

A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Obsession for Perfection and Psychological Unravelling in *Black Swan* (2010)

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Abstract. *Black Swan* (2010) is a psychological horror movie that explores themes of ambition, perfectionism, and the psychological toll of obsession in the competitive world of professional ballet. The movie delves into Nina's descent into madness as she strives for artistic perfection, blurring the lines between reality and hallucination. The aim achieved in this analysis includes examining how psychological stress manifests itself, how high-pressure artistic circumstances can distort reality, and how these factors influence the protagonist's spiral toward mental instability. This is qualitative-descriptive research. The researchers follow a four-step process involving data identification, classification, analysis, and concluding. The main data collection comes from *Black Swan* (2010), focusing on scenes when Nina Sayers experiences mental breakdowns. The researchers collected data from the film itself and several journals, focusing on Nina's mental disorders and applying Freudian concepts to analyze her behavior and personality. The research results show that obsession and strong demands for perfection from herself and others have disturbed Nina's mental instability in *Black Swan* (2010).

Keywords: black swan; hallucination; obsession; psychoanalytic; unconscious

Abstrak. *Black Swan* (2010) merupakan sebuah film horor psikologis yang mengeksplorasi tentang ambisi, perfeksionisme, dan dampak psikologis dari obsesi seorang penari balet, Nina Sayers dalam dunia balet profesional. Film ini menceritakan tentang Nina yang berubah drastis saat ia berjuang mendapatkan kesempurnaan artistik dalam karirnya sebagai penari balet, yang mana hal tersebut mengaburkan batas antara kenyataan dan halusinasi. Tujuan dalam analisis ini mencakup bagaimana tekanan psikologis termanifestasikan dalam tokoh Nina, bagaimana keadaan artistik yang bertekanan tinggi dapat mendistorsi realitas, dan bagaimana faktor-faktor tersebut mempengaruhi spiral protagonis menuju ketidakstabilan mental. Jenis penelitian ini adalah penelitian deskriptif kualitatif. Peneliti melakukan empat langkah dalam proses analisis, yakni mengidentifikasi data, mengklasifikasi data, menganalisis data, dan membuat kesimpulan. Data utama berasal dari film *Black Swan* (2010), dengan fokus pada adegan saat Nina Sayers mengalami gangguan mental. Peneliti mengumpulkan data dari film itu sendiri dan beberapa jurnal, dengan fokus pada adegan saat kondisi mental Nina tidak stabil dan menerapkan konsep Freudian untuk menganalisis perilaku dan kepribadiannya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa obsesi dan tuntutan kesempurnaan yang kuat dari diri sendiri dan orang lain telah mengganggu ketidakstabilan mental Nina pada film *Black Swan* (2010).

Kata kunci: black swan; alam bawah sadar, halusinasi; obsesi, psikoanalitik.

A. Introduction

Psychoanalytic concepts have become our everyday lives, and therefore psychoanalytic thinking should have the advantage of familiarity (Tyson, 2012). Psychoanalytic criticism requires awareness of the unconscious and the repressed mind to comprehend human life experience, culture, language, and society as critics believe that the text can only be evaluated as if it were a dream. This theory claims that since literature is

similar to dreams, the text symbolizes the author's unconscious desires, fears, worries, and traumas. Thus, the author deals with their psychosis through their writings.

One of the most known founders of psychoanalytic criticism was Sigmund Freud. He found this theory after he had done numerous therapy sessions with his patients. Through his patients' cases, he discovered that there is a part of the human mind whose contents are unknown to the human itself at a conscious level. In other words, it is the existence of the unconscious mind. The "laws of transformation" are principles that describe how humans suppress memories or sublimate memories in the unconscious mind.

Freud considered the mind as an "iceberg" with the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind constituting the various layers of sky, surface, and deep sea. There is also the iceberg, which encompasses the id, ego, and superego. On the top of the iceberg diagram is the ego, a part of a human's conscious personality that acts as a bridge between the id and the socially oriented outside world. In contrast to the more instinctive id, it is guided by logic and reason. The ego frequently restrains and guides the id's impulses. The next is Id, which is the most primal element within the human mental state. The id, or inner self, is motivated by instinct and contains the libido as well as cravings and impulses that we usually resist. The last one is the superego, which develops throughout the child's early years of psychosexual development. The Superego is a part of the unconscious. It is regarded as a reflection of human conscience as well as self-criticism. The Superego frequently combines human beliefs and morals, which were learned as children from their parents and other parental figures. By using Freudian psychoanalytic theory, this research will focus on the obsession for perfection and psychology in *Black Swan* (2010)

Black Swan (2010) is a psychological horror movie directed by Darren Aronofsky. The story of the movie is about Nina Sayer, a young ballerina with her obsessive complex to play the role of the main character for her studio's upcoming project namely *Black Swan*. In order to get the role, Nina was trying her best to prove to her superior that she was capable of playing the little swan role. After successfully getting the role, she was going through some obstacles which led to her anxiety. As a form of releasing her anxiety, she often hurts herself unconsciously and imagines things.

Black Swan (2010) explores themes of ambition, perfectionism, and the psychological toll of obsession in the competitive world of professional ballet. The movie delves into Nina's descent into madness as she strives for artistic perfection, blurring the lines between reality and hallucination. Nina's grasp on reality breaks, putting her into a waking nightmare after being pushed to the breaking point by her superior and a tempting

rival. The film received critical acclaim for its intense storytelling by Natalie Portman's performance and its portrayal of psychological torment within the competitive realm of ballet.

Several studies have been conducted related to the movie *Black Swan* (2010). The previous research focuses on uncovering the complex psychological dimensions underlying the main character, Nina Sayers, on her journey to achieve her dream as a professional ballet dancer. Lumbanraja, Sembiring, and Sembiring (2021) analyzed the types of delusions experienced by Nina Sayers, the main character in the *Black Swan* (2010). The results of their research indicated that there were three types of delusions, namely somatic delusions, jealousy delusions, and erotomaniac delusions experienced by Nina. Moreover, they said that delusion is a belief where sufferers find it difficult to distinguish which ones are real and which ones are not real will of course hurt the sufferer.

Utami (2022) identified the roots of Nina's anxiety disorder and its impact on her health. Her research showed that Nina had an anxiety disorder caused by her ambition and pressure coming from her mother to become the perfect ballerina. Nina tried her best to make her mother's dreams come true without thinking about her mental health impact on her body. At the same time, Hatyanti (2022) explored the anxiety felt by the main character in the *Black Swan* (2010). Her exploration illuminated the complex interplay between psychological states and character traits, providing a nuanced understanding of the protagonist's internal struggle.

The latest research by Nastiti and Sutandio (2023) examined Nina's psychological state during the process of achieving her dreams. They found that uncontrolled desires could cause psychological disorders that influence a person's characteristics. They concluded a person's mental state can influence a person's characteristics. Collectively, the above literature reviews show the richness of scholarly discourse surrounding *Black Swan* (2010). Each study contributes insights that collectively weave a deeper understanding of Nina Sayers and the psychological complexities woven into her character. Meanwhile, this research aims to extend the existing literature by focusing on three aspects. The first is, to investigate how psychological stress specifically manifests itself in the context of the protagonist's experiences. The second is, to delve into how high-pressure artistic circumstances can distort reality. The third is to connect psychological stress and distorted reality to the protagonist's progression toward mental instability.

B. Method

The research method for the article is a qualitative research method with a psychoanalytic approach. This research uses text analysis and secondary data related to the film, such as previous studies, theses, and journals relevant to the research topic and the researchers watched *Black Swan* (2010) several times. This research aims to analyze the obsession for perfection reflected in the film *Black Swan* (2010) and portray the character Nina who has mental disorders, namely obsessive-compulsive disorder and schizophrenia, from a psychoanalytic perspective.

The author also uses the observation method to collect data about behavior and social interaction in the film *Black Swan* (2010). In this case, the writer observes the characters in the film and records their behavior related to psychoanalytic concepts such as id, ego, and superego. Observations can also be made on the interactions between the characters in the movie to identify the psychological dynamics that emerge in the movie.

The author uses the narrative analysis method which can be used to analyze the narrative structure of the film *Black Swan* (2010) from the perspective of Freudian theory. The author identifies narrative elements such as plot, characters, and themes that relate to psychoanalytic concepts such as libido, Oedipus complex, and self-defense mechanisms. In conducting this research, the author ensures that the research methods used are in line with the research objectives and can produce accurate and relevant data. The author must also ensure that the data collected is analyzed in an objective and structured manner and that the conclusions drawn are supported by the data at hand.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Obsession and Demands for Perfection in *Black Swan*

a. Psychological Stress Manifestation

Black Swan is a psychological thriller that examines the sacrifices that must be made to achieve artistic excellence. In the movie, Natalie Portman's character Nina is seen exhibiting a number of symptoms that are indicative of many psychological diseases, including paranoid schizophrenia, anorexia nervosa, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Dissociative identity disorder is the main psychiatric notion that is depicted in the film.

The pressure to be flawless, especially for her mother and her director/instructor, is one of Nina's primary sources of psychological stress. Ballet dancer Nina is a delicate and reserved woman who aspires to play the lead in

Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake," where she will have to portray both the sensual black swan and the soft white swan. Former dancer Erica, her mother, is a selfish and domineering person who gave up her profession to raise Nina. She has a small, messy apartment with Nina, where she is always watching over and critiquing her daughter's actions and appearance. In order for Nina to completely inhabit the part of the black swan, her director Thomas is a demanding and sexually aggressive man who urges her to "lose herself" and embrace her darker side. Lily, a newer and more assured dancer who possesses the traits of the black swan that Nina lacks, poses a threat to Nina as well.



Figure 1. Nina receiving sexual harassment from her director

(Source: NPR website)

Nina's high levels of worry, insecurity, and self-doubt are brought on by these external factors, and these in turn produce her internal conflicts and psychiatric problems. Nina has ritualistic, repetitive habits including picking at her nails, scratching her skin, and staring at her mirror that are indicative of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Additionally, she displays symptoms of anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder characterized by compulsive dieting, purging, and a distorted body image. She is observed sulking after eating, shoving away a piece of cake that her mother offers her, and looking at a grapefruit. In addition, Nina experiences delusions, hallucinations, and disordered thinking associated with paranoid schizophrenia. In addition to seeing herself in black throughout the theatre's corridors and at the train station, she begins to imagine that her stuffed animals are coming to life and making fun of her. She also imagines herself as a lesbian who stabs Lily with a glass shard in her fantasies.

Nina's psychological collapse and tension reach their peak at "Swan Lake"'s last performance when she emotionally and physically changes into the black swan. She feels wings sprouting out of her back and begins to sprout feathers, webbed feet, and

bird-like legs. As she dances the part of the black swan with passion and intensity, she also develops more aggression, confidence, and sensuality. But this metamorphosis has a price: she also loses her sense of self and her connection to reality. She thinks she killed Lily, who was her understudy, and that the glass shard—which was actually a piece of mirror—was what she used to stab herself. She smiled when she concluded the act and remarked, "I felt it. Perfect. It was perfect.", prior to passing out on stage and gushing blood from her injury.



Figure 2. Nina sees her own reflection

(Source: Screenqueens website)

b. Artistic Circumstances Distorting Reality

Black Swan, a psychological thriller directed by Darren Aronofsky and released in 2010, delves into the intense and competitive realm of the artistic environment, especially in professional ballet. The movie portrays a toxic work environment characterized by high pressure, ruthless competition, exploitation of sexuality, and psychological manipulation. These elements contribute to the unravelling of the protagonist, Nina Sayers, as she grapples with the demanding and cutthroat nature of the ballet world, ultimately leading to a psychological descent into madness.

The film *Black Swan* (2010) highlights the toxic work environment in a ballet company that demands perfection from its dancers. The main character, Nina, undergoes intense training and practices diligently both in the studio and at home to receive praise from the demanding director at the ballet studio. Additionally, Nina is asked to play two roles with contrasting characters, the white swan and the black swan, showcasing the company's expectation for dancers to be versatile for the benefit of the company. The depiction in the film serves as a portrayal of the extreme pressure and unrealistic expectations that exist in toxic work environments, as seen in this ballet company.

The depiction of a toxic work environment in the movie *Black Swan* (2010) is shown by the authority of the leader who has toxic behaviors. Thomas Leroy is the director of the NYC ballet company where the movie is set. Throughout the film, he is portrayed as a powerful and perfectionist figure. He chooses the main dancers for his company's new shows based on personal decisions. As a perfectionist, he does not tolerate the slightest mistake from his dancers and demands them to be perfect, especially Nina as the main dancer. He does not hesitate to manipulate and explore Nina's sexuality for the sake of the show and the company.

Amidst a toxic office atmosphere and pressure from her perfectionist boss, Nina is trapped in an unsupportive friendship environment. Her pursuit of the lead role not only fuels rivalry, but also damages relationships, further isolating her from her circle of friends. Throughout the movie, Nina's friendship life at the ballet studio is less than smooth. She lacks support from her fellow dancers at the ballet studio, so she has no close friends to have conversations with.

Nina experienced feelings of isolation and alienation within her work environment. The lack of genuine camaraderie among the dancers, combined with personal struggles, contributed to the feeling of disconnection. Throughout the movie, Nina spends her time in the studio by herself, watching the other dancers with their own circle of friends. Therefore, she feels lonely. The interaction between Nina and her fellow dancer Lily is an example of the competitive nature and rivalry that occurs in the ballet world depicted in the movie the *Black Swan* (2010). They compete for the director's consideration to play the main role of Swan Queen in the show. The rivalry between them contributes to the hostile and cruel atmosphere in the studio.

A toxic work environment can cause declining physical health. It can also simultaneously disrupt mental health and distort reality, which can contribute to or be a component of delusional thinking, as they involve a departure from an accurate understanding of the actual circumstances.

c. Protagonist's Mental Instability

In the scene of Nina and Lily going home together after drinking at the club, there are differences in their memories of what happened after they went home. Nina asks Lily why Lily left her the morning after they "slept" together. Lily denies that they slept together and assumes that Nina had a wet dream about Lily. Nina believed that Lily was trying to replace her as a "Queen Swan" and perceived Lily as a danger to her career. This affects Nina's mental health and triggers the emergence of her dark

alter ego. It can be concluded that this scene has an influence on Nina's mental health and triggers the emergence of her dark alter ego.

Nina became pressured and courageously herself to do something she had never done before, even if it meant she had to betray her mother. Her mother had always been the one who took care of her since she was young. One night, Nina went to a club with one of her colleagues, Lily. After partying, Nina and Lily went drinking in a pub and they were approached by two men who introduced themselves as Tom and Jerry. Lily placed a drug into Nina's drink when she was going to the bathroom. This drug's side effect is what caused Nina to hallucinate about making love with Lilly in her room. The truth, however, is quite the contrary.



Figure 3. Nina and Lily in Nina's room

(Source: Telegram)

Another distorted reality that affected Nina's mental health was when the night of the main event approached. Nina was overtaken by ambition, which enhanced her delusion. Nina was anxious at the start of the performance, making her performance less consistent. Frustrated, she encountered Lily in the dressing room as she was getting ready to change into her costume to play the role of Black Swan. When Nina saw this, she felt unacceptable and attempted to attack Lily. Nina saw herself in Lily's body after shoving her behind the glass and strangling her. All of her action was driven by her inner emotions. Her rage became a complete madness as if she was possessed.

Nina's fury became uncontrollable as she ultimately stabbed the stomach of the person in front of her with the glass that had already shattered, whom she mistook as Lily. That person's stomach started to bleed, making Nina panic as she decided to hide the person's body in the toilet. The show still continued as it was and Nina eventually succeeded in executing the role of Black Swan flawlessly. After this incident, She garnered appreciation from her director and colleagues. Nina was shocked when Lily approached her, congratulating her and apologizing for their previous fight. Nina thought Lily was dead after stabbing her with a shard of glass.

Then, she realized that she had stabbed herself rather than Lily. Nina's loss of control leads her to seriously harm herself.



Figure 4 and 5. Nina unconsciously stabbed Lily

(Source: Eli D on YouTube)

2. Id, Ego, and Superego in Black Swan

Based on the information gathered from results 1, 2, and 3, Nina's mental instability has been affected by the establishment of a strong preoccupation and her expectations for perfection from both herself and others. It can be connected to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, which holds that the id, ego, and superego must be integrated and balanced dynamically for the psyche to be healthy, since conflicts or imbalances between these elements may lead to mental instability. Moreover, the id, ego, and superego interplay significantly influence human behavior. Many literary critics and scholars have applied these Freudian psychoanalytic principles to the interpreted characters, plots, and themes in literature or cultural products such as film.

In *Black Swan*, the id represents Nina's primal instincts and desires, which can be seen when Nina tries to bite her director's lips when he kisses her without consent as self-defense. Then, her ego balances reality and those instincts, if she refuses to be kissed, she will not get the role as the little swan. She eventually reciprocates his kiss, and as time passes she gets used to how her trainer treats her. The superego reflects societal and moral standards. She knows that effort is not the only thing needed to get the role, so she has to accept the reality even if it is contrary to her morals. Nina's internal struggle mirrors these elements as she grapples with her desires, reality, and societal expectations, leading to a psychological unraveling in the pursuit of perfection in her ballet career.

D. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Black Swan* (2010) stands as a psychological horror movie that masterfully explores the intricate themes of ambition, perfectionism, and the psychological toll of obsession within the competitive world of professional ballet. The movie vividly portrays Nina Sayers' descent into madness as she relentlessly pursues artistic perfection,

blurring the boundaries between reality and hallucination. The movie received widespread critical acclaim for its compelling storytelling, Natalie Portman's exceptional performance, and portrayal of the profound psychological torment prevalent in the cutthroat realm of ballet.

The research framework embraced psychoanalytic criticism, drawing upon Sigmund Freud's foundational theories that delve into the complexities of the unconscious mind and its impact on human behavior and societal constructs. Freud's structural model of the mind, comprising the id, ego, and superego, offered a lens through which Nina Sayers' descent into insanity was comprehensively examined. Previous studies, such as those by Lumbanraja, Sembiring, and Sembiring (2021), Utami (2022), Hatyanti (2022), and the latest research by Nastiti and Sutandio (2023), have contributed valuable insights into Nina's psychological complexity, including her delusions, anxiety disorders, and the interplay between psychological stress and character traits. These studies collectively enrich our understanding of Nina's psyche and lay the groundwork for further exploration.

In essence, the research on *Black Swan* (2010) employs a psychoanalytic lens to unravel the intricate layers of Nina Sayers' psyche, shedding light on the impact of psychological stress and distorted reality in her journey toward artistic perfection, ultimately leading to her mental unraveling. The movie serves as a compelling canvas for the application of Freudian theories, offering a profound exploration of the human mind and its vulnerabilities in the pursuit of excellence.

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