four newbloods (Christian's friends, murdered by the Hårga), four Hårgans (the elders and two volunteers: Ingemar and Ulf) and a final chosen by their May Queen, Dani. The final offering is either Christian or an ordained Hårgan, to which Dani chooses Christian. A paralyzed Christian (by a Hårgan) sits vulnerably: 'his eyes BEG Dani for mercy' (Aster, 2017, pp. 113). Dani's face portrays a wave of emotion: 'sadness, anger, love, heartbreak... are finally wrestled down... Her EYES, still trained on Christian, have HARDENED (Aster, 2017, pp. 113). Her firm decision was based on witnessing him copulating with a Hårgan woman earlier, triggering another panic attack. Despite his muffled pleas, she becomes less tentative and as May Queen, asserting her dominance defies his disparaging behavior. A mortified Christian is forced into a disemboweled bear's carcass and planted in the center of the temple's hay platform. Ingemar and Ulf strapped to the wall while the disfigured corpses rest in the corners, then three Hårgans ignite a fire inside. Aster explains that the bear is an 'important symbol in Norse mythology and in Scandinavian folklore' (Movieweb, 2019), symbolizing strength and healing. Ironically, Christian is incapacitated and enervated.



(JPRoscoe, 2020)

Swedish author Po Tidholm (2019) who studies Sweden's pagan practices explains that most of the *Midsommar* customs are based on Christianity. This ritual purges Hårga's sin and may have been inspired by supposed German pagan practices, where bonfires originally were more likely used for human sacrifice. Dani's pained face might be guilt or regret, having dealt with tragic deaths in the past few days. Christian 'steam-boiled in the animal's fluids' (Aster, 2017, pp. 116) causes the audience to wonder: *how can humans do this to one another?* Though the film seemed slow at times, it allowed the viewer to fear and empathize with Dani and perhaps sympathize a little with the victims. After a wave of horror and anguish, the film ends with a smile breaking onto her face.



(Marceau, 2020)

People can adopt an attitude toward their suffering that allows it to cease to be *mere* suffering. Instead, traumatic events can... be an opportunity for growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995, pp. 11).

Her growth is accomplished through her exhilarating epiphany: she is not alone and is embraced by a new family – ‘she has lost herself completely, and she is finally free. It is horrible and it is beautiful’ (Aster, 2017, pp. 117). Now adopting a mentality of overcoming her trauma and grief, her liberation may be a cathartic element for the audience. Her smile may be an optimistic element in the dark film, however the actions taken in order to obtain her happiness are equally troubling. Pugh argues that Dani is disoriented, and Aster believes she is losing her sanity – given the bad trips from the Hårga’s psychedelic drugs, but also from regularly repressing her mental illnesses for others.

Horror is often explored in the dark, however overcoming traumatic experiences in the midsummer light could also take an emotional toll on the audience. Bodo Winter (2014) explains that two metaphors ‘*EVIL IS DOWN*’ and ‘*EVIL IS DARK*’ are often used in horror: ‘evil emerges only when it becomes dark’ or ‘the evil can only move toward where there is darkness.’ *Midsommar* mostly takes place in the daylight, with the opening scene already setting an emotional weight, (which may be hard for some viewers), followed by graphic deaths until the end. The audience’s disconcertment throughout could reinforce Aster’s suggestion that horror does not need to transpire in the darkness – the horrific acts could simply appear before us. The darkness being Christian’s betrayal and the cult’s rituals, yet Dani finds her “light” with the Hårga. Ironically, her empowerment and freedom may be perceived as a villainous act. Contrasting Christian, Dani’s clothes gradually brighten, matching the Hårga, suggesting her new beginning as their Queen. Dani’s May Queen dress (designed by costume designer Andrea Flesch) weighs 33 pounds, affixed with 10,000 flowers. Paradoxically, the dress could be argued as a visual representation of the cult engulfing others with their “heavy” influences – she struggles in the dress before succumbing, alluding to no escape from the cult. ‘Typically in horror, the woman or visual object is also the chief victim sacrificed to the narrative desire to know about the monster’ (Freeland, 1996, pp. 195). Freeland argues that typically when the victim is a woman, the viewer would turn to the investigator’s narrative, usually a male. *Midsommar* provides a feminist perspective with Dani investigating her own relationship – ‘growth may occur when a person is able to better assess others’ motives and develop strategies to avoid being hurt again’ (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995, pp. 83). Her character development could be seen through the blazing fire as purging her trauma and letting the patriarchy in her life die. Throughout the film, yellow is often associated with death and trauma. This could tie-up with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’: a woman’s depression and the male’s oppression and gaslighting. As Dani fully acknowledges Christian’s narcissism, the presence of flora amplifies. The dress’s most radiant flower is St. John’s Wort, used to alleviate mood disorders, depression, and anxiety – illnesses she battles. In the real-life Swedish midsummer festival, flower crowns symbolize rebirth and fertility – in the end, *Midsommar*’s flowers slowly become grotesque. Adorning the colorful floral costume in the vibrant summer setting could represent the controlled chaos which leads to her blossoming individuality, but also connecting her to mother nature: juxtaposing the burning victims, *Midsommar* reveals that the wearer has the power to breathe and eliminate life, as shown in the symbolic yellow temple. The enchanting setting juxtaposed with the grotesque ritual could reflect Dani’s (and the viewer’s) conflicted psychological state, yet her smile could evoke delight or delirium. Like the narrator in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ separation from the patriarchy allows Dani to assert her dominance in her flourishing world.



(Sczesny, 2020)

Dani's journey could be explored through the film's notable use of sound. The cult's greatest power is their manipulation of empathy – the women reflected Dani's panic attack with sympathetic synchronized wails. Cults claim to 'ameliorate the mental state of their members' with their 'intense cohesiveness,' strong belief systems, and their exerted influence (Galanter, 1990, pp. 545). Psychologists believe that women are more likely than men to join because of being 'oppressed for much of human history' and 'tend to feel safe around other women' within the group (Online Psychology Degree Guide, no date).



(Marceau, 2020)

Unlike Christian, who repressed her mental sufferings, she feels *home* with the Hârga after freeing her pain. Gambin and Sharp's study (2018) on empathy and anxiety dimensions suggests that empathy which develops intimacy 'may contribute to relationships with parents that limit a child's autonomy and independence and lead to separation anxiety symptoms.' In addition to feelings of personal failure and guilt, people may also 'feel anxious that they will be rejected' or 'criticized by others.' As an antisocial, Dani questions if she has been too needy and relies on Christian for his ostensible emotional support. One element of an abusive/predatory relationship is 'the naïve woman,' which Houston defines as 'one whose instincts are not intact. She is neither aware nor in tune with her vulnerabilities' (Houston, 2012, pp. 21). Being previously forced to grieve in silence for the fear of being a burden, (Dani's) grief is

acknowledged and shared by the community, hence, sacrificing her boyfriend instead of a member of the community that she has been in for four days. This deranged notion of “support” is reinforced when Ulf screeches while burning alive – the group mimics the horrific chorus with convulsive movements. The howls create an apocalyptic aura, ‘soon it’s uncertain whether Dani is crying or LAUGHING’ (Aster, 2017, pp. 116). The crumbling temple and her grin exorcises her inner demons, guilt and fear of loss. Another sinister element includes composer Bobby Krlic’s background music, ‘Fire Temple’ – the sombre orchestra overlayed with an ominous, screeching pitch ends light and soaring. Its transition from heavy to light conveys her cathartic paradise. The triumphant tone sets a gleefully perverse finale, leaving viewers to question: *is it truly a happy ending?*



(Marceau, 2020)

The unsettling, sinister ending of *Midsommar* disguised in a beautifully shot film shows Dani achieving liberation from her trauma and oppression and is reborn in her new tribe and strangely cathartic paradise, yet some may say she has lost her sanity – leaving (conflicted and possibly psychologically tormented) viewers to wonder if she is truly free.

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