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## Of Good and Evil: A Psychological Study of Nina Sayers in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*

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### **Abstract:**

The paper is a psychological study of the lead actor, Nina Sayers of Darren Aronofsky's 2010 psychological thriller film, *Black Swan*. The primary objective of the paper is to trace the behavioural and psychological neuroses that Nina is a victim of and how she overcomes them. The paper demonstrates how the anxieties and paranoia of Nina Sayers are a result of the imbalance between her libidinal instincts and her death drive and also examines their cinematographical portrayal in the film. The paper examines the constant battle of the "eros" and "thanatos" that the ballet dancer, Nina Sayers undergoes because of which she becomes a neurotic wreck. The paper traces and understands Nina's evolution and transformation from an anxiety-ridden and neurotic dancer to becoming a peaceful and holistic human being after having confronted and dealt with her demons.

**Keywords:** *Black Swan*, Psychological, Repression, Eros, Thanatos, Death instinct, Life instinct, *Swan Lake*.

Nina Sayers, the protagonist of Darren Aronofsky's film *Black Swan*, is a beautiful but "frigid" ballet dancer played by Natalie Portman, whose unconscious, like that of any other, is a storehouse of multiple, conflicting drives. Her unconscious is driven primarily by a tussle between the libidinal or life instincts<sup>i</sup> and the thanatos or the death drive<sup>ii</sup>. Her outward frigidity of behaviour is the defence that her unconscious puts up in trying to ward off the constant battle that rages within her mind.

Nina is portrayed in the film as a quintessential anxiety-ridden, neurotic young woman who engages in hyper competitive behavior in order to quell her anxieties and insecurities regarding her dance. Nina's character borders on an obsession with her ballet which results in her hyper-anxiety. In fact, everything she does is driven by her quest for perfection. She frets to get every little move in her dance and life perfect. She wishes to be the perfect "sweet girl" whose obedience to her mother, politeness to her colleagues and diligence for her craft makes her win the appreciation of everyone.

Nina's persistent effort and tenacity in order to bag the coveted role of the "swan queen" in the much sought after ballet dance-drama, "*Swan Lake*" is directly at odds with her sentinel of a super-ego. She works for the role, though, in a guarded way. There are various moments in the film where we see her being pulled apart in both directions and yet her desire

for the role wins over her desire to play cautious and remain protected. In a way, Nina's competition for perfection through her work is an instance of her ego at work. Richard M. Ryckman has examined the socially motivated role of the ego that works to transform the deviant urges into socially approved ones:

The ego tries to exert control over both an id that is concerned only with gratification of its instinctual urges and a superego that constantly seeks perfection. . . . To this end, the ego seeks to find realistic outlets for the person's id impulses, for example, to transform aggressive urges into more socially acceptable activities, such as competing athletically with others. (29)

Nina's burning desire for the role of the "swan queen" is an evident indication of her zeal for life and her ego helps her to strive hard for that. She craves for acceptance, recognition and love. She realizes that her role as the "swan queen" would bestow on her that recognition and love.

Nina is depicted almost perfect as the "white swan" – delicate, childlike and soft. However, this softness is not Nina's true nature, but only a cover for her anxieties and neuroses. As a "white swan", Nina is "beautiful, fearful and fragile". Her entire life is a pursuit for attaining perfection. However, the perfection for which she strives is never completely accomplished as it lacks in balance. Throughout the film, Nina's "white swan" personality or "life instinct" and her thanatos or "death drive" exist in complete imbalance to each other and constantly seek to outdo one another. Nina's thanatos, which according to Freudian theory is a powerful equalizer of emotions, stays buried throughout, which is why she cannot dance (like) the "black swan".

Nina's personality and quest are both lopsided as her goodness is sterile and inert which cannot be a possibility in the real world. The dance director of her ballet company, Thomas played by Vincent Cassel, tells her that though she is very good as the "white swan" but she is one in whom he had never witnessed the "black swan". He also tells her that the "black swan" means letting go of one's control. The "black swan" is the misunderstood counterpart of the "white swan". The "black swan", like its counterpart, is a metaphorical figure that stands for a complete abandonment of all principles and assumptions that we live our lives by. It signifies freedom from norms, competition and the urge for attaining perfection. The black swan lives its life on its own terms and is not afraid of breaking barriers or venturing into unknown territories.

Nina's eros has been repressed<sup>iii</sup> underneath a façade of a "sweet child" who is obedient to her mother and lives in a room full of soft toys. Her childhood innocence extends the way beyond her adulthood to keep her erotic, adult fantasies under check and she scarcely remembers that she has outgrown her childhood. Thus, according to Goleman, "Repression has come to mean the defense wherein one forgets, then forgets one has forgotten" (119).

Nina's repressed eros and her neurotic nature are also indirectly a result of her mother's overly controlling and intrusive behavior. Nina's mother played by Barbara Hershey, though affectionate in treating her child even to the point of leaving her career at its peak to give time to her child, is obsessed about her daughter and her life. Her affection is

more like a fixation with her daughter, which smothers Nina's adulthood and stunts her psychological growth. At various points in the film, we witness how Nina's mother encroaches upon her only child's life and identity. She keeps an all-time check on Nina and is even seen doing things that a mother would only do for a young child under normal circumstances like cutting her nails, undressing her and putting her to bed. All these acts, though fulfilled by the mother in earnest devotion towards her child, nevertheless arrest Nina's holistic development as a balanced adult. Nina experiences a battle between the adult in her that wants to assert itself but whose expression is checked by the mother and the child in her that has long died, but is constantly being resurrected by the mother. Nina's childhood assumes the form of a spectre that clings to her and haunts her through her mother's stifling love and control of her life.

Goleman further explains how intrusion and control of a parent on the child can develop the child's neuroses:

Trouble typically occurs when the child faces some ongoing, relentless, and repeated threat: a hostile, controlling mother, an abusive father, abandonment. The child comes to expect trouble, and dares not let down his guard. He comes more and more to rely on a favoured defense, a habitual mode of keeping his feelings controlled and protected in a heartless world. . . . In this way, a handy coping tactic becomes neurotic defense. (148)

Nina feels choked and even embarrassed with her mother's attentions, especially when her mother forcefully undresses her to check her skin rashes. Even in the scene where Nina refuses the cake which her mother has baked to celebrate her success, we witness the mother's livid response to Nina's reluctance at eating the cake. It might seem to the uninitiated viewer that Nina's mother exercises a calming and soothing influence upon her daughter's anxious personality however, if we dig deeper we realize that the calming influence works as a sort of hypnosis upon Nina's personality. The colourful hues of Nina's room, the soft toys strewn around, and the snow globe with the couple dancing to the tunes of a harmonious rhythm, that the mother winds up while putting her daughter to bed, all suggest of a fake, confined world that Nina's mother has created for her. This is a world which is far removed from reality and is redolent of a child being comfortably ensconced within her small world. Nina, the adult lives in this room which is meant for Nina, the child and is created and maintained by her own mother.

This imaginary world of a comfortable and protected childhood throws Nina's mind and personality into disarray and she goes off her mental balance. The chasm that exists between Nina's childhood world and the real world is responsible for most of the panic and disorder that her mind experiences. Herself disintegrates and she relapses into an imaginary and constructed past in which she dances the ballet, but is mentally still a child.

However, her over-stimulated eros is constantly looking for chinks in the armour that she wears, in order to pour itself out. Since it just finds a few ruptures through which to come out, it gushes forth in distorted forms. The eros within her projects itself onto other people like her own sexual encounter with Lily, the old man in the train who indulges in sexual

behaviour on seeing Nina, and the director of her dance company, Thomas, having sex with Lily. In Freudian theory, projection is a, "Defense mechanism in which a person attributes his or her own undesirable characteristics to others" (Ryckman 49). Thus, the sexual actions that Nina witnesses in other people do not happen in reality, but are the imagined manifestations of her own buried eros.

Nina's buried eros finds its strongest vent through Lily, Nina's alter-ego or her "shadow" and also her alternate in the ballet. Lily is everything, Nina isn't but wishes to be. The two women stand at two ends of the psychological spectrum. Lily is carefree and wild in her attitude and wears her sexuality on her sleeve. Her movements in ballet too are not technique-perfect, but spontaneous and beautiful. On the other hand, Nina's movements exhibit an obsession with technique and perfection. In fact, Nina's quest for perfection in ballet and life is an underlying symptom of her yearning for people's love and attention – a significant life instinct. Nina's attraction to Lily is a sign of the tussle between her superego and her eros and also a strong suggestion of her life instinct defeating her super-ego.

Lily manifests the death instinct perfectly. She indulges in casual sex, consumes drugs, smokes cigarettes, drinks alcohol, and is unrestrained and fearless in her lifestyle. She lives her life with a temerity that is unsettling and disturbing, but extremely tempting to Nina's austere life. Whether it is Lily's free movements in ballet, or her promiscuity in her escapades, Nina puritanical super-ego fights hard to keep away the enticements, while at the same time getting pulled towards them unknowingly.

Nina's attraction to the dark, seamy underbelly of life can also be studied as a reflection of her "shadow." "Jung chose the term shadow to indicate the dark, sinister, Mr. Hyde side of our natures. . . . the shadow represents the evil, unadapted, unconscious, and inferior part of our psyches" (Ryckman 58). Lily is Nina's dark side or her "shadow" and this is the reason why Nina imagines watching Lily engaging in sexual encounters at quite a few times. At one time, Nina imagines seeing Lily having sex with Thomas, the director of their ballet company, while at another time she observes Lily having a sexually suggestive conversation with a steward in the restaurant. On the final day of the act, Nina also comes about to catch a moment of sexual encounter between Lily and her own male counterpart. As a culmination to Nina's repressed eros projecting itself onto other people, she imagines and brings to life, her own sexual encounter with Lily. Nina's sexual escapade with Lily is nothing but her own sexual angst and desire running wild and wanting to assert itself by breaking through the barricades of her superego.

Just as Nina's repressed eros, her death instinct is also choked which is why she displays a compulsive obsession for perfection. Nina's death instinct manifests itself throughout the film by means of her lure towards the morbid and bloody side of life. There are various scenes in the film where she imagines herself to be wounded, bloodied or injured. This pulls towards the dark side which keeps getting stronger as her death instinct keeps becoming more powerful. At one point, she imagines her skin sprouting thorns and her eyes as pools of blood.

However, it should be observed that her death instinct overpowers her life force just when her anxiety to perform and outdo her competition heightens. For instance, she feels her toes bleed or her nail skin peel off right before professionally major moments of her career, for instance, right at the time when her boss announces her as the new “swan queen” at a large gathering. There is also a scene where Nina, who after having been declared as the new “swan queen”, steals Beth’s – the previously reigning dancer – personal possessions from her room. Though Nina has been crowned as the “swan queen”, yet she is still in denial about her accomplishments. She harbours an anxiety and an inferiority complex about her own accomplishments and performance and considers Beth as a haunting threat to her own career. Hence, her act of pilferage from Beth’s room is Nina’s dark side asserting itself as she feels threatened by Beth’s perfection. Nina is anxious whether she would be able to live up to her new stature of the “swan queen” and experiences a conflicting battle of becoming like Beth and wanting to outdo Beth.

When Nina visits Beth at the hospital, she returns all the stolen things to Beth and offers the argument that she stole Beth’s things in order to be like Beth: “I was just trying to be perfect like you.” This argument becomes a rationalization that Nina comes up with in order to cover up her shameful act. Goleman has explained rationalization as: “One of the more commonplace strategies, rationalization, allows the denial of one’s true motives by covering over unpleasant impulses with a cloak of reasonableness. . . . Rationalizations are lies so slick we can get away with telling them not only to ourselves, but even to others, without flinching” (121).

Thus, since Nina is aware that she is offering a rationalization to Beth for the stolen articles, she experiences a manifestation of her guilt in the form of Beth’s gruesome attack on her own self. The attack however soon emerges to become a cover for Nina’s own insecure self and hyper-anxiety for perfection, as she sees Beth transforms into her own image attacking her own self and screaming the words, “I am nothing!” (?)

After this attack of anxiety at the hospital, in which Nina once again deems herself to be insignificant and “nothing”, panic strikes her again and she feels her skin to be sprouting thorns, her eyes shedding blood and her limbs growing rigid and snapping off like sticks of wood. Thus, it is only when death strikes the “white swan” in Nina that she can emerge as a whole person. She literally and figuratively has to kill the “sweet girl” in her for the thanatos to balance itself with her eros. As we witness the death of the “white swan” and the birth of the “black swan” in Nina, we see a sudden and concurrent transformation in Nina’s entire character. Her character which was till now soft, restrained, and fearful now gets transmuted into dark, sexually seductive and fearless. Her movements become looser and freer and her voice also acquires a bolder and more confident tone. She becomes not only the wicked swan on stage, but also a whole person in reality.

Paradoxically, it is only when Nina imagines to have killed Lily that she truly emerges as the “black swan”. Lily’s death as imagined by Nina is the death of the spectre of her “shadow” or her alter-ego that has ensnared Nina all her life. Lily’s death is the annihilation of all demons of Nina’s personality that had till now prevented her from living her life with sanity. It is in reality, the death of the excess of goodness in her that she has

killed herself – that excess goodness which was suffocating and stifling her into a person controlled by her psychic battles.

However, it should be understood that Nina suffers for as long as the battle between her eros and thanatos rages hard. It is a complex battle which takes a heavy toll on her as her body and mind are the sites on which the battle is carried out. Whether it is the eruptions on her skin as a result of her scratching, the peeling off of her skin around her fingers' nails, her wounded, bloodied toes, or her collapsing bones, Nina's fantasies run wild as far as the disintegration of her body is concerned. She imagines herself to be battered and bruised in body and mind because of this struggle between the eros and thanatos.

While as the "white swan", Nina is terribly afraid of being unkind to or causing displeasure to anyone, as the "black swan", she abandons all yardsticks of good, evil and morality. She must meet her dark side, one which is confident, free of worldly rules and in touch with the wilderness in her, in order to make herself a whole individual. Nina as the "white swan" is the controlled and disciplined girl, while Nina as the "black swan" is the untamed and liberated girl. Prior to coming in touch with her dark side, Nina has always lived a partial life. She has kept all pleasures and sensations, likely to cause a slack in her discipline, at bay. Burdened with guilt she leads on her life as wanting to absolve herself and undertake penance for her imaginary guilty acts. However, after meeting her dark side, she willingly engages in guilty pleasures like kissing her boss (on stage).

Besides Lily, Nina's boss, Thomas, is also a major catalyst in Nina's transformation from a purely "white swan" to one who can balance both the eros and thanatos in her as the "black swan". He is the one who acquaints her with her dark and deep, death instincts and digs them up so that she can dance the "black swan" with perfection.

The cinematography of the film reflects not only the paranoia and anxieties of Nina, but also her evolution and transformation in a stark and compelling manner. For instance, Nina is shown as being preoccupied with watching reflections of herself in mirrors. There is liberal use of mirrors throughout the film in which Nina looks for re-assurance and acceptance. However, her anxieties, instead of being quelled, are fuelled more by looking into the mirror. The mirror is an important figurative device or symbol used in psychology and psychoanalysis for explaining ideas related to the self and its image as perceived.

Whenever Nina looks into a mirror, she sees in it not a benign reflection of her own self, but its distorted and evil image. Either she sees her own "dark" self scratching her skin or simply looking back at her with an evil grin from the mirror. Even in the beginning of the film, when Nina is practising her dance moves of spinning on her toes, she does it in front of a full sized mirror. The scene shows her staring into the mirror while spinning on her toes, and it is after a few rotations when she is completely lost in observing her mirror image, that she twists her ankle and is thrown off her balance. In other words, it is always her observation of her own self in the mirror that disconcerts her as it is only then that she is confronted with her dark, shadow self or her death instinct that she has kept hidden so well from the public eye.

She is also shown as catching glimpses of her reflection in the metro's window pane while going for work and also putting on the lipstick before she is going to meet Thomas to ask for the role of the swan queen. Nina finds the mirror as a symbolic device through which she lets out her dark side. The mirror becomes a medium with which she is completely honest about her instincts and self. The mirror establishes a sort of communication between her two, divided selves and instincts. The mirror becomes a representative medium for Nina's dark self, while it seeks to bridge the gaps between her present self. The mirror also acts as an important tool which shows Nina glimpses of her buried death instincts. In fact, Lily, who is Nina's alter-ego, beguiles Nina because she acts as a mirror image of Nina's self. Nina first spots Lily through the metro window pane and thereon, everything that Nina does, is reflected in a stark contrast in Lily's character.

There are certain acts that substantiate the conflict that exists between Nina's divided selves and instincts. For instance, the scene where Nina steals some of the personal possessions from Beth's room and also the one where she puts on Beth's lipstick to meet Thomas to convince him for the role of the swan queen, suggest the rebellious, dark side of hers. Her theft and wearing lipstick to seduce Thomas into giving her the role are acts of rebellion where her dark-self overpowers her good-self. Furthermore, when Thomas tries to kiss her, Nina bites him in a rare display of her wicked and seductive self.

There is also an abundant screen time that has been given to Nina's expressions and body language which reflect her hyper-anxious state and her submissive demeanour. Nina's docility and her passivity are expressed through the tone of her voice and the manner of her speech. She speaks in an extremely soft voice that is barely audible even to her mother at times. Her voice is also high pitched like that of a child. Her mannerisms and body language are shown as being subdued, quiet and controlled. She speaks with her eyes downcast and refrains from too much eye contact. In fact, she almost speaks like a shy, young girl instead of an adult ballet dancer.

Her facial expressions also reflect uncertainty and hesitation. She is even shown as almost on the verge of tears many times in the film, whether it is while she is happy (when breaking the news of her selection to her mother on phone), or while she is being instructed and checked by Thomas in her dance moves. She breaks down easily in the face of any criticism and cannot face challenges like an adult. Either she is stern-faced and sombre or breaking down.

However, it is towards the end of the film, when Nina has finally emerged out of her cocoons and her conflicts, when she has finally accepted and embraced her dark self and her shadows that her body language and tone of speech registers an instant and drastic reversal. Her posture is now erect and her head is held high. She makes confident eye contact with Thomas and is no longer stern and controlled. Her body movements are now easy and unrestrained. Even her voice is now no longer high pitched rather it is lower in pitch and more seductive in its tone. She now surveys the audience and the world around her as if she owns them and not with a sense of fright. The camera has aptly captured the awakening of the self that Nina experiences towards the end of the film. It is the blossoming of her whole identity where she no longer shies away from the evil prevalent in the world rather she partakes of it

in order to show that she is now at peace with her dark self. For instance, she passionately kisses Thomas backstage during the performance, thus giving us a glimpse of her radical transformation.

Ironically, Nina's real life is an unconscious enactment of the story of her ballet – the “swan lake”, which Nina is performing in. The story is about a “virginal girl, pure and sweet, trapped in the body of a swan” who desires freedom and needs love to break her spell and it is only death that can break her spell and make her whole again. Death in the ballet “swan lake” and in the film is a metaphor for the annihilation of all imbalances, immoderations and excesses that lie within Nina's psyche. Nina's is a case of extremities wherein all her life she has closeted her dark side and has only lived by her good side, however, this secret “shadow” self of hers must be brought out of its isolation and laid side by side along with her good self. She must learn to come to terms with the vice and immorality inherent within each one of us and accept it as a part of her own self too. It is only then that she will manage to procure a balanced personality for herself.

The premise of the story implies the pervasive existence of injustice in our lives and also how naivety cannot survive all by itself in this world. The “virginal girl” in “swan lake” is about to receive the love which will undo her spell, when “the black swan” seduces the prince and takes him away. “The swan lake” punctures the myth of a benign and paradisiacal existence and also advances the plucky message of cunning winning over blithe innocence. It teaches us, eventually Nina, how the wisdom to survive in this world cannot be a product of childlike innocence alone. Rather, it also needs a judicious and discreet temperament to balance out the inexperience of adolescence.

Nina Sayers kills all the restraints and limits within herself at the end, and must die in order to be reborn as a whole personality. She kills the neuroses, anxieties, imbalances and paranoia within her and rises from the ashes as the true “black swan”. In her death, she becomes the black swan who has come to terms with the goodness and evil within herself and has conquered both so as not to let either one overpower the other. In other words, Nina achieves a complete balance of personality in her death. The thanatos which had always been suppressed within Nina's psyche is brought to life in the form of the dark, deviant, destructive and sexually emancipated “black swan”. The “black swan” or thanatos, traditionally deemed as self-destructive, preserves the universal balance between creation and destruction. It reminds Nina and all of us of the parallel co-existence of creation and destruction.

Thus, it is only when the sinner is brought at par with the saint and juxtaposed together that we can truly appreciate the beauty of the saint. The existence of vice is necessary to understand and to be grateful about the virtue. Evil has always been a necessary counterpart of the good which can only be celebrated in its binary existence along with evil. It is only by killing herself that Nina emerges as the perfect union of the good and evil. Nina learns to eventually accept and embrace the beauty of life that is a balance of opposites. For a while, she imagines having killed the dark and sinister Lily (the black swan) in her but she has in fact killed the “white swan” in her and balanced out the surplus of goodness in herself with the evil prevalent in the world.

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## Notes:

<sup>i</sup> “Freud theorized that each person has life instincts or eros. These instinctive urges seek to preserve life. . . . he viewed libido as the psychic and pleasurable feelings associated with gratification of the life instincts” (Hutchins 639-663).

<sup>ii</sup> “In addition to the life instincts, Freud postulated the existence of an opposing death instinct or thanatos. He believed that the goal of all life is death, that human beings strive to return to an inorganic state of balance that preceded life, in which there is no painful struggle to satisfy biological needs. The life instincts operate, however, to ensure that death is delayed as long as possible, so that human beings can attain many other satisfactions before attaining this nirvana” (Hutchins 652).

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Goleman explains the Freudian term “Repression” as “. . . the keeping out of awareness of a single class of items – those that evoke psychological pain. The pain can be of many varieties: trauma, “intolerable ideas,” unbearable feelings, anxiety, guilt, shame, and so on” (Goleman 113).

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