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The Female Paradoxical Search for Control and Empowerment as Depicted in Darren Aronofsky’s Psychological Thriller *Black Swan*
Abstract

This research paper was conducted in order to analyze Darren Aronofsky’s film *Black Swan* and to determine the film’s correlation to and representation of the modern female struggle for empowerment and search for identity. This topic was chosen due to a personal interest in the positive and negative effects of the modern societal exploitation of women in various industries. *Black Swan*’s focus on the ballet industry’s mistreatment of women and its emphasis on the psychological effects of such abuse is what drew the focus of the topic at hand. Research of the topic included watching the film *Black Swan* several times in order to fully comprehend its intended meaning and also studying the ballet *Swan Lake* through books and different videos of the ballet in order to grasp the complete story of *Swan Lake* as addressed in the film. Further research included conducting various online and book searches of information on the effects of the pressures and demands of the modern ballet and modeling industries on women. The research mainly focused on the industries’ impact on the female search for identity, control, and empowerment in modern society. The complete analysis of the film and various research findings concluded that through its innovative use of a mentally deteriorating ballerina, *Black Swan* dramatically portrayed the negative effects of the pressure that the modern ballet industry places on women. The film also accurately depicted the universal struggle that women experience in their search for the role, body image, and identity that is appropriate for them in today’s society. Through its excellent mastery of cinematography and symbolic imagery, *Black Swan* accurately portrayed the dangers of the burgeoning demand for female perfection in modern culture.
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Introduction

The classical ballet Swan Lake is an archetypal story relying on traditional themes of beauty, evil, betrayal, and the sacrifices one makes for true love. The film Black Swan twists these traditional themes into the modern theme of struggling for empowerment and defining oneself through its portrayal of a young, schizophrenic ballerina experiencing all of these emotions while on a self-sacrificial journey towards her own love which is not a man, but perfection itself.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake is a ballet that addresses not only the themes of sacrifice and betrayal, but that also touches on the powerful role desire plays in the lives of all human beings. As the director of the contemporary film Black Swan, Darren Aronofsky, recognized these dominant themes; he decided to develop a story that would play off of the ideas of Swan Lake in a bolder and more stimulating way. Aronofsky’s film was not only created to intensify Swan Lake’s themes of sacrifice, desire, and betrayal in a more direct manner, but to also address the burdening struggle for power and perfection experienced by the modern woman. The theme of sacrifice for love in Swan Lake is represented in Black Swan in the form of an intense desire for perfection and the ultimate sacrifice of one’s own self in order to achieve the outcome. A sacrifice such as this represented in a modern female serves to develop the ideas of the pressure they’re under and the struggle for self-actualization and individualization that modern women constantly battle. Thus, in Darren Aronofsky’s film Black Swan, the [protagonist’s] experience symbolizes and encompasses the modern archetypal female’s journey to break from parental and societal constraints. Her struggling
journey is reflected and developed through various uses of swan feather and mirror motifs, multiple female foils, and black and white imagery.
Parallel Themes

*Swan Lake*’s story is a sad melancholy tale of love, trickery, and loss in which a prince falls in love with the evil black swan twin of a princess cast under a spell that forbids her to be human until she earns the love of a prince (Barnes 3). When the young prince finally realizes his mistake, he decides that he would rather die than be without his true love, and thus the white swan princess and the prince drown together in *Swan Lake* (The Royal Ballet Covent Garden Swan Lake).

In *Swan Lake*, it is the intense desire that the prince holds for the [white swan] that ultimately causes his death. His unhindered love for her causes a powerful desire for which he is willing to sacrifice his own life if it means that death is the only way to be with the princess (Balanchine and Mason 586). Similarly, in *Black Swan*, desire becomes the force that ultimately consumes and destroys the modern woman, signified in the protagonist Nina. In both the film and the actual ballet, desire develops in correlation with violence. In *Black Swan*, Nina’s desire to master both the role of the white swan and the black swan drives her to such extreme defiance from her childlike existence that she soon resorts to violence towards herself, her mother who is herself a kind of foil for Nina, and her black swan counterpart. As the movie progresses Nina grows violent towards her mother by physically fighting her when her mother attempts to contain Nina in her room, away from the ballet world. Also, throughout the film Nina increasingly scratches herself and peels off layers of skin, which represents her black swan counterpart emerging into her mind and driving Nina to the point of insanity. Nina’s unhealthy yearning for perfection in her portrayal of the Swan Queen not only represents the universal human sacrifice for love, whether it be for another person or for self perfection, but it also represents the female struggle for empowerment and perfection in
society. Nina’s battle with herself and the effects of her overreaching desire for perfection symbolizes the collective female battle against the warped womanly image of today’s world. It is this image that drives so many women to the breaking point of their minds, whether it is represented in dangerous eating disorders or in the fictional mind of a schizophrenic ballerina (Cohen 85-90). Throughout the film, the development of the theme of desire leading to violence is a dominant topic not only introduced in Swan Lake, but is also a theme that touches on the topic of the actual struggle for perfection modern societal women are battling (Tagore, “‘Black Swan’: Feminism and Desire”). Nina’s desire for perfection begins to overwhelm her and becomes the core reason for the deterioration of her mental state. Nina becomes paranoid as soon as she is given the role of Swan Queen, hallucinating instances of ridicule and imagining fellow dancers are out to steal her role. As her obsession with perfecting the role of Swan Queen intensifies, Nina begins to confuse her mental deliriums with reality, which ultimately causes her to forget her own identity altogether. Her progressively unstable mental state serves to represent the unbalanced psyche of every contemporary woman struggling with the demands of growing out of childhood and developing into the perfect image that society advertises they should be.
Motifs

The film *Black Swan* contains multiple motifs that help to develop the theme of internal struggle in Nina’s transformation into the black swan. As Nina’s director, Thomas, states to Nina, “I knew the white swan wouldn’t be a problem. The real work would be your metamorphosis into her evil twin” (*Black Swan*). The most obvious of the motifs representing Nina’s transformation is the reoccurring growth of black feathers from Nina’s body. In the film, the sharp black feathers that continue to protrude from her body represent Nina’s metamorphosis into the black swan. As one online film critic pointed out, Nina in fact “hallucinates all kinds of strange mutations on her body which represent the gradual coming out of the black swan in her” (“The Occult Interpretation”, June 15 2011). As Nina’s growth into the black swan progresses, her mental sanity is threatened when she becomes so obsessed with perfecting the role that she imagines another dancer, Lily, trying to steal it.

As Nina’s paranoia over her role being stolen increases, mirror motifs begin to develop throughout Nina’s every day routine. Nina becomes paranoid as soon as she is given the role of Swan Queen, which becomes apparent when she is overjoyed on the phone in a bathroom telling her mother that she has received the part and then is horrified to find the word “whore” written on the mirror. Nina perceives the message was written for her and that she is being accused of not being deserving of the role due to her recent kiss with the director—which was Thomas’s first attempt to bring out the black swan in Nina. Despite Nina’s guilt at first, she begins to rehearse for the ballet and starts to see a darker and more sinister version of herself reflected in the mirror that she dances in front of.

There is also a scene that contains Nina brushing her hair and looking into a mirror in which there is one main image of her reflecting back along with multiple smaller images of
her face reflected around the main frame. This motif symbolizes the developing process of Nina’s psychological breakdown as she is beginning to mentally separate into a darker form. According to one reviewer, multiple mirror images can serve to represent a character’s alter-persona that is “programmed and manipulated by a handler” when dealing with mind-control symbolism (“The Occult Interpretation”. June 15 2011). Nina’s mind-controlled state is mostly due to her overbearing, constraining mother and her sensuous and demanding director, Thomas. The mother’s controlling behavior towards Nina is seen in her possessiveness with Nina’s dancing and in the childlike manner that Nina is raised even as an adult. The separation of personality begins, however, when Thomas attempts to bring out the seductress in Nina by seducing her himself, an experience that Nina has never encountered and has difficulty embracing. As Nina’s inner self becomes increasingly conflicted between the submissive ballerina that her mother has programmed her to be and the provocative dancer that Thomas is trying to bring out in her, her psyche begins to split. The separation between her innocent, virginal white swan persona and her seductress black swan persona is what Nina witnesses when she sees another version of herself reflected in mirrors.

Finally, the motif of Nina gaining and losing several of her possessions symbolizes her increasing rebellion against her mother’s oppression along with her attempt at procuring perfection in this ideal role. In the beginning of the film, after Nina is told she is to play the role of Swan Queen, she secretly acquires several of the possessions of Beth Macintyre, who is the most recent ballet Swan Queen that has just been let go and replaced by Nina. This act signifies Nina’s desire to live up to the demanding role of Swan Queen and demonstrates her insecurity with her own self in such a role. Her subtle worship of Beth’s items also shows her childlike tendencies to strive to be like those whom she both admires and envies. However,
Nina's action makes it apparent that she is trying to break from her childlikeness and enter the world of perfection coupled with seductiveness and self-pleasing desires. These desires are soon observed later in the film when Nina rebels against her lifestyle with her mother by throwing all of her stuffed animal possessions out and becoming more violent towards her mother. This action, along with the act of destroying her music box, symbolizes Nina's frustration with her sheltered life and her inability to perform the black swan at the intense level that is required of her. She feels that if she rids herself of her childhood assets she will be closer to the adult seductress that is demanded of her for the role of the black swan. The various motifs of this film not only explain and develop Nina's dividing psyche through her hallucinations and rebellion against her mother, but they also serve to demonstrate the psychological instability of Nina's mind and its symbolism of her struggling growth as a dancer and as a woman.
Female Foils

Various female foils are also present in the film as Nina’s developing dark persona is reflected in the form of Lily; a free-spirited and unrestrained ballerina whom Nina believes encompasses all the parts of a dancer that she herself does not live up to. As Nina pushes herself further and further to become the unfamiliar black swan, she looks to [Lily] for guidance because of her ability to dance freely and seductively. At one point in the movie, Nina witnesses black wings on her fellow dancer Lily’s body while Lily is satisfying Nina in her bedroom. This hallucination is extremely symbolic of the force of the black swan consuming Nina and taking over her life; and the fact that it is represented through Lily demonstrates Lily’s important role in Nina’s mental transformation (“The Occult Interpretation”. June 21 2011). However, as Nina watches Lily, she begins to feel threatened that she will get her Swan Queen role stolen from her because Lily embodies all that Nina has not perfected yet. Nina’s paranoia begins to cause her to hallucinate and physically confuse Lily’s physical person with herself (“‘Black Swan’ Movie Interpretation”. June 21 2011). This becomes apparent when, in the film, Nina briefly witnesses her own face multiple times on another person but then is disturbed to find her own face fade into Lily every time Lily is present. This female foil not only symbolizes the developing split in Nina’s psyche on her journey to finding perfection in her black swan counterpart, but it also parallels the foil of Odette and Odile in Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake. The internal struggle that Odette feels in Act 3 of the ballet when she is helplessly beckoning her prince from the window while he is unknowingly falling in love with Odette represents the internal feeling of helplessness that Nina feels as she begins to imagine Lily taking over her role of the Swan Queen.
Nina's paranoia grows in the form of female foils even further when she begins to fear for her own downfall as Swan Queen after she witnesses the former Swan Queen, Beth Macintyre, losing her sanity. In the film, when Nina is first presented by director Thomas as the new Swan Queen in front of the entire dance company, Beth storms out of the room when Thomas tries to make it sound as if she has retired from the role, when in actuality she has been fired. Out of jealousy and frustration, Beth attacks Nina after the gathering and accuses her of acquiring the role only due to personal advances with Thomas. The next day Nina is disturbed to hear that soon after Beth's fit, she walked into the street and was hit by a car. Beth's sudden outburst against Nina coupled with her violent accident symbolizes the breakdown of a Swan Queen who failed at perfecting the role. Beth's inability to cope with living without the role of the Swan Queen demonstrates the intense effect this kind of role has on dancers. The demand for perfection of this role is so intense for its dancers that those who are given the role begin to live only for the role. And when this role is taken from Beth it symbolizes her imperfection; thus she begins to breakdown mentally because she cannot comprehend how to live without being perfect. Beth's breakdown encompasses the struggle of every woman striving to live up to some expectation set for them in which their image must be highly regarded and perfect in the mind of society. Coincidently, the accident that Beth is involved in soon after she begins breaking down is symbolic of her failure to perfect the role under the pressure of the outside world and her director. It was ultimately her audience that drove her to madness and her accident symbolizes her crack under the pressure of the demands of trying to live as two personalities.

The process of transcendence into the black swan ultimately destroys Beth because of, as one critic phrases, "her inability to exist without being the black swan" ("The Occult
Interpretation”. June 21 2011). Beth’s increasing madness strikes fear into Nina, who sees herself as the new Beth. When Nina witnesses Beth attempting to mutilate herself during a visit to the hospital, [Nina] becomes extremely disturbed and paranoid about what will become of herself if she fails in the role. She believes that if Beth was unable to perfect the role of the black swan and remain sane, then she is likely to suffer the same fate. Nina’s female foil in Beth shows part of the reason for her mental deterioration because Beth’s tragic story helps to explain the pressure that Nina feels to be perfect.

Nina’s final female foil is the twisted and oppressive foil of her mother, a former ballerina herself. Nina’s [mother] battles the belief that she is living a life of wasted talent due to having to raise Nina instead of pursuing her dancing career. She is still so hung up on living her life as a perfect ballerina, which she never got to live out, that she constantly pushes and overburdens Nina with overreaching expectations and childlike suppression (“‘Black Swan’ is Disturbing, Effective”. June 15 2011). Nina’s unhealthy, childlike existence is observed first-hand in the “little girl” bedroom that she sleeps in every night. With pink butterfly wallpaper (a reference to Monarch programming) and stuffed animal rabbits throughout the room (an allusion to the symbolic mind-controlling rabbit from Alice in Wonderland), Nina’s room becomes a testimony to an unhealthy relationship with her overbearing mother (“The Occult Interpretation” June 21 2011).

Through an accumulation of possessions as irksome as a wall filled with paintings and drawings of Nina, it soon becomes apparent that Nina and her mother share quite a dysfunctional relationship in terms of mother-daughter boundaries and obsessive parenting tactics. In one scene the audience witnesses Nina’s mother forcibly undressing her adult daughter in order to scold her on her [scratching habit], which symbolizes the mother’s
awareness of Nina’s gradual transformation into the black swan and her attempts to repress it. This disconcerting scene demonstrates Nina’s total submission to her mother and also hints at the unhealthy sexual “familiarity” between the two, which is part of the reason for Nina’s unsettling obedience towards her mother in the beginning of the film (“‘Black Swan’: Movie About Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse”. June 21 2011). As Nina begins to grow as a woman, she starts experimenting with new bodily sensations in order to grow in her role of the black swan. However, every time Nina attempts to explore her sexuality, as requested by her director Thomas, her mother is symbolically always physically present and keeps Nina from doing so. If Nina’s mother is not physically present, she is represented as being present in Nina’s mind through Nina’s resistance to new sexual experiences.

When looking at Nina’s mother and her role in Nina’s life, Nina’s journey correlates directly with the psychoanalytical Freudian ideas of one’s ego. While Nina’s mother is personified as her overbearing Superego, Nina’s Ego is in the form of a sexually repressed and fragile ballerina that encompasses her white swan persona. Nina lives at the mercy of her Superego, or her mother, and eventually finds her free-spirited Id when she begins discovering her black swan identity. Her discovery eventually leads Nina to releasing herself from “the confines of her oppressive Superego and achieving her height of perfection” (“Black Swan, Freud, and the Monomyth”. 8 July 2011).

The blatant oppression and mind-controlled state established by her mother is what prompts Nina to veer away from her childlike fantasy of a world. As Nina begins resisting her mother’s controlling techniques – such as letting her mother wind her music box up every night and dressing/undressing her – the foil for Nina’s controlled, white swan self becomes clearly apparent as Nina’s mother. The more Nina attempts to deviate from her home lifestyle
in order to find ways to encompass the black swan, the tighter Nina’s mother tries to hold on
to her “little girl”. This is seen through the mother’s attempts to keep Nina from leaving the
house and even by trying to keep her from attending her Swan Lake performance. The harsher
Nina’s mother’s actions become towards her, however, the more resistant Nina grows, in turn
truly representing Nina’s mother acting as Nina’s white swan persona during her
transformation into the black swan – creating a true female foil.
Black and White Imagery

The female foils and the various motifs present in *Black Swan* are woven together throughout the film through the use of intense black and white imagery in order to develop the themes of the film. From the beginning of the film, light and soft colors are used to create Nina's wardrobe while darker and more diluted colors make up the wardrobe of Nina's fellow ballerina, Lily. The color difference between the two dancers' clothing symbolizes the contrast in personality between them, and thus the separate make-up of the dominant black swan in Lily and the innocent white swan in Nina. As Nina begins to hallucinate images of herself walking past her and reflected in mirrors, each image of herself is portrayed in a darker form and with darker clothing. Soon Nina begins to see herself in the form of Lily, who is another "darker version" of herself. Helping to develop the importance of mirror motifs, this usage of black and white imagery also establishes the beginning of Nina's transcendence into the black swan – the transformation that ultimately divides her psyche.
Analysis of Climax of the Film

The ultimate split in Nina’s psyche occurs in the dénouement of the film, which symbolically ends with the finale of Nina’s performance in *Swan Lake*. When Nina begins her performance, her virginal white swan self is danced sporadically and nervously for fear of not being able to master both roles throughout the performance. Meanwhile in the dressing room between her parts on stage, Nina hallucinates a battle with Lily, whom she believes is there to finally steal her role. Nina ends up battling “Lily” and symbolically stabs her with a piece of a broken mirror. This action demonstrates Nina’s ability to overcome her divided psyche and completely assimilate into the black swan identity. Once Lily is dead, Nina is able to go on stage and dance the role of the black swan perfectly. As Nina becomes completely encompassed in the black swan and is ready for her plunge to death on stage, she focuses on her distressed mother in the audience, symbolizing Nina’s understanding that she has finally overcome her mother’s oppression and can now be perfect as both the black and white swan. As Nina falls to her “death bed” underneath the stage, a large red blood spot appears on her white swan costume as her director and fellow dancers are horrified to realize that Nina has been stabbed to death. Nina had never stabbed Lily, but the battle between the two women was actually symbolic of Nina’s final internal struggle between her white and black swan persona. Nina realized that she would never be able to coexist with her two personalities, and, therefore, she had to let part of herself die before she could achieve the perfection that she had always desired.
Modern Female Tribulations

Nina’s final downfall in the denouement of the film is an extreme representation of the struggle that modern women experience every day in their battle to achieve the perfect body image and empowerment despite the stereotypes against women. While Nina battled with achieving perfection in embodying two different personalities, many women today struggle with achieving a body image that is “acceptable” in society. Whether the pressure to look perfect comes from the oversensitive modeling industry or from the intense physical demands of athletes, the demand for perfection is constantly increasing and tearing apart the wholesomeness and self-respect that makes women comfortable in their own skin. As Nina struggled to break free of the parental constraints from her mother and define herself as a woman, women today struggle with the same difficulties. The transition from child to woman is one of the toughest milestones for women because of the responsibilities and new identities they must embrace; these expectations are made even harder to live up to with the increasing societal demand for a perfect body image and perfection at balancing mothering, marriage, and working (Tsai, “Female Bodies in ‘Black Swan’”). The more that the demand for perfection consumes the minds of modern women, the more women are made to believe that they can never reach perfection and thus can never live out empowering roles in their lives. As the industry for “beautiful”, modern women grows harsher, the closer women become to self-mutilation and killing off the part of them that makes them physically and emotionally healthy – just as the ballet industry consumes and ultimately destroys Nina.
Conclusion

Nina’s literal journey to perfecting both the role of the white swan and the black swan not only represents her journey to self-actualization, but it also represents every modern woman’s struggle towards individualization in a perfection-crazed society. Nina’s intense and disturbing transformation into the black swan throughout the film is representative of the extreme measures that women are beginning to take in order to achieve perfection as women, mothers, workers, and wives. Much like Nina constantly struggled to rediscover herself once she had been given her role of the Swan Queen, the women of today’s world are on journeys to discover who they are and the power that they hold within their families and with the rest of society. Through its extensive use of contrasting imagery, symbolic motifs, and female foils, Black Swan portrays one of the most reality-sensitive themes of society in a powerful and unsettling manner – the female struggle for control and empowerment. With the use of the delicate yet enthralling protagonist Nina Sayers, Black Swan dramatically paints a picture of the difficult journey that women embark on throughout their lives in order to discover their own roles in society. This journey is necessary in order for women to discover their true selves along with the person that society summons them to be, until they are “perfect”.

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Bibliography


