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Female Protagonists In Film Noir: Comparing and Contrasting *Midsommar* by Ari Aster and *The Seventh Victim* by Mark Robson

Cults have been a focus point of human fascination for a long time. My personal interest in cults developed during my experiences with religious institutions as a child, and continued to grow throughout my time in Hutchins lower division courses. However, my fascination for horror books, films and stories stems from my early childhood. As a young girl, my favorite book was *Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark*. I read every *Goosebumps* book in my school library, and begged my dad to let me watch horror movies with him. As I got older, I developed a deep appreciation for the art of horror and suspense portrayed in films. Nothing makes me feel more alive than the adrenaline pumping through my veins as I sit on the edge of my seat, anticipating what twist or turn is about to come on the screen before me. This class opened my eyes to a new genre of films that I wish I had discovered sooner, but I look forward to continuing to explore after this semester. Throughout this course, I have developed a deeper appreciation for observing and analyzing the role of women as actors and as characters within film. As my final piece for this course, I have decided to compare two films: one classified as an American horror film noir, and one a folk horror film. Although one may not be classified as a noir film, I argue that with my understanding of the noir genre, I was able to identify aspects of noir in this horror film. Without further adieu, let me introduce you to Mary Gibson and Dani Ardor.

Mary Gibson is the main character in the American horror noir film titled *The Seventh Victim* directed by Mark Robson. Mary has one family member, her sister Jacqueline. We are never introduced to the whereabouts of the parents of these girls, but the audience is invited to understand that Jacqueline is the only family that Mary has. However, Jacqueline is missing for

a majority of the film, and Mary discovers the secrets that come with her missing sister and the life she built outside of Mary's reach. Mary decides to stay in New York City to look for her sister, and begins to work as a kindergarten teacher. Jacqueline was a business owner, but Mary discovers early on in her search for her sister that the cosmetics company had been sold. Although this film is from 1943, Mary is portrayed as a strong independent woman in many aspects. For example, while sitting with the man Mary discovers is in love with Jacqueline, he tells her to drink her milk. She replies letting him know she does not want to be told what to do again. Watching this film as a feminist viewer in 2021, I felt so empowered knowing that the writers of a film fundamentally based on the idea of a satanic cult still enabled women as independent, capable, and strong. Mary had enough confidence in herself to feel comfortable venturing out into a new city, all by herself to search for her sister and breaking certain gender norms.

Dani Ardor is the main character in the folk horror film titled *Midsommar* written and directed by Ari Aster. In the early stages of the film, Dani becomes a traumatized orphan after her sister kills herself and her parents at home. She mourns the loss of family with her emotionally unavailable boyfriend, Christian. She plays the role of a strong independent woman as she picks herself up and rebuilds her emotional identity after tragedy, just like Mary Gibson. She joins her boyfriend and his friends on a trip to visit Sweden, the home town of their exchange student friend, Pelle. They attend midsommar at Pelle's commune, the Harga. Throughout their journey, Dani faces endless moments of hardship, emotional abuse and vulnerability. Yet somehow, Dani is still able to portray a strong, self assured female role. After mourning the loss of her family, she is able to rise again and continue with her education and her future plans.

Both Dani Ardor and Mary Gibson reflect traits that remind me of the character Mildred Pierce. Mildred Pierce was hardworking, family oriented, and self-sacrificing. Mary Gibson was also self-sacrificing, as she abandoned her "old life" at school to go to New York and find her

missing sister. She worked hard to network towards finding her sister, and immediately getting a job to be able to afford her time in New York. She does all of this to help her sister, like Mildred Pierce did what she did for her daughter, Veda. Dani Ardor also showed her self-sacrificing heart before her family died. Through a conversation with her boyfriend, we discovered as the audience that her sister had bipolar disorder and that Dani would often put her sister's needs before her own. Dani worked extremely hard to get back on her feet after losing her family. Dani Ardor, Mary Gibson, and Mildred Pierce are all female protagonists in horror or noir films that represent growth in the development of women in cinema.

Death is often involved in the plot of a classic noir film. In this case, death plays a huge role in both *Midsommar* and *The Seventh Victim*. A very specific similarity between these two films is the role of death as a part of the cult organizations highlighted in the films. In *Midsommar*, death is praised and celebrated regularly, but extremely during the actual midsommar festival. In the traditional practices of the commune, elderly participate in the ritual known as Attestupa at the age of seventy two. In other words, at the age of seventy two, individuals are expected to share a last meal with one another, and then commit suicide by jumping off of a cliff. The others then clean up the bodies, and spread the ashes amongst the other ancestors. The final scene of *Midsommar* consists of a yellow pyramid building, containing all of the boys Dani entered Sweden with amongst others, going up in flames. As the rest of the commune watches and purges the pains, sorrows, and emotional attachments within themselves and the individuals inside, the cult is now free- Dani included. As the pyramid goes up in flames, Dani cries and screams along with the other commune members. However, the final scene portrays Dani moving out of her crying stage, and into a smile- accepting the end of her emotionally abusive relationship, the end of her mourning and trauma; Dani smiles as her past burns to the ground, and her future with a new family and community begins. The death of others plays a huge role in the preaching and practices of the commune, in symbolical ways as well as in standard traditional ways.

As for *The Seventh Victim*, death is relatively the first and last discussion to indirectly occur between the audience and the director. When Mary first goes looking for her sister in New York, Jacqueline's room is eventually opened for Mary to look at- and a chair with a noose tied above it is inside the room. This leads us to believe that her sister is in danger, but we later discover she is in danger because of something far more complex- a satanic cult. This cult, which is called the Palladists, lured Jacqueline into joining. During Mary's search for Jacqueline, she discovers a man who had been Jacqueline's fiance before she went missing. When Jacqueline tells him about how she ended up getting into the situation with the cult, the cult hosts a meeting to decide what to do about her sharing that information. They rule she must die, and when they kidnap her they decide she should kill herself, since she has wanted to kill herself before anyways. She does not want to kill herself when they want her to die, she only liked the idea of having the power to end life when she wanted to. Death and the idea of power and control plays such a huge role in this film, especially in the final scene when Jacqueline finally escapes the cult without having to kill herself, goes home, and kills herself. While Jacqueline was not the female protagonist of this film, I do believe that she holds power as a female leader in this film. Jacqueline has deep knowledge of the control over death and life in relation to time. Even when Jacqueline felt the most hopeless, being forced to die by the satanic cult that ruined her life, she wanted to live. Then, after escaping, she had the freedom to continue to live or to end her life- and she chose to die. We saw nothing of her death, just the extremely unpleasant sound of the chair being kicked to the side or to the ground, and the door of her room. The audience was able to connect the dots and come to the conclusion that the film ended with the death of Jacqueline Gibson. I believe death is used in film noir so frequently because it adds a dimension of darkness that everyone is able to empathize with and develop fear in relation to. Fear of the unknown is mankind's biggest flaw, and I believe one of the worlds' greatest unknowns is death. Humans fear the pain and darkness related to death, the emotional vulnerability attached to the death of loved ones, and the unknown of what happens

after death. Automatic suspense added to any film when directors choose to include death in the plot.

The use of cults in film noir is not as common, but it absolutely adds a degree of suspense and interest due to the fact that most viewers are unaware of the details and specifics related to cults, but find the overall idea fascinating. I have always taken interest in the idea of cult organizations, and I discovered this about myself when I was moving through multiple different religious institutions. In horror movies that include cults, the remedy to satanic energies tends to be religion. In *Midsommar*, the cult organization is focused more on psychedelics, purging and cleansing- nothing related to satan or devil worshiping is portrayed. However, anyone who pointed out flaws or labeled the traditions related to death as unacceptable were killed by members of the commune in aggressive, unique and disturbing ways. In *The Seventh Victim*, the satanic cult is a network amongst a large gathering of individuals- the logo of the salon is connected to the symbol of the satanic cult. During a cult gathering, two men come in and share a verse from the bible that many, even individuals who do not associate to the church, tend to know, the Lord's Prayer: "...do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The man who shares this verse is considered high ranking in the cult, which represents religion being used to heal satanic worshiping.

Although *Midsommar* is considered a folk horror film and not film noir, the connection between the use of death, cult organizations, and strong independent female protagonists created an opportunity for me to bridge the gap between film noir and horror using characteristics of both. *The Seventh Victim* is a 1943 American horror film noir capturing a search for a suicidal sister tangled up with a local satanic cult. *Midsommar* is a 2019 folk horror film entangling a woman mourning the loss of her family via suicide/homicide with a Swedish commune celebrating annual traditions and customs. Both films highlight strong, independent female protagonists, even though the films were made decades apart. Both protagonists share similar character traits to Mildred Pierce, another protagonist from one of the films we watched

this semester. Death is highlighted in many different ways in each film. In *The Seventh Victim*, death is used as a tool for power and control, as well as used as a punishment within the cult organization. In *Midsommar*, death is used to represent tragedy, celebration of life, purging, punishment, and tradition. Both films utilize the idea of cults having power and tradition in which its members uphold. Film noir recognizes suspense in crime fiction, and I believe that even though one of these films is labeled as noir and one is not, they both encourage the suspense, crime, and drama we consistently see in film noir.