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## *Midsommar* (2019): Is ‘Good for Her’ the New Final Girl?

Cassidy Crane

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*Midsommar* (2019) is part folk-horror, part high school comedy, part breakup film, part slasher, and part feminist movie. Director Ari Aster gives the viewer two stories: the unhealthy relationship between main characters Dani and Christian, and the Swedish cult Hårga that slowly but surely encroaches on their lives. By the end of the film, Dani is the last foreigner standing, with the men who wronged either her or the cult dead in a ritual sacrifice. Across the film, we watch Dani go through the death of her family, be mistreated by her boyfriend, and be brushed off by his friends. The final shot of the film shows Dani smiling, crowned May Queen, watching Christian burn to death. After the release of *Midsommar*, this final image of Dani became an online meme, accompanied by an image from the show *Arrested Development* of the character Lucille saying, “Good for her.” Dani is like a Final Girl, but she is coded differently.

I argue that Dani represents a new type of Final Girl, which I call the Good for Her Girl (written as GFH Girl from now on). The GFH girl honors the Final Girl and slasher film conventions while departing from them. The GFH Girl differs from the Final Girl in that she has experienced continuous trauma throughout her life and seeks revenge against men at the end of the film, yet still the audience reacts sympathetically to her.

### **Part I: *Midsommar* as Slasher**

Though *Midsommar* is regarded - rightfully so – as a horror film, director Ari Aster ultimately saw its genre as twofold. In an interview with David Sims for *The Atlantic*, Aster explained,

I would say this was, for me, a way of making a breakup movie and having fun with clichés and tropes that are inherent to two different genres, doing

something that's simultaneously absurdist and nakedly vulnerable. It's folk horror, but being given to you with the trajectory of a high-school comedy. It's about a girl who everyone knows is with the wrong guy, and the right guy is under her nose.

This combination of genres is reminiscent of the slasher film, where often high school or high school-aged teens are put into a horrific situation. The victims are normal people with normal problems, but they go through an abnormal experience at the hands of a killer that may or may not have a motive. This comparison especially rings true for the monster of a Slasher film being compared to that of *Midsommar*: the threat is often human as opposed to supernatural.

Ari Aster calls upon many tropes of the slasher films in *Midsommar*. Of the slasher films cited by Carol Clover, the inventor of the term "Final Girl, *Midsommar* compares closely to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Clover describes the elements of the slasher as such:

the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness (96).

Slasher films heavily rely on these elements in which to put cliché young characters into. We can see these elements present in *both Texas Chain Saw* and *Midsommar*, even if *Midsommar* was not necessarily marketed as a slasher.

To start with the elements that are less important to this paper but important to the slasher film, the location of "not-home" is clear in both films. In both *Texas Chain Saw* and *Midsommar*, our group of future victims go to the home base of the families that will kill them. In *Texas Chain Saw*, the couple Kirk and Pam stumble into the Family's home, ensuring their deaths. In *Midsommar*, the Americans are brought to Sweden by a fellow graduate student, Pelle. Here, Pelle lures them to his cult family under false pretenses. In this scenario, the characters of

*Texas Chain Saw* seem more foolish, but neither group is able to escape due to the isolated location. In both films, the monstrous groups use different methods of murder than a gun, with the *Texas Chain Saw* using mostly a chainsaw as well as a hammer as murder weapons. The cult in *Midsommar* uses different rituals, though most are off-screen. Sims notes this, saying “You’ve [speaking to Aster] also kind of made a slasher movie with no kills. You don’t really see the murders, but they’re all getting picked off, one by one. They just walk off into the woods.” The culminating scene is a large fire killing Christian and burning the corpses of the other foreigners, as well as willing participants. Unlike *Texas Chain Saw*, *Midsommar* is much more subtle. The audience knows what is happening, but the horror is in the tense feeling as opposed to the abject violence and gore (for the most part).

Gendered killing plays out differently in *Midsommar* than in the slasher film. Clover argues that in a slasher “death of a male is always swift, even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror. [...] The murders of women, on the other hand, are filmed at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length” (105). This matches up with *Texas Chain Saw*, especially comparing Pam’s murder to Kirk’s or Jerry’s. Pam is sexualized through her death, even hung on a hook, comparing her to a piece of meat. In *Midsommar*, there are nine deaths: five foreigners and four natives; 2 women and 7 men. We only see the death of one of the women – she is one of two that commits ritual suicide by jumping onto rocks. Her death certainly has extreme graphic detail, but no more than the man that jumps after her. We watch both of their skulls smash onto the rocks until they are almost no longer recognizable. When the man survives his jump, one of the cult members delivers a killing blow to his head with a hammer. This is reminiscent of Leatherface smashing Kirk’s head with a hammer in *Texas Chain Saw*, but in *Midsommar* we stay in this moment longer.

To return to Pam’s death, there is similarity in how Pam is hung up on a meat hook and how Simon – one half of the British couple, and

the first foreigner to disappear – is strung from the barn ceiling, naked, and covered with flowers. Mara Bachman observes in a Screen Rant article that Simon has undergone a Norse method of torture called blood eagle, and that “Perhaps the most disturbing part of Simon's death is the fact that he is actually alive when Christian finds him. It's very subtle, but his chest can be seen rising and falling with each painful breath he takes, serving to paint a much more complete picture of the cruelty of *Midsommar's* Hårga cult.” Though we do not witness the entirety of his torture, like Pam, Simon is similarly tortured in a way that can be interpreted sexually. The way they are both displayed and forced to live through their torture – Pam watching Kirk die, Simon being stripped naked and having his sight removed – while being presented both violently and provocatively is jarring.

These two scenes serve as two sides of the same coin – *Midsommar* is not a film that is overtly sexual about women (while *Texas Chain Saw* is), but it does contain sexual content in relation to violence. This is especially important in looking at how the victim of *Midsommar* is not this “beautiful, sexually active woman” (Clover 96). Despite this, the general structure of the slasher is still there, with only a few differences.

### **Dani as Final Girl**

*Midsommar* is a film that is predictable, as most slashers are. Aster notes this in his interview with Sims, saying,

I'm not here to subvert the [horror] genre, but at the same time, we all know what's going to happen. So it's not that interesting. If anything, I respect you as a viewer—you know they're all going to be killed—so that's not where the surprises are going to be, and that's not where the joy is going to be.

There is a familiarity in the Slasher genre: we know that everyone is going to die. What makes it exciting is how. If *Midsommar* follows the guidelines set forth, we know that Dani will live and be our Final Girl.

She does live, but Clover's explanation of what a Final Girl is does not only require her to avoid death.

Clover requires a Final Girl to be not just a girl. She defines the Final Girl as boyish, in a word. [...] she is not fully feminine – not in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, and competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance sets her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Martie, Terri, Laurie, Stretch, Will (Clover 109).

Dani. It is a masculine name, after all. But this alone does not make her our Final Girl. In appearance, Dani does not wear makeup and wears simple clothing. This certainly sets her apart from the women in the cult. We might juxtapose her against Connie, the only other non-cult woman, though Connie dies very quickly. Though they are both taken aback by the ritual, Connie and her fiancé Simon yell about it, which gets them killed. Dani stays alive by fading into the background, which is ironically very feminine.

Dani does not ally with the majority of the men, but she does find a confidant in Pelle. We watch the men talk badly about her, mostly regarding her relationship with Christian and her emotionality. Her lack of sexuality is perceived as a flaw by Mark, who takes the cliché of the sex-obsessed friend of Christian. He tells Christian to break up with Dani before they go to Sweden so that he can find a milkmaid to have sex with instead. Pelle, who is the one who lured everyone to Sweden, tells Dani that she deserves better than Christian. They share a kiss after Dani is crowned May Queen. Dani finds friendship more with the women of Hårga, who give her clothing to match them and let her in on their customs. When Dani discovers Christian having sex with another girl, a group of women cry with her. The men were instead encouraging Christian to cheat on Dani.

Dani lacks the specific masculine intelligence that Clover claims keeps the Final Girl alive. Instead, she avoids the wrath of the cult by

minding her own business, and finally by being crowned May Queen. May Queen is arguably the most feminine role of the film, though it does perhaps require a physical prowess to be the last woman standing. Dani is adorned with flowers and a crown and is later placed into a dress-like blanket of flowers. This role as the top female of Hårga is what affords her the ability to choose between Christian and a cult member to be sacrificed.

Ultimately, Dani has some masculine traits, but these traits are not what keep her alive. It is her actions more than her traits that keep her alive. In addition to who the Final Girl is, Clover does outline what the Final Girl *does*, saying,

She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. [...] She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also funds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B). She is inevitably female (106).

Sally in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is used as Clover's example of the epitome of a Final Girl, mostly for all of her screaming and being chased through the woods. Dani, however, is never chased, cornered, or wounded. She does not scream because of the cult. She hardly screams at all. But when she does scream, it is because of her boyfriend, Christian

Dani is primarily positioned as a character in relation to Christian throughout the film, much as Christian is positioned in reference to her. They are *the* couple. Returning to Ari Aster's assertion of *Midsommar* as a breakup movie, Dani very much lives in this genre. Dani's priorities throughout the film remain with her relationship until the very end. We do not see her engaging in these "Final Girl activities" because she does not know that she is living within a horror film. Instead, she maneuvers as she would within a breakup film. It is hard to

characterize her actions as “Final Girl” or not “Final Girl” because the characters outside of the cult do not know what they have wandered into. Dani cannot run from a monster if she is never chased.

Dani is also shielded from the horror because she is different from the other characters. In *Texas Chain Saw*, the Family goes after the group of teens that trespass on their land and cannibalize them. There is a reason for the violence, even on the surface, and it is because of the transgressions of the teens. Similarly, the cult has a reason for each of the killings of the foreigners. The British couple, Connie and Simon, are killed for their disrespect at the ritual suicide and for trying to leave. Mark is killed for peeing on the ancestor tree. Josh is killed for taking a picture of the cult’s holy book. Christian, however, is killed because Dani makes that choice. She makes that choice because she perceives Christian as having cheated on her. Every death has a reason.

Dani is not abject terror personified. She is heartbreak personified. Dani has to suffer the murder-suicide of her sister and her parents while being in a relationship with a man who does not care for her. At the end, she does look death in the face, but it is not her killer. It is her victim, burning alive, in the carcass of a bear. Dani cannot be the Final Girl. I argue she is something similar, something more.

### **Dani as Good for Her Girl**

From the film’s beginning, the audience’s sympathies lie with Dani. We watch as her family dies when Dani can do nothing to stop it. We watch as her boyfriend badmouths her with his friends. We watch as her boyfriend treats her badly at a party and ends up getting her to apologize for it. We watch as her boyfriend forgets her birthday. Later, we watch Dani watch her boyfriend have sex with someone else. This woman has been through so much, and so much of it has been out of her control. Mark decided to pee on the ancestor tree, so he was killed. Josh decided to take pictures of the sacred book after explicitly being told not to, so he was killed. But Dani? Dani did everything right. It is not



her fault that bad things happened to her. When the festival reaches its end, and Dani finally fights back against the man who has hurt her the entire duration of the film, there is a simple audience reaction. Good for her.

Aster's portrayal of Dani and Christian is night and day. Dani is the doting girlfriend who just needs someone to pay attention to her needs, while Christian is the selfish boyfriend who forgets how long they have been together. They were on the cusp of a breakup when Dani's family was killed and Christian only stayed with her because of that.

One way that *Texas Chain Saw* and *Midsommar* are similar is the audience perception of the victims. Though we are scared of the killer, the victims deserved it in a way. Pam and Kirk decided to walk right into the Family's house, what did they expect was going to happen? We can apply this logic to Christian. Christian treated Dani poorly without even a moment of redemption. The two things he did to be kind to her (not breaking up with her and inviting her to Sweden) were only because he felt bad for her, not because he had any real love for her. When he is a bad boyfriend, what does he think is going to happen?

With Dani creating "ending C" and joining the killers, we get to watch the ultimate death. The cult kills over pettier things, where anyone who mildly steps out of line is the next to be sacrificed. With the genre split between the folk-horror and breakup/high-school comedy, the cult is the folk-horror monster. But Christian is the villain of our breakup movie. While high-school comedies might end with the girlfriend publicly dumping her horrible boyfriend, *Midsommar* ends with her sacrificing him.

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<sup>1</sup> As a sidenote, the sex that Christian has with the other woman is not necessarily consensual. There are other papers and articles about the faults of that scene and how it can be seen as problematic, but that is beyond the scope of my paper. Though I believe that scene is an example of Christian being a victim of the cult, he still is a bad boyfriend to Dani up to that moment. It takes Dani seeing Christian in that position for her to finally understand that, and she does not have the full context of that scene that we do as the audience.

In this way, the feeling of “good for her” transcends genre. We might have a similar reaction to the high-school comedy that we do to *Midsommar*. But the violence scratches a certain itch in the viewer that is more satisfying than simply telling off a mean bully might fulfill. In her article “Do you Want to Watch?” Jody Keisner explores this relationship between a viewer of a slasher film and the victims within the slasher. She says,

Not only does the horror movie monster serve as a model of deterrence in the fictional reality created, but the movies themselves serve as models of deterrence for the mostly teenage audience, illustrating what behaviors equal death. The movie audience is allowed to watch and “enjoy” (“enjoy” is used lightly here since so many viewers report increased anxiety and levels of fear) without the same “punishment” as the movie’s victims (Keisner 419).

Keisner is not comfortable with the slasher providing murder as a “punishment” for premarital sex, but that theme is not present in this movie. Dani survives to punish Christian, and because his transgressions are worse than premarital sex, there is more satisfaction in watching it happen.

I would also argue that the audience satisfaction does not only rely on Christian’s death but also on Dani’s happiness. It is not just about hating Christian, it is about liking Dani and wanting what is best for her. Keisner disagrees with the notion that a female viewer might relate to a Final Girl (412-413), but could she relate to a GFH Girl? We root for both, but perhaps the type of satisfaction we get is different.

The Final Girl might act as a stand-in for feminism, but Keisner argues that she only imitates it. When watching a film filled with the fear and murder of women, sparing one does not make up for everything else. Keiser asserts,

This interpretation of the Final Girl as an expression of female empowerment, or an “I” for the audience to identify with, becomes problematic when comparing gender discrepancies in horror movie portrayals and audience reactions. Furthermore, male viewers report that they enjoy

slasher films significantly more than female viewers, and that enjoyment is heightened when in the company of a distressed woman (422).

How does this change with a GFH girl? Even if she is masculinized, does it balance out with the death of a man?

I characterize the GFH Girl as a woman who has undergone trauma throughout her life – in particular, by men – and is able to enact revenge by the end of the film. In Shuntaya’s article on the genre, she gives examples (some of which she empathizes with more than others) such as Amy from *Gone Girl*, the titular character of *Carrie*, Cee of *The Invisible Man*, and Jen of *Revenge*. While the Final Girl is a characteristic of the slasher, the GFH Girl exists in both horror and thriller.

Watching a “bad guy” kill people might give some satisfaction in an audience, but the justice we see served by a GFH Girl is much different. Audiences enjoy having the “good guy” win, but better yet, they like seeing punishment upon the “bad guy.” With *Midsommar*, we might have expected one of the endings that Clover proposed (106), with an ending A having Dani escape or an ending B of Dani burning down the cult herself. With the combinations of genres, Dani kills the “bad guy” we might not expect her to, but the bad guy that is worse to her.

Dani is never treated badly by the cult, only the other foreigners are. As Dani never steps out of line, she is accepted and even crowned as May Queen. The only man that is sympathetic to her is Pelle, the man that might be right for her over her own boyfriend (Aster qtd in Sims). So in this sense, we sympathize with the cult because we sympathize with Dani. Aster even sees this movie as having a happy ending, saying,

Hopefully, the details [of the cult] are rich, and there’s a logic behind everything the villagers are doing, and they’re not just lawless pagans. At the same time, they’re also adhering to laws that are very particular to this film, and they exist solely to satisfy Dani’s particular needs. They are perfect for

Dani right now. It's a wish-fulfillment film in a way—she loses a family and gains one (qtd in Sims).

We return to the high-school comedy, where the protagonist dumps her boyfriend, but this time she gets with another guy that people misunderstand. But she understands him, and so we say, “Good for her. Good for them.” Perhaps this is how Aster wanted us to feel about the cult – that they might not be for us, but they are for Dani, and so we like them.

Despite the name of the GFH Girl containing the word “good,” this doesn't mean that everything in it is truly good. Kaiya Shuyata's article is very critical of these films, focusing specifically on *Midsommar* and how we as an audience should not have this reaction. She says,

Dani has clearly been broken down by a white-supremacist cult throughout the course of the film; they've groomed her with praise, given her a false sense of family, and ultimately forced her to join their cult by murdering all her friends. This is not a powerful moment of feminist fury: it's a heart-wrenching example of how cults prey on the fragile and weak. Using the “good for her” meme in this context, thus branding *Midsommar* as a feminist tale, is quite frankly false advertising (Shutaya).

Shutaya argues that while the audience may see the ending of *Midsommar* as Dani taking control of her life, instead this is just another sad moment after all the sad moments that came before it. Shutaya also cites *Gone Girl* as a poor example of using “good for her,” as we should not celebrate Amy's actions of manipulating her cheating husband and framing him for murder. Shutaya ultimately sees movies such as *The Invisible Man*, which ends with a woman killing her abuser, as an example that is worthy of “good for her.” Though I agree with Shutaya's point to an extent, horror is often about indulging messed-up desires, and the GFH girl is an outlet for violent revenge. To watch Amy frame her husband for murder or Dani make the choice that forces Christian to burn to death excruciatingly may not be an equivalent

punishment for the crime. But it isn't about being fair. It's about the satisfaction that comes along with it.

*Midsommar* borrows from the slasher genre, but with the wit of a high-school comedy, we watch the good girl burn her boyfriend to death inside of a bear. The GFH Girl replaces a Final Girl, where instead of getting pleasure from her fear, we are satisfied by her revenge. Dani's fate is unknown after the credits roll, and we do not know if she will have a happy life with the cult. At least, for the moment, we can watch her smile at the flames.

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