

The Shadow of the Monomyth Lives in Midsommar

Christina Segura

Lamar University

I hereby confirm that I have written the following paper. I utilized sources in forming my thoughts and opinions, and I have cited those sources where I used them, and the resulting paper is my own work.

Christina Segura 7/22/19

The Shadow of the Monomyth Lives in Midsommar

In his epic work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (1949) summarizes humanity's long tradition of mythological storytelling with the succinct passage, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." (p. 28) This story arc is referred to as the monomyth (p. 28), and transpires through a process of separation, initiation, and return. Indeed, this formula is engrained in the psyche of humanity and is reflected in innumerable stories, movies, and fairy tales. The highly anticipated sophomore effort of writer/director Ari Aster, *Midsommar* (2019), has echoes of this pattern ringing throughout the film. While our protagonist is a woman, some archetypal roles are reversed, and stages of the initiation and return are out of sequence, the epic journey is ultimately fulfilled. This adventure is one in which oppositions abound. In this essay, we will explore the movie in depth and map the hero/heroine's journey through the three stages and many of the identified steps within each. We will analyze our heroine's character and her experiences as they lead her to her shadow, and ultimately to her rebirth and subsequent freedom.

When Aster was pressed at a red-carpet event about what to expect from *Midsommar*, the director laughingly called it "a Wizard of Oz for perverts" (Handler, 2019). Interesting hint.

Like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Midsommar* is about a girl who is lost, who is looking for 'home'. *Oz* is also a favorite subject of analysis of film critics and scholars for its rich potential for interpretation. One Freudian analysis recounted in Skip Dine Young's *Psychology at the Movies* describes *Oz* as a "metaphor for the adolescent journey" (p. 26). So too, can Dani's saga in *Midsommar* be viewed as a metaphor for the young adult's journey into their actualized self.

Instead of a sweet, palatable version-*Midsommar* gives us a beautiful, gruesome, limit-pushing test within the text of what our heroine's Freedom to Live/No Place Like Home epiphany looks like.

Midsommar opens with a beautiful nature scene of what appears to be Sweden in the winter. It is all blues and greys against the white snow that blankets the trees and hibernating foliage. The images linger a while before cutting to a suburban bedroom where two apparently sleeping people are bathed in moonlight of the same blue and grey tones. The entire first act is shot in the cool colors of winter (much like the sepia toned scenes of Dorothy's Kansas). Dani is a young, anxiety ridden college student in her mid-twenties who is quietly desperate for her boyfriend Christian to commit to loving her or put her out of her misery and end the relationship. In the first act, we learn that Dani's bi-polar sister has killed herself and their parents by piping exhaust from the family car into the sleeping parents' bedroom and into a gas mask duct taped to her own face. A forlorn Christian is at a pizza parlor being goaded by his friends Mark, Josh, and Pelle for putting up with Dani's drama when he clearly wants out. Christian appears trapped; conflicted by his care and concern for Dani but aware that he is unable/unwilling to be the boyfriend or even the friend she needs. Shortly after the crass Mark coldly exclaims, "She needs a therapist!" and Christian replies, "She has a therapist," the male bonding session is interrupted by Dani's phone call in which she cannot speak; only guttural, animalistic wails of pure anguish and grief greet a horrified and scared Christian.

Dangling in her new reality, stripped of her family, Dani puts on a brave face. She accompanies Christian to a party where she learns he and his friends (who are all anthropology students) are planning a trip to Sweden in two weeks to celebrate a nine-day mid-summer festival. She and Christian fight about it, but she quickly apologizes for making it an issue. Feeling guilty and

assuming she will not accept, Christian invites her to come along: Dani's first call to adventure (this became her call the moment her parents and sister died). Her refusal is a half-hearted one, she longs for something familiar enough to feel like family that she would follow Christian anywhere.

Our unlikely heroine receives her Introduction of Supernatural aid in the following scene when she visits Christian's apartment he shares with his friends. Pelle, the Swedish student whose village is hosting the festival, puts his sketch pad down to have a conversation with Dani. They discuss the festival in Halsingland. He explains that this year is special, it only happens once every 90 years. He describes it as lots of dressing up and festivity and learns that Dani's birthday will land in the beginning of the event. This sparks a new interest in her within Pelle. He looks her warmly in the eye and tells her he is most excited that she is coming. He offers his condolences to her about his family and then confides that he too lost his parents. This act of compassion, this first taste of true empathy in far too long unhinges Dani and she quickly excuses herself to the bathroom as her eyes spill over. She is not ready for the aid Pelle is tentatively offering. Sobbing her way across The Threshold behind closed bathroom doors, Dani is transported to the airplane lavatory. Pressing her fists to her eyes, she composes herself and emerges in a warmly lit cabin of an airplane. The sunlight is golden, the tone has changed. It is now summer, and the plane will soon land in Sweden, in the belly of the whale.

The group arrives in Halsingland; a technicolor folk paradise. The Hargas go about their festival preparations wearing simple white clothes with embroidered runes and flower crowns against a rich blue sky. It is a saturated, beautiful scene. They are offered hallucinogenic mushrooms and Dani hesitates. This annoys the group, and she acquiesces. "I'm excited," she says politely. The trip is Dani's first immersion in the reality of the new world, and who she is in it. It is not an easy

transition. As she sits in the grass under the ever-present sun (it is 9pm and still it hangs brightly in the sky) she sees blades sprouting out of her hands and feet. They all marvel at the trees 'breathing' around them. The word 'family' pops out of the conversation and Dani is abruptly pulled from pleasant reflections. She feels a panic attack rising. She knows these thoughts are dangerous in this state. She tells herself that she is ok. Running, she tears past a group of laughing young adults. Her breath shallow, she finds solace behind yet another closed door-this time an outhouse (these bathroom doors appear to be a metaphor for the stages of Dani's emotional journey). In the outhouse she sees a shadow of a woman behind her. This might represent the 'higher' self she is destined to be. Terrified, Dani panics at the thought of her truth: she is alone, she has only herself. She flees, runs through the woods, and falls asleep in a field of flowers. She wakes up as the sun begins its long journey through the Swedish sky. Her skin is radiant. She looks more alive than ever. This episode was her first rebirth. In the belly of the whale she was forced to extricate herself from her fear of abandonment. The pain and panic tried to consume her, but she endured and awoke a new version of herself. Still soft, still scared, but unconsciously glowing in her new skin.

The hero in this story doesn't know that it is about her. She knows she is fighting for her relationship, for her sanity, but the synchronicity of her destiny lining up all around her is still hidden below the surface. Her birthday arrives (the mid-point of her life's spring falls appropriately in mid-summer) and Christian forgets. Pelle pulls her aside and gifts her with a beautiful portrait he drew of her. It is her talisman. In it she looks regal, strong, beautiful. They agree to keep the gift between them.

On the Road of Trials, Dani and the group witness elaborate group meals, ceremonies, rituals, and finally the voluntary deaths of two elders who have reached ages 72. The Hargas view life as

a series of seasons: winter ends at age 72 and the people joyfully give their lives to be reborn again in the 'great cycle'. As the Hargas gathered to witness the honorable sacrifice, they were joyous when the first immediately died after diving off a cliff onto a waiting tablet shaped rock. The second fell wrong and survived the fall, writhing in pain. Members of the community used a ceremonial club to end it. Dani was horror stricken and transfixed by the scene. She noticed that the community dissolved into sympathetic cries of anguish when the second suffered, as though the burden of the pain was carried by all.

Shell-shocked and ready to abandon the trip, Dani turns to Christian for sympathy/reassurance. His fascination as an anthropology student and his inadequacy as her partner prevent him from offering the compassion she seeks from him. Pelle, again, finds her and offers her the understanding she needed and the empathy that would transform her. In more detail, he shares his own story of being orphaned with her. He explains how the community shared his pain. In the script, Pelle says, "My difference is, I didn't get a chance to feel lost. Because I had a family here-where everyone embraced me and swept me up and I was raised by a community that doesn't distinguish between what is *theirs* and what is *not* theirs. That's what you were sacrificed to." (Aster, 2017) He goes on to ask her if Christian makes her feel held, feel like she is home. This is a pivotal moment for Dani. The first sign that her return to *home* looks nothing like the Brooklyn she left behind. The matriarch of all festivities, SIV, can be seen as the Mother archetype, orchestrating all the events in the background (these events can be interpreted as the smothering mother or the nurturing provider depending on your perspective), but The Goddess in Dani's story is Pelle (which means "rock"-perhaps a nod to the grounding presence he provides) who is offering her the cultivating nudge towards her ascension (Wikipedia 2019).

In the midst of all of this, the temptress of this tale, beautiful 15-year-old Maja has just been given permission to mate. Her eyes are on Christian. She has been casting love spells by serving him drinks tinted pink with her menstrual blood and feeding him meat pies with her pubic hairs baked inside. Dani notices them exchanging looks throughout the festival. SIV takes Christian aside and informs him he has been approved to mate with Maja. They are an ideal astrological match. Many of the community members share a birthday- this is an important sexual rite. Christian is interested but torn between his desire and his duty to Dani. Participating in this way is no longer mere observation. Further complicating things, Mark, Josh, and the two other visitors have all gone missing.

Everything is culminating towards two events: the maypole contest and the sex between Christian and Maja. All the young women including Dani drink a concoction of spring water and herbs that contain ‘special properties’ and prepare to participate in a dance contest. It is in defiance of an ancient event in which The Dark One possessed the girls and they danced to their deaths. In this contest, the last girl standing is the winner and the new May Queen. During this dance the girls hallucinate, laugh, vomit, fall, all around Dani. She wavers, but she is emboldened. For the first time we see her laugh. Competition begins to fuel her movements. Her new friend encourages her as they dance and dance to the hypnotic music. They begin speaking a language they both understand. Dani is letting go. This is her Magic Flight. She is letting herself follow her natural path. She approaches her apotheosis. After winning and becoming crowned queen, a still hallucinating Dani is swept up in the cheering crowd. She sees her parents go by. She remembers her grief, then Pelle kisses her, and she returns to enjoy the embrace of the community. Later, during the blessing of the crops by the May Queen, Dani hears singing

coming from a temple. Compelled towards it, she peers through the keyhole and beholds Christian making love to Maja in the center a ceremonial circle of naked elder women.

What was left of Dani's hope for anyone from the home she came from to offer her some semblance of comfort is shattered. She hyperventilates. Instead of running into a bathroom, she collapses in the bunkhouse—a building where doors are notably absent (no more hiding). The women surround her and steady her breath with theirs. They begin to feel her pain and they cry with her, wailing with loss. Dani cracks open. She lets herself be lifted up and held by the women who shoulder her pain with her and metabolize it as their own. This catharsis leaves Dani near catatonic. She is later placed on a throne to oversee the final sacrifice of the nine who give their lives. 4 outsiders, 4 community members (volunteers) and one of the May Queen's choosing. Dani is on the precipice of sanity, but she knows what she's doing.

She chooses Christian as the final sacrifice. In this way, Dani Atones with the Father. Christian was ambivalent at best about being the support Dani needed when she was orphaned. He was the only real relationship she had left. Instead of responding with empathy and respect, he could only feel trapped by her need. He symbolized an inverted archetype of Father, incapable of caring for his child (Dani having been forced into childlike vulnerability by her experiences). Yet instead of leaving, and forcing the child to adapt, he was selfishly afraid of missing her, so he stayed; condemning Dani to a hopeful purgatory. When she witnessed his betrayal, all hope died. Given the opportunity to force Christian to atone for his destruction by neglect, she took it. In doing so, she burned away her dependence on him and all the bonds tying her to the life she left behind.

Norse culture feared and revered the bear for its speed, power, and ability to so savagely destroy (Sons of Vikings 2018). For this reason, Christian (who was paralyzed but fully conscious) was

chosen as the one to be sewn into the disemboweled bear corpse as a “purging of the community’s most unholy affects” (Aster 2017).

The Sacred House and its sacrifices go up in flames. This wakes Dani up from her dissociative state. This is her refusal to return home. She is suddenly horribly aware of how alien all of this is to her very psyche. She is ashamed at what she has done, horrified. She begins walking away, sobbing. Inside the Sacred House, the two Hargan men are smiling, awaiting their fate. Then the fire crawls up their arms. One of them screams out in pain. Outside, the community feels this. They start screaming, swatting at invisible flames crawling up their bodies. Dani watches. Pelle holds his face in his hands, in agony. She realizes he has seen this before, that he lost his parents in this way. Looking back at the flames, her expression goes from fear to excitement. Relief. Her face breaks out into an authentic smile. The connection that held on to her rational thought snapped. “She has surrendered to a joy known only by the insane” (Aster, 2017). In the midst of this carnage, these unspeakable crimes, Dani has found the Ultimate Boon she was never able to find in her previous life: empathy, community, *home*. As their queen, her joy for this way of life will ensure they can continue. Her insanity frees her from any moral misgivings, and she relishes the Freedom to Live in her destined role as May Queen. Here she is adored, *held* by a village that regards human interdependence with the same reverence and respect that they offer Nature. And every 90 years, a little bit of blood.

References

Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Commemorative Ed.). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Anderson, P. (Producer), & Aster, A. (Director). (July 3, 2019). *Midsommar* [Motion Picture]. United States of America: A24.

Aster, A. (2017) *Midsommar*. Retrieved from

<https://www.docdroid.net/39EggEN/midsommar.pdf#page=84>

Handler, R., (Mar. 22, 2019). Ari Aster Shares Details about New A24 Movie 'Midsommar'.

Retrieved from <https://www.vulture.com/2019/03/ari-aster-new-a24-movie-midsommar.html>

Sons of Vikings. (Jan. 14, 2018). *Viking Symbols and Meanings*. Retrieved from

<https://sonsofvikings.com/blogs/history/viking-symbols-and-meanings>

Wikipedia. Pelle (Given Name). Retrieved from

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelle_\(given_name\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelle_(given_name))

Young, S. D. (2012). *Psychology at the Movies*. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons

LTD.

