

## **A Flowered Hell: Spiritual Meaning, Paganism, and Religious Psychosis in Ari Aster's Midsommar**

**By, Zariyah Ortega**

Ari Aster's *Midsommar* is a film that both seduces and terrifies. Wrapped in sun-drenched flower crowns and folklore, it lures viewers into a world of unsettling serenity, where grief, tradition, and transcendence blend in a ritualistic fever dream. Beyond its surface as a folk horror film, *Midsommar* poses deeper spiritual questions. It explores the transformative power of trauma, the yearning for belonging, and the dangerous ecstasy of faith unmoored from reason. Through its narrative structure, Aster evokes themes tied closely to pagan spiritualism, while also exposing the fragility of human psychology under the weight of religious extremity. The film becomes a crucible through which we can examine not only the nature of faith and community, but the thin veil separating spiritual enlightenment from psychosis.

### **The Spiritual Meaning: Grief as Rebirth, Ritual as Healing**

At the core of *Midsommar* is Dani, a young woman who has lost her family to a horrific murder-suicide committed by her sister. The trauma leaves Dani emotionally paralyzed, alienated in her relationship, and desperate for stability. Her journey to the Hårga commune in rural Sweden marks the beginning of a spiritual rebirth through pain, not unlike the cycles of death and renewal that dominate ancient mythologies. In this context, the film's spiritual core can be understood as a meditation on how grief becomes sacred, how pain can be ritualized and made meaningful.

The Hårga operate on a deeply symbolic cosmology: their lives are dictated by cycles, from the age-based seasons of human life to their ritualistic calendar of sacrifice and celebration. Death, even self-inflicted, is not an end but a transition. The spiritual message here is twofold: first, suffering must be witnessed and shared communally; second, it must serve a larger cosmic or communal purpose.

This stands in stark contrast to Dani's life in the outside world, where her pain is met with silence, awkwardness, and detachment. In Hårga, her grief is mirrored most notably in the scene where she breaks down and the women of the commune scream and sob in unison with her. This moment is not just emotional, it is spiritual. It enacts a kind of collective catharsis that transforms grief into a shared sacrament. In the end, Dani is crowned May Queen not just as a symbolic ruler, but as a vessel of spiritual transformation. Her suffering has been sanctified, her identity reborn.

## **Paganism and the Power of the Sacred Natural World**

The entire world of Midsommar is steeped in pagan symbolism. The Hårga's traditions echo Norse, Celtic, and pre-Christian agrarian societies, where reverence for the Earth, seasons, and ancestral rites dictated social and spiritual life. Their rituals ranging from the blood sacrifice of elders to the fertility rites are violent and ecstatic reenactments of cycles found in many ancient pagan religions. Nature is both nurturing and cruel, sacred and unforgiving.

The film does not reference any specific real-world pagan tradition, but rather constructs a composite of pan-European folk customs. The midsummer festival itself is a real Scandinavian tradition, often associated with light, fertility, and the height of nature's power. Aster, however, reimagines it through a darker, more sinister lens. Flowers become instruments of control. Sacred groves are places of execution. Hallucinogenic herbs are used to dismantle ego and enforce conformity.

Still, the power of paganism in the film lies in its capacity to create meaning through ritual. In contrast to monotheistic religions that often emphasize transcendence from the material world, paganism is rooted in immanence, the divine is in the soil, the flesh, the sun, the seasons. This worldview makes every act of life and death sacred. The Hårga's violence is not cruel in their eyes; it is holy. Sacrifice maintains cosmic balance. Pain brings growth. The May Queen is not a mere title; she is the living embodiment of the goddess, the Earth reborn.

In this context, Midsommar is a film about the terrifying power of spiritual immanence: how, when the divine is made flesh, every action becomes justified in the name of balance and tradition. It is also a critique of the seductive quality of meaning-making: how people, especially those in crisis, will submit to systems that promise purpose and transformation, even at the cost of morality or autonomy.

## **Religious Psychosis: The Madness of Meaning**

One of the film's most disturbing layers is its portrayal of religious psychosis: an altered mental state in which spiritual beliefs become delusional or pathological. Dani's transformation into May Queen can be interpreted as a descent into this kind of psychosis. After enduring immense trauma and emotional neglect, she is finally embraced, exalted, and given a role within a spiritual system that validates her pain. Her final smile, watching her boyfriend Christian burn inside the sacrificial temple, is chilling not because it's vengeful, but because it's serene. She has found peace in madness.

Psychologically, this can be understood through the lens of trauma bonding and identity dissolution. Dani's repeated exposure to hallucinogens, the cult's emotionally manipulative rituals, and the complete erasure of external moral anchors contribute to a breakdown of ego boundaries, a hallmark of psychosis. Her acceptance of the Hårga's worldview reflects a dissociative response to trauma, not enlightenment. In this interpretation, the commune's rituals

serve as a spiritual delusion into which Dani retreats to escape the unbearable reality of her past life.

The film invites us to consider how religion, especially in its more extreme or cultic forms, can exploit the psychologically vulnerable. The Hårga do not just offer Dani belonging; they offer her absolution. In their worldview, there is no guilt, only necessity. No loneliness, only ritual. This is both comforting and terrifying. Religious psychosis is not merely about believing in false gods or hearing voices, it is about the total collapse of individual moral reasoning in favor of a system that rewrites the self.

Midsommar thus becomes a case study in how spiritual beliefs, when disconnected from critical thinking or ethical boundaries, can become a dangerous refuge for the traumatized. It asks whether some forms of healing are, in fact, another kind of madness.

### **Real-World Parallels: Jonestown and the Fatal Allure of Belonging**

The horror of Midsommar does not exist solely in fiction, it echoes the real-world tragedy of Jonestown, where over 900 members of the Peoples Temple died in a mass murder-suicide led by cult leader Jim Jones in 1978. Like the Hårga, the Peoples Temple offered belonging, purpose, and healing to the vulnerable. Members were largely marginalized individuals, people of color, the elderly, the poor seeking community and meaning in a society that had failed them. Much like Dani, they were offered an emotional refuge that, over time, dissolved their individual identities into collective ideology.

Both the Hårga and the Peoples Temple used ritual and isolation as tools of control. In Midsommar, the commune is geographically and psychologically removed from the outside world. Hallucinogens, repetition, and communal behaviors foster an environment where independent thought erodes. In Jonestown, the Guyanese jungle served the same purpose: separation from external influence, creating an echo chamber where Jim Jones's voice was absolute. Rituals like forced confessions, public shaming, and loyalty tests prepared followers for the final act of obedience, "drinking the Kool-Aid," a phrase that has since become synonymous with blind faith.

The mass suicide at Jonestown was not spontaneous. It was the result of years of indoctrination, emotional manipulation, and the deliberate dismantling of reason. Followers believed they were committing a revolutionary act, escaping a corrupt world. Their deaths, like the final sacrifices in Midsommar, were seen as necessary for communal transcendence. Jim Jones, like the elders and oracles of the Hårga, justified death as sacred, cloaked in ideology that masked terror as salvation.

This comparison underscores the film's warning: when spirituality becomes weaponized, when ritual is used to sanctify control, and when trauma is exploited in the name of healing, the result is not transcendence, it is tragedy. Whether in a fictional Swedish commune or a real jungle in Guyana, the longing for meaning can lead even the most rational individuals into fatal

submission. Dani's journey, viewed through this lens, becomes more disturbing: she doesn't escape her pain, she simply replaces it with a collective delusion.

### **Conclusion: Sacred Horror and the Fragile Human Psyche**

Ari Aster's *Midsommar* is not simply a horror film, it is a spiritual text disguised in gore and garlands. It speaks to the timeless human longing for meaning, especially in the face of death and grief. Through its use of pagan imagery and ritualistic symbolism, it creates a world where every act is imbued with spiritual purpose. Yet it also warns us of the fine line between transcendence and delusion. Dani's journey is not a clear arc of empowerment; it is an unsettling spiral into a belief system that annihilates the self under the guise of spiritual fulfillment.

The film compels viewers to ask: what happens when we are offered comfort not through truth, but through beautifully constructed lies? What is the cost of healing when it is bought with blood and blind faith? In its sunlit terrors, *Midsommar* reveals the darkest corners of spiritual longing, where sacredness and madness meet, and where salvation might look like a smile as everything burns.

### **Opinion: *Midsommar* and the Liberation of Being "Too Much"**

Ari Aster's *Midsommar* is often labeled a folk horror film. But beneath its florals and fire, it's a breakup movie wrapped in ritual, and for many of us, it's painfully personal.

When I first watched *Midsommar*, I didn't see just a disturbed cult or a toxic relationship unraveling under the Swedish sun. I saw my own story flickering through every frame. The story of Dani, gaslit and dismissed, always "too much", "too emotional", "too needy"... is the story of so many women who've been told to shrink themselves for the comfort of others. I know that story. I lived it.

At 16, I fell into a relationship that would hold me captive for a decade. A relationship built on gaslighting, manipulation, and emotional starvation. It wasn't just love that kept me there, it was the false promise that if I stayed quiet and agreeable, I would finally be chosen. Spoiler: I wasn't. And no one came to rescue me. Except my friends. My chosen family.

That's why Dani's grief struck so deeply. Her family dies, and Christian, her boyfriend, doesn't comfort her, he tolerates her. That coldness, that apathy masquerading as support, is something I knew intimately. And yet, like Dani, I stayed. I stayed until I didn't.

Like Dani, I spent years trying to mold myself into someone others could understand, or at least tolerate. I was called loud, opinionated, and a know-it-all, as if confidence was something to be shamed instead of celebrated. My family never quite knew what to do with me, and instead of

love, I often felt like an outsider in my own home. That ache of invisibility, of always being the one no one had to worry about, followed me like a shadow.

My “Ah-ha” moment didn’t involve flower crowns or human sacrifices, but it was a death. I killed the version of me who existed only to serve others. I stopped showing up for people who didn’t show up for me. I stopped doing things out of guilt, obligation, or fear of being left out. And I stepped into a new life, a life where I could finally breathe, grieve, rage, and dance without apology.

Midsommar is a cautionary tale, yes, but it’s also a strangely cathartic one. It shows us what it feels like to be emotionally starved and then suddenly, violently seen. It’s about how far someone will go to feel held, valued, and avenged. No, I didn’t join a cult. But I did burn down the life I had before. I did choose myself.

So many of us have been Dani. Silenced, diminished, unloved in the ways we needed most. But we don’t have to stay in the shadows. Whether you’ve endured trauma, heartbreak, loss, or just years of being overlooked, the real horror is never feeling like you’re enough. And the real liberation is realizing you always were, you just needed to find the right place to bloom.

And sometimes, that place isn’t home. Sometimes, it’s the one you build with the people who do fight for you.