

Performance In Reflecting Nuances Of Character Arc

Florence Pugh, although not formally trained, is an award-winning young British actress who skyrocketed to fame in 2019. In *Midsommar* (2019), Pugh employs a method acting style by internally visualizing scenarios and letting her emotions naturally flow outward in expression. Her performance in the film is further characterized by facial expressions, posture, and sounds or silence primarily conveying her emotions more so than explicit verbal dialogue, which in the film, maintains a behind the beat rhythm to evoke suspense. Specifically, in the closing scene of the film, a close-up shot of Pugh focuses on her face in silence, showcasing her performance in that moment as a twisted kind of bliss, a far and unsettling thematic deviation from the distress and despondency she displayed throughout the film prior. Pugh's performance in this climax of catharsis poses a direct contrast to the beginning scene of her loud sobbing and wailing over her family's deaths before the title card. Upon closer inspection into her unique method acting style, Pugh's performance dichotomy between the two scenes exemplifies the arc of emotional healing, albeit abnormal, that her character Dani undergoes over the course of the folk horror movie.

At the foundation of Pugh's performance in *Midsommar* is her method acting style that brings the emotional authenticity and believability she conveys throughout the film. In an interview with *Deadline*, Pugh stated that she "imagined every single member of [her] family in a coffin" to get herself in the right depressive headspace for filming the movie (D'Alessandro). This process of building emotions from the inside out that Pugh

employs is clearly characteristic of method acting, though she is not professionally trained.

In the first scene of close inspection, Pugh likewise performs the film's final shot and climax of catharsis with method acting. During an Actors on Actors interview with *Variety*, she described her performance in that scene as trying to feel all the emotions of "happy, free, unhappy, depressed, screaming, crying, vomiting, bliss, orgasmic" (Aurthur). The natural outward flow of all these diverse internal emotions makes her performance that much more nuanced. Pugh justifies her use of method acting as opposed to representational acting because in her words regarding her performance as Dani, "it couldn't just be faked, it couldn't be imagined, it couldn't be something that you thought that's how they would feel" (D'Alessandro). Notably, she significantly altered her mental state while shooting the film to match her performance, willingly taking a psychological toll on herself to do so. As such, Pugh's method acting performance runs deep into the complexities of her character to service the film, as analysis of the following two scenes will prove.

Pugh's character Dani rarely smiles in the movie, and when she does, they are broken and artificial smiles. In contrast, during the closing scene of the film, Pugh's face slowly and organically forms a full joyful grin. Her eyes are set straight ahead and unwavering. She remains completely silent. Her physical body sits rigidly still in posture. She appears frozen eerily in focus on the burning sacrifices, a subtle reaction uncharacteristic of a normal person and dissimilar to her behavior throughout the film prior. Her face implicitly communicates both euphoric mania and quiet satisfaction in

seeing her boyfriend and travel companions go up in flames, a strange subversion of the overreaction that is to be expected. The toned-down subtleties of Pugh's performance in this scene along with no other distractions in the shot privilege the audience with an intimate look at her character Dani and only Dani. Additionally, the uncluttered close-up shot provokes acute attention to Pugh's twisted and psychotic facial expression. The visual component of her physicality and performance are at the forefront, whereas the audible aspect is dramatically minimized.

Thematically speaking, her performance in this scene reveals the final destination of the unsettling and irreversible transformation her character has now finished. Like the sacrificial temple, Dani's psychological bridge to sane reality is incinerated. Furthermore, she is liberated from the dependency on and relationship to her boyfriend, emotionally healed from the vengeful bloodthirst of choosing him to be the sacrifice. Dani is now at a point of no possible return to who she was before. Who she was before is portrayed quintessentially by Pugh in the opening scene before the title card. Pugh's performance in that opening scene draws an immediate and apparent contrast to the muted bliss of the final scene, being in fact the complete antithesis of it.

Pugh's distress and despondency she displays for her character Dani throughout most of the film can be microcosmically assessed in the opening scene before the title card. In this scene, Pugh is being extremely loud, uncomfortably loud relative to the normal volume of the film. She is sobbing uncontrollably and wailing unintelligibly over the loss of her family. Her physical body is bent over weakly and sinking into the lap of her boyfriend. From her curled up withdrawn posture, she seems to be drowned in the

inner world of her raging emotions. In the low-key lighting, only Pugh's silhouette is clearly visible in a continuously zooming in shot. Her face is turned away and the audience cannot see her tears but knows they are there. Thus, this draws more focus instead to her subtle bodily shaking and continuous wail. Pugh's wail is uninterrupted and nonverbal, a primal and raw outpour of emotion and loss. Moreover, the high pitch intonation of the wail and the lack of any pause in it contribute to the mental shattering Pugh conveys in her performance. The audible aspect of her physicality and performance are at the forefront, whereas the visual component is significantly less emphasized.

Thematically speaking, her performance in this scene is representative of the starting point of her character's emotional arc from devastatingly broken to sadistically healed. She is still dependent on her boyfriend, clinging to him like a crutch both physically and mentally. This all changes by the end of the film as she grows into her new May Queen self. In comparing this opening scene and the closing scene analyzed before, the distinctions between Pugh's performances in them are indicative of Dani's extreme psychological journey and complex character arc through the film.

One external but relevant performance detail worth noting is the mythology Pugh brings to the movie as an actress. At the time of the film's release, Pugh was not a huge star and still relatively unknown to the public. The choice to cast her in *Midsommar* accentuates the notion that her character arc through the movie can happen to any normal person like her and her character Dani. Pugh did not come into her performance bringing any previous big roles, news, or gossip about herself that often run in the tabloids and popular press. This type of baggage would have weighed down the film's creepy reality

imposed on the normal people it uses as characters. In essence, Pugh serves an ordinary, everyday person role for the audience to slip themselves into and experience the events of the movie with heightened immersion.

Pugh's mythology grounds the folk horror movie at least somewhat in reality, such that her performance from the beginning to the end of the film can better convey feelings of authenticity and relatability to the average viewer. In holistic evaluation of Pugh's performance, the contrasts between the opening and closing scenes that were analyzed exemplify her character Dani's untraditional story arc of emotional healing. The audience can easily detect apparent shifts in Pugh's performance from audible to visual emphasis, from her face turning away to later facing straight ahead, and from loud broken despair to quiet twisted bliss. The nuances in Pugh's performance prove that she is indeed right for this volatile part.

Works Cited

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