

Toxic Relationships in Midsommar: A Literary Analysis of Psychological Needs

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ABSTRACT

Toxic relationships, characterized by recurring patterns of manipulation and unmet emotional needs, form the central conflict in Ari Aster's film, *Midsommar* (2019). This research aims to analyze the relational dynamics between Dani and Christian in *Midsommar* (2019), focusing on how these interactions form a toxic relationship. Using Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs this study examined how unmet psychological needs such as safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization affect their behaviour. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research examined key dialogues and interactions in the film to identify patterns of emotional dependency, avoidance, and manipulation. The findings indicated that Dani's reliance on Christian for emotional security contrasted with her growing detachment, leading to an imbalance that hindered both partners' psychological growth. This study demonstrated the applicability of Maslow's theory in understanding relational instability, underlining how fictional narratives can mirror real life relational struggles, offering insights into the destructive patterns that arise when fundamental needs are neglected.

Keywords: *Relational Dynamics, Toxic Relationship, Psychological Needs, Midsommar*

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INTRODUCTION

Literary and cinematic narratives serve as powerful mirrors reflecting the complexities of the human condition, particularly our psychological needs and relational struggles. Through the close examination of character motivations, conflicts, and outcomes, these narratives offer profound insights into universal human experiences such as the search for security, belonging, and self-worth. The field of literary psychology confirms that fiction provides a valuable framework for understanding human behavior and emotional processes. This interdisciplinary lens is essential for exploring dysfunctional dynamics, where the failure to meet fundamental psychological needs leads directly to conflict and the deterioration of well-being.

One pervasive form of relational struggle frequently explored in modern narratives is the toxic relationship. These are characterized by recurring patterns of manipulation, neglect, and emotional abuse, which deeply affect the mental and emotional well-being of those involved. The term 'toxic' refers to relationships in which one partner consistently fails to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the other, leading to long-term consequences for the affected partner's mental health. Prolonged exposure to toxic dynamics can exacerbate stress and increase the risk of depression, as noted in studies on unhealthy relationships (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). These harmful effects, though often depicted in fiction, also resonate in real life, as individuals recognize similar toxic patterns in their own relationships and experiences (Johnson, 2006).

To understand how these patterns emerge and persist, it is essential to examine relational dynamics, which refer to the recurring patterns of interaction between partners. These dynamics may be either positive or negative. In the context of toxic relationship, relational dynamics tend to become dysfunctional, perpetuating cycles of emotional control,

dependency, and unmet psychological needs that undermine relational stability and individual well-being. A compelling example of toxic relational dynamics is portrayed in *Midsommar* (2019), a psychological horror film by Ari Aster.

The film centers on Dani Ardor and Christian Hughes, whose deteriorating relationship vividly illustrates how emotional neglect and manipulation can destabilize a person's mental and emotional well-being. Dani, a 24-year-old woman, is devastated after the tragic loss of her family in a murder-suicide carried out by her sister, who had bipolar disorder. Seeking comfort, she turns to her 24-year-old boyfriend, Christian, who becomes increasingly passive and emotionally detached. Instead of supporting Dani during her most vulnerable moments, Christian remains detached, exacerbating her grief and intensifying their relational dysfunction.

This emotional imbalance is further strained when Dani and Christian travel to Sweden with their friends Mark, Pelle, and Josh. Invited by Pelle, they visit a secluded commune to attend its Midsummer festival, which soon takes a dark and disturbing turn. As the group becomes more entangled in the commune's unsettling rituals, the toxic dynamics between Dani and Christian escalate, exposing patterns of avoidance, passive aggression, and emotional detachment. Dani, who longs for connection, feels increasingly alienated by Christian's lack of empathy, further intensifying her dependence on him (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Although the film ends with Dani seemingly liberated from Christian's influence, *Midsommar* (2019) highlights the long-term consequences of emotional neglect and manipulation on both individuals. Christian's inability to meet Dani's psychological needs and his own failure to address his esteem and self-actualization needs highlight the cyclical nature of toxic relationships. These dynamics not only erode mutual support but also hinder individual growth, leaving both parties trapped in dysfunction.

To better understand the dynamics between Dani and Christian, we can apply Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), which emphasizes the importance of fulfilling psychological needs in maintaining a healthy relationship. Maslow identifies five fundamental needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). This research focused on four key psychological needs—safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization due to their relevance in Dani and Christian's relationship. Physiological needs, such as food and shelter, were presumed to have been met in the film and were thus excluded from the analysis. Maslow's framework offered valuable insight into the relational struggles between Dani and Christian. Dani's safety needs are compromised due to emotional neglect, which inhibits her sense of security within the relationship. Her desire for emotional stability remains unmet, deepening her distress. Similarly, her need for love and belonging remains unfulfilled, as Christian fails to provide emotional validation and intimacy, which leads to further isolation and an imbalance in their relationship.

On the other hand, Christian struggles to meet his esteem needs. His passive behavior and avoidance of emotional responsibility reflect his lack of self-worth, which prevents him from effectively managing relational conflicts. His failure to emotionally engage with Dani also obstructs his path toward self-actualization, as he remains stagnant in an unfulfilling relationship rather than evolving into a more emotionally competent partner. By applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this study examined how unmet psychological needs triggered relational dysfunction, emotional control, and dependency. This framework underscored how the lack of fulfillment of fundamental psychological needs prevented both Dani and Christian from achieving personal growth and mutual support, ultimately resulting in a toxic and unbalanced relationship.

Previous studies on *Midsommar* (2019) primarily focused on its thematic and symbolic elements rather than its interpersonal dynamics. Adinda, Priyoto, and Isminarni (2024) examined Dani Ardor's trauma and her struggle to reintegrate into society. However, their study did not analyze how her psychological burdens manifested in her relationship with Christian. Similarly, McManus (2024) explored the sonic representation of trauma in *Midsommar* (2019), discussing how sound design conveyed emotional distress but did not

address its role in interpersonal relationships. In a similar, Spadoni (2020) applied Thing Theory to examine material symbolism in the film, emphasizing the unsettling presence of objects rather than exploring the complexities of human connection. Likewise, Lambert (2023) investigated feminist themes in *Midsommar* (2019), particularly Dani's transformation, but did not explore how her psychological struggles shaped her toxic relationship with Christian.

Beyond *Midsommar* (2019), research on psychological distress in literature has also been conducted. Rohmatin (2024) analyzed emotional wounds in literary works using a psychological counseling approach, offering insights into psychological distress but without applying them to toxic relationship dynamics in film. Similarly, Agustina (2016) examined psychological conflicts in the novel *Air Mata Tuhan*, focusing on the protagonist's internal struggles. However, her study did not address toxic relationships or apply Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a framework. While these studies provide valuable insights into *Midsommar* (2019) and psychological struggles in literary and cinematic works, they do not comprehensively examine the psychological mechanisms that define Dani and Christian's toxic relationship particularly how their unmet emotional needs contribute to their relational dysfunction.

This study bridged that gap by applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) to analyze how unfulfilled psychological needs such as safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization contribute to the deterioration of Dani and Christian's relationship. Unlike previous research that focused on trauma and symbolic elements, this study specifically examined how their relational dysfunction was shaped by emotional neglect, dependency, and power imbalances. By identifying the unmet needs that drove their toxic behaviors, this research provided a deeper psychological understanding of their relationship, offering an alternative perspective to existing thematic discussions on *Midsommar* (2019).

Understanding these unmet needs not only shed light on their toxic behaviors but also revealed the deeper psychological mechanisms at play in their relationship. Given these gaps, this study aimed to analyze how Dani and Christian's relationship in *Midsommar* (2019) manifested the characteristics of a toxic relationship, particularly through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. By examining their interactions, dialogues, and behaviors, this research explored how unfulfilled psychological needs such as safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization contributed to the deterioration of their relationship. Through this analysis, the research sought to deepen our understanding of how psychological distress and relational dysfunction were intertwined, not only affecting the individuals involved but also shaping the dynamics of their toxic relationship.

METHOD

To explore the dynamics of toxic relationships in *Midsommar* (2019), this study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze Dani and Christian's interactions. As (Taylor et al., 2016) explained, qualitative research generated descriptive data from written and spoken words as well as observable behaviors, focusing on holistic settings and individual experiences. This method was particularly effective in examining psychological complexities, as it allowed for a deeper understanding of how unmet emotional needs contributed to relational dysfunction (Abdussamad, 2021).

The primary data for this study consisted of dialogue excerpts (Textual Data) selected from key scenes in *Midsommar* (2019). This analysis was supported by visual and cinematic context (Cinematic Data), which was used primarily to establish the contextual framework, understand non-verbal cues, and validate the emotional atmosphere surrounding the dialogue exchanges. These scenes were selected based on their relevance to the four psychological needs outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943): safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Christian's neglect of Dani's emotional needs, both in dialogue and in moments of silence, served as the basis for understanding the film's portrayal of toxic relationship patterns. The analysis categorized key interactions based on how they reflected each level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Each scene was examined based on its dialogue excerpts, visual

representation for context, and corresponding psychological implications. By structuring the analysis in this manner, this study systematically examined Dani and Christian's relationship through the lens of unmet psychological needs, highlighting recurring themes of emotional neglect, dependency, and relational instability.

Through this analysis, the study demonstrated how manipulative behaviors and emotional neglect disrupted essential psychological needs, such as love and belonging, ultimately hindering individual growth and relational stability. By applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this study provided a structured framework for analyzing the impact of toxic relationships in cinematic narratives, offering new insights into their psychological implications.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In exploring the toxic relationship dynamics between Dani and Christian in *Midsommar* (2019), this section analyzes key scenes that highlight the emotional dysfunction and psychological damage resulting from their unfulfilled needs. Framed by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, these scenes offer insight into the destructive and manipulative behaviors within their relationship, illustrating how both Dani and Christian contribute equally to their mutual emotional breakdown through patterns of neglect, avoidance, and codependency.

The Compromised Safety Needs:

Safety needs constitute the second level of Maslow's Hierarchy, encompassing stability, protection, and emotional security. This fundamental need is the first to be severely compromised in the relationship due to Christian's emotional neglect, while Dani concurrently fails to build internal safety.



Figure 1. The start of Christian and Dani's relationship
(4:10 - 5:14)

This scene takes place at the beginning of the film, when Dani is feeling anxious because she cannot reach her sister. She repeatedly calls her boyfriend, Christian, but receives no response. Meanwhile, Christian is out with his friends. At home, Dani appears visibly distressed and tries to calm herself down.

Dialog 1:

Christian : *"She does this every other day, Dani. And only because you let her."*

Dani : *"Well, I don't LET her. She's bipolar."*

Christian : *"I know, but you do, though, babes. You go straight to crisis mode."*

Dani's worry escalates as she is unable to contact her sister, leading her to seek emotional reassurance from Christian in an effort to satisfy her Safety Needs. Rather than offering comfort, Christian responds dismissively, remarking, *"You go straight to crisis mode,"* which invalidates her feelings and erodes her emotional security. Dani, in turn, becomes vulnerable by relying solely on Christian for emotional safety, indicating a failure to build internal stability post-trauma. These unmet needs gradually contribute to a pattern of relational dysfunction, wherein Dani becomes increasingly dependent on Christian's approval while he persistently withdraws. Their inability to communicate effectively sustains a cycle of emotional neglect, stalling emotional progress for both individuals within the relationship.

The Failure of Love and Belonging Needs:

Love and Belonging needs are consistently neglected by Christian through emotional detachment. Christian's failure to provide validation and intimacy causes Dani to feel increasingly isolated and overly dependent on him. Consequently, the emotional gap widens, forcing Dani to constantly seek external validation instead of relying on her partner.



Figure 2. Christian's Avoidance (7:14 - 8:27)



Figure 3. Dani's anxiety call (6:12 - 8:22)

Following the initial crisis figure 1, the relational imbalance becomes immediately apparent. Dani, still grappling with her anxiety, seeks comfort from outside the relationship, as shown in figure 2. Dani on Call, where she is visibly distressed while questioning her dependency on Christian. Concurrently, figure 3. Christian's Avoidance captures Christian in the presence of his friends, displaying complete emotional detachment. While Dani struggles with her emotional needs, Christian ignores her call and allows his friends to mock and belittle her, highlighting his failure to provide emotional support and signaling that he prioritizes external influence over his partner's well-being. As Christian avoids the call and listens to his friends' mockery, their dialogue focuses on avoiding accountability.

Dialog 2:

Josh : *"Do you think a masochistic part of you might be playing out this drama to distract you from the work you actually need to be doing?"*

Christian : *"And what work do I actually need to do, Josh?"*

Josh : *"Your prospectus maybe? Your PhD...?"*

Christian's phone rings. He checks. It's Dani. He deflates.

Mark : *"That's not her again? Seriously?"*

Mark : *"Oh my god. She needs a therapist, dude."*

Christian's passive avoidance, however, is the antithesis of Dani's emotional turmoil. While Christian retreats, Dani internalizes the relational dysfunction, fearing that her valid needs will only push her partner further away. Simultaneously, in her apartment, Dani expresses her fears to a friend.

Dialog 3:

Dani : *"Well - what if I scared him? I'm always roping him into my family crap...*

I'm always leaning on him! I even called him today in tears because my sister sent another scary email. What if I'm scaring him off?"

Dani : *"But what if I need him too often? If it becomes a chore?"*

The failure to meet Love and Belonging Needs is powerfully demonstrated through Christian's emotional withdrawal Figure 3 and Dani's subsequent coping mechanism Figure 2. In Figure 3. Christian's Avoidance, Christian confirms this failure by passively accepting his friends' mockery *"She needs a therapist, dude"* which reinforces Dani's feelings of rejection and

invalidates her emotional reality. His visible deflation and refusal to take the call signal detachment at a time when Dani most craves reassurance.

This detachment forces Dani into a dangerous coping cycle, shown in Figure 2. Dani on Call. Her anxious questions, such as *"What if I'm scaring him off?"* and *"If it becomes a chore?"*, reveal that she internalizes Christian's neglect as a flaw in herself, rather than a gap in their relationship, thereby creating a pattern of relational dysfunction. Her reliance on a friend instead of her partner signals an unmet longing for emotional intimacy and connection. Furthermore, Christian's persistent avoidance suggests a deeper struggle. His refusal to engage with emotional expectations is an avoidance tactic that indicates a struggle with Esteem Needs and a broader evasion of personal growth. This distance simultaneously reveals stagnation in his Self-Actualization Needs, hinted at by Josh's question about his PhD.

The Blocked Esteem Needs:

The failure to achieve Esteem (self-respect, self-worth, and responsibility) afflicts both characters. Christian's conflict-avoidant behavior stems from his own lack of internal self-worth, while Dani erodes her own esteem through the internalization of guilt.



Figure 4. Dani Confronts Christian's Silence
(15:58 - 19:33)

In this scene, Dani confronts Christian about his sudden decision to go to Sweden without informing her. She cautiously expresses her frustration, while Christian, instead of acknowledging her concerns, downplays the situation and becomes defensive. His initial response suggests that he was not intentionally hiding the trip, yet his dismissiveness indicates a pattern of avoiding emotional responsibility. As the conversation escalates, Christian shifts the focus away from his lack of communication by framing the trip as a *"surprise"* for Dani, it becomes clear that including Dani was never his original intention. Rather than addressing the real issue of his failure to communicate, Christian attempts to deflect accountability, making Dani feel unreasonable for being upset.

Dialog 4:

Christian : *"Well - what do you mean? I told you I wanted to go."*

Dani : *"Okay, fine, but I didn't know you were going."*

Christian : *"Well, I just decided today. I wasn't keeping it from you."*

Dani : *"You told me it would be 'cool to go."*

Christian : *"Yeah! And then I got the opportunity to go and I decided to do it."*

Dani : *"I have no problem with you going! I just wish you'd think to tell me!"*

Christian : *"Well, I just apologized, Dani."*

Dani : *"You didn't apologize, you said 'sorry.' Which sounds more like 'too bad."*

Christian : *"Maybe I should just go home."*

Dani : *"I'm not trying to attack you."*

Christian : *"Well, it feels like that."*

Dani : *"I get paranoid. I'm sorry. I'm going through all this stuff and I've been dealing with all this panic and I just - overreacted. I'm not trying to put pressure or accuse you of anything. I just got crazy for a second. I didn't mean to project"*

Christian's failure to meet his Esteem Needs is evident in his defensive posture and deflection of responsibility *"Well, I just apologized, Dani,"* and the threat, *"Maybe I should just go home"*. This conflict-avoidant behavior demonstrates a lack of self-assurance and discomfort with genuine accountability, which are clear indications of Christian's failure to fulfill his own

psychological needs. Christian's claim, "Well, you ruined the surprise," further illustrates how superficial gestures replace authentic emotional engagement as a means of conflict avoidance.

This pattern directly erodes Dani's Esteem. Christian's reluctance to engage in meaningful dialogue leaves her feeling emotionally insecure, which feeds into the deterioration of her Safety Needs. Crucially, Dani resorts to self-blame, stating, *"I just got crazy for a second. I didn't mean to project,"* which is a form of internalized self-neglect. This reaction highlights Dani's eroding self-worth and escalates her emotional dependency on Christian, continuously reinforcing the relational imbalance between them.

Obstruction of Self-Actualization:

Christian's failure to meet his Esteem Needs directly obstructs his Self-Actualization (the realization of one's full potential). Christian actively avoids opportunities for emotional and personal evolution, choosing stagnation and emotional withdrawal, which ultimately causes both individuals to remain trapped in an unfulfilling relational pattern.



Figure 5. Dani's Emotional Plea vs Christian's Emotional Neglect
(1:28:59 - 1:32:29)

This scene takes place at night in a quiet area of the commune, away from the ongoing festivities. Dani, overwhelmed by the emotional strain of their relationship, confronts Christian about her growing discomfort and her desire to leave. The dim lighting and isolated setting mirror the deepening rift between them, emphasizing Dani's distress and Christian's emotional detachment. As Dani pleads for reassurance, Christian remains dismissive, prioritizing his academic research over their relationship. His defensive and indifferent responses escalate the tension, making Dani increasingly aware of the imbalance in their dynamic. This moment serves as a turning point, highlighting the culmination of emotional neglect and reinforcing Dani's realization that she can no longer depend on Christian for support.

Dialog 5:

- Dani : *"I don't want to acclimate! I want to leave."*
 Christian : *"Baby, I cannot leave right now. Period. I'm doing my thesis on these guys."*
 Dani : *"Do you not love me anymore?"*
 Christian : *"What does that have to do with this?"*
 Dani : *"This is the devaluation phase. We've been in it for a long time now. Next comes the discard."*
 Christian : *"Oh fuck - can we maybe spare our relationship your textbook psychology keywords?"*
 Christian : *"When you casually give me a bouquet of flowers, all I wonder is how and when I'm supposed to pay that back."*
 Dani : *"I grabbed those on a whim!"*
 Christian : *"You selflessly give me flowers and I feel trapped. Fuck. I'm supposed to be WORKING here!"*
 Dani : *"You're just gonna leave me like this?!"*

The core of Christian's failure to achieve Self-Actualization lies in his refusal to accept emotional responsibility and growth. This is powerfully demonstrated in Figure 5, where he explicitly sacrifices the well-being of his partner and by extension, the health of the relationship by prioritizing his academic goal *"Baby, I cannot leave right now. Period. I'm doing my thesis on these guys."* This statement is not just about choosing work; it signifies his inability

to evolve beyond his self-centered needs and enter the mature stage of a relationship that demands sacrifice and empathy.

His defensive language reveals his aversion to intimacy and emotional depth. Christian views Dani's simple act of affection – giving him flowers – not as love, but as an obligation or a trap *"I feel trapped. Fuck. I'm supposed to be WORKING here!"*. This indicates that Christian is unable to perceive love and generosity without associating it with pressure and performance. This emotional immaturity highlights a profound failure in the Self-Actualization process, where he remains stunted, confusing vulnerability with control and intimacy with suffocation. Furthermore, Christian's dismissal of Dani's vulnerability *"Can we maybe spare our relationship your textbook psychology keywords?"* is a tactic to avoid deep engagement, further blocking any path toward honest communication, which is crucial for relational and personal growth. This stagnation is not spontaneous; it is a long-standing pattern hinted at earlier in Figure 3 (Christian's Avoidance). In that scene, Josh pointedly questions if Christian is using relationship drama to evade his academic duties (PhD). Christian's subsequent failure to complete his work, coupled with his desperate clinging to the thesis project in Figure 6, confirms that he is trapped in a loop of avoidance. He is sacrificing personal growth and emotional maturity – the true markers of Self-Actualization – for a superficial academic achievement.

Christian's inability to navigate conflict and accept emotional depth signals a fundamental refusal to evolve. Because Christian remains fixed in this state of avoidance, Dani is also trapped. She continues to plead for a connection *"You're just gonna leave me like this?!"*, forever dependent on a partner who cannot grow. Thus, Christian's obstruction of his own Self-Actualization simultaneously acts as a fatal inhibitor to Dani's potential for healing and independence, cementing the cycle of their toxic, stagnant relationship. Neither partner is able to break the unhealthy dynamic. Dani becomes increasingly dependent on reassurance, while Christian avoids vulnerability altogether. Their opposing coping mechanisms trap them in a relationship that consistently fails to meet their psychological needs. To illustrate how these psychological needs unfold across different moments, the following table summarizes which aspects of Maslow's Hierarchy are most clearly reflected in each scene.

Table 1. The result of a psychological analysis in each dialogue

Key dialog per scene	Love and Belonging Needs	Safety Needs	Esteem Needs	Self-Actualization Needs
Dialogue 1		✓		
Dialogue 2	✓			
Dialogue 3	✓			
Dialogue 4			✓	
Dialogue 5				✓

As shown in the table, the repeated patterns of unmet psychological needs contribute to the deterioration of Dani and Christian's relationship. These patterns not only highlight individual psychological distress but also reveal the broader dynamics of toxic relationships. The following conclusion reflects on the implications of these findings. The following conclusion reflects on the implications of these findings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm that unmet psychological needs, particularly those outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, can fracture a relationship from within, as devastatingly illustrated in *Midsommar* (2019). This research has shown that Dani and Christian's relationship deteriorates due to recurring patterns of emotional neglect and avoidance, where their unmet needs for safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization create a cycle of dysfunction, trapping both in emotional stagnation. Specifically, Christian's failures to meet his own Esteem and Self-Actualization Needs directly obstructed Dani's ability to fulfill her fundamental needs, ultimately leading to psychological collapse. This analysis contributes significantly to understanding psychological realism in cinematic narratives by establishing a structured framework for diagnosing complex relational problems

on screen, validating the use of psychological theory to dissect narrative motivation and character arcs. On a practical level, the narrative offers critical lessons regarding emotional dependency and self-worth for audiences: Dani's journey highlights the danger of sacrificing one's Esteem Needs by internalizing a partner's neglect, while Christian's conflict-avoidant behavior confirms that a lack of personal growth inevitably compromises the stability and health of any intimate relationship. Ultimately, the film suggests that genuine emotional security must be developed internally before it can be successfully sought or sustained within a partnership.

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