

Supernatural Elements in *Black Swan* Show How Broken Mirrors Provide Clarity

Beautiful, destruction, disturbing, and lustful are all used to describe the film *Black Swan* directed by Darren Aronofsky. The film's themes take words with a typically beautifully elegant connotation and showcases them as their antithesis. It takes the grace of a ballet dancer and turns it into a demonic nightmare; it takes someone who is pure and sweet and turns them into a devil creature intent on withstanding any danger in order to reach perfection. The story follows an ignorant young woman steadfast on accomplishing her goals as a dancer. When tenebrous obstacles present themselves, the protagonist, Nina, drives herself over the edge and into insanity in order to hold on to her dreams. *Black Swan* uses supernatural elements to show how Nina slips into madness by showing uncanny events take place, like her reflection disassociating itself from her body. Mirrors play a big role in this film not only because of the dancing aspect of the film, but they also act as a catalyst to her insanity by Nina visually losing herself more and more in front of a mirror. With a huge focus on dichotomy, they play a pivotal part as they provide the perfect visual example of how two extremes can be represented through the same person. The use of supernatural elements in the film *Black Swan*, provides clarity of inner desires through a depiction of mental illness as a serendipitous demon that demonstrates true identity.

The film *Black Swan* parallels Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* but has a modern day, dark twist. The film defines the ballet as a

“...virginal girl, pure and sweet, trapped in the body of a swan. She desires freedom, but only true love can break the spell. Her wish is granted in the form of a prince. But before he can declare his love, her lustful twin, the Black Swan, tricks and seduces him.

Devastated, the White Swan leaps off a cliff, killing herself. But, in death, finds freedom.” (Black Swan 7).

That same description can be used to describe the movie; the main difference being that one person plays both the White and Black swan and in the play, it is two different individuals. The works of art differ when it comes to the meaning of love. *Swan Lake* has the typical love story between a man and a woman while the love in *Black Swan* is better categorized as passion; passion belonging to the protagonist, Nina, of her dancing and her drive to be the best ballerina. Themes represented in the film are: good vs evil, or dark vs light, or black vs white; there are metaphors upon metaphors for the themes. For example, while some descriptors are beauty, love, passion, and ballet which are typically words with a positive and enchanting connotation, the film redefines their capabilities in a dark and disturbing way. It shows the pain in beauty: like Nina’s anorexia and bulimia in order to maintain her shape, and destruction in love, specifically how passion turns into aggression: when Nina pushes herself over the edge in order to maintain her love. The film uses the antithesis of words to show their true meaning. Even the connotation of “ballet” is contrasted as the film reveals itself to be a horror/psychological thriller; not typical words used to describe a ballet. Director, Darren Aronofsky’s explains it as

“... a poetic metaphor for the birth of an artist, that is, as a visual representation of Nina’s psychic odyssey toward achieving artistic perfection and of the price to be paid for it.” (Bali para. 4). The film maintains a disturbing undertone but it’s nebulous mood comes shining through as we see the progression of Nina’s decaying psychosis. As Nina disappears into madness and cannot distinguish what is reality and what is a manifestation of her mind, neither can the audience, they become just as disgruntled. Nina’s personality transforms along with her

mental state; she starts out as a representation of the White Swan: an immature, virginal girl, pure and sweet; she always wears pink, still in her mother's care, even her name embodies her personality because *niña* in Spanish means "little girl". She breaks free of her mother's grasp, starts changing her ways including changing the way she dresses to imitate those in her life she is told resemble perfection, and therefore, the Black Swan begins to take a hold of her soul and manifests inside her. As Nina loses her ignorance, she simultaneously loses her mental stability; she drives herself over the edge chasing an unattainable perfection.

Black Swan leans heavily on its supernatural elements to showcase themes like the cost of perfection, the unexpected virtue of ignorance, and how a distorted reality provides clarity. The presence of the paranormal hallucinations distorts the protagonist as well as the audience, so neither know what is going on, therefore, forcing Nina to change in order to adapt to her new environment as a mature dancer. Supernatural elements do not consist of the typical ghosts, witches, ghouls, and whatnot, but rather a metaphysical being; Nina has schizophrenia so the celestial beings take the form of demons that plague her mind. They call the authenticity of reality into question;

"a genre of the Gothic in which the laws of everyday reality remain intact and permit an explanation or even dismissal of allegedly supernatural phenomena. In Ann Radcliffe's novels, the author allows both the character and reader to question throughout the entire novel whether the weird phenomena described are happening in a setting of known laws of nature or in a setting where miracles or supernatural intervention must be in place to account for the strange events." (Glossary of Literary Gothic Terms para. 40)

The uncanny events that occur in the film are somewhat plausible. It opens up eyes to different versions of alternate realities and the correct one remains unclear, but it differs greatly from supernatural gadgetry. It refers to the physical elements in a gothic works that represent how the various supernatural beings display their presence and unearthly abilities. (Glossary of Literary Gothic Terms 23). The supernatural trope in *Black Swan* presents itself in order to confuse the audience; each member walks out with a different interpretation of what it all meant.

The use of the supernatural in the film *Black Swan* takes the shape of Nina as an evil doppelganger and is used to show what she truly desires to be because she is told that is what perfection is. Nina's inner desires are revealed in the very first scene of the film: she dreams of dancing the role of the white swan in the prologue of *Swan Lake*; a scene synonymous with the rest of the film. Both portray Nina as the white swan but then her love reveals itself, but shortly turns into the devil, the devil then transforms Nina and steals her innocence. (Black Swan 1) The writers: Mark Heyman, Andres Heinz, and John McLaughlin, made this the opening scene because it informs the audience of her passion for dancing and that she was made to play the role of the white swan. Director Darren aronofsky notoriously makes films about how the power of obsession drives people over the edge into unrecoverable madness, and *Black Swan* is no exception. It seems like his thought process for coming up with a film would be along the lines of 'How can I (Darren Aronofsky) disturb the audience in a new way to demonstrate the dangers of perfection?'. For this film in particular, he uses the gothic element of supernatural. That does not mean witches are flying around or ghosts are haunting her, it means Nina's schizophrenia allows her to see demons in her head; demons that take the form of herself and set out to kill her. They start out as indecisive figments that plague her day to day life; she may be on a subway,

look to the next car over, and see a dancer that looks just like herself, and even moves the same way she does (*Black Swan 4*), or she will be on her way home from a dance class when

“She hears the sound of soft FOOTSTEPS approaching. She stops, and the other
FOOTSTEPS stop.

She looks up and sees the faint outline of a SLENDER WOMAN standing there, almost
ghostlike.

Nina starts walking again, keeping her head down, and the other woman continues as
well.

As they pass each other, Nina glances at the woman’s face and discovers...

The woman looks EXACTLY LIKE HER.

But the moment passes as the woman continues walking.

Nina stares after her, perturbed.” (*Black Swan 12*).



Black Swan is divided into acts in the way a ballet is divided into acts. Said events happened in act 1 which consists of the 15 fifteen minutes of the film. As it progresses, the demon gets worse and it begins to turn on Nina. When alone, it takes advantage of the opportunity and torments her

until interrupted. Nina will be in the bathtub, submerged underwater when suddenly, there is blood dripping from above; she opens her eyes and distorted by the water, she sees herself peering at her from above. (*Black Swan* 49). As each act progresses, the demon gets worse and Nina sustains more injuries as a result of her insanity. It affects her, both mentally and physically; as she sees the affects the demon has on her daily life, the more abuse she obtains to her physical well being, such as: a broken toe, rashes, and most repulsive of all, a hangnail that when peeled, pulls the skin all the way back to her second knuckle. The entire film takes place from Nina's point of view, so the audience is just as confused as Nina when she begins to see things that are not actually there; her mind disassociates with her body, therefore, she loses her credibility, or ethos, because the audience cannot trust what they see. While her body fatigues, her paranoia grows; her mind appearing to unravel as well. In an article about Natalie Portman in the January '11 issue of *Vogue*, Aronofsky pretty much sums up the film when he says, "The only way to be perfect is to allow chaos and madness into your life." (the opinioness world para. 12). Supernatural elements in the film *Black Swan* are used to reveal Nina's emphatic desires of dancing by having her hallucinations attack her as a representation of a stressor as a result of her desire to play the part perfectly and becoming the ballerina of which she always dreamt of being.

The duality between the two sides of the swans is made obvious throughout the film by various channels that use the juxtaposition of black against white, or light against dark. The most important one is the dichotomy of black and white shown in the setting, characters, and the illusions that appeared to the protagonist from her insanity. Aronofsky uses this logos technique to contrast black and white to symbolize darkness of characters that opposed Nina by aggression or seduction. Nina is the epitome of innocence and naivete; first, in the beginning of the film,

Nina is always wearing a white or pink costume that signifies the pure nature of her White Swan side.



As her hallucinations come into play, they wear black, dark makeup, and clearly contrast her visually.



This cues the audience into seeing how the world sees Nina and how she sees the rest of the world. Most people associate light colors with innocence and purity so the audience can logically piece together the black vs. white without someone having to straightforwardly tell them that light is synonymous with naivete, and her competition wears dark colors to contrast her. Nina's visions were not her only competitors, there is a new girl in the dance company by the name of Lily who perfectly embodies the Black Swan and therefore, becomes an immediate threat to Nina. People tell her she needs to be more like Lily who wears black, is sexually seductive, and can easily lose herself in what she is doing.



Whenever she encounters Lily, there is a disruption of balance, an intruding presence that indicates the opposition of the Black Swan, to herself. Lily is personified as the Black Swan because of the tattoos on her back, her hair down, she drinks, does drugs, and sleeps around with different men. Soon enough, Lily becomes apart of Nina's hallucinations. The writers use pathos to show her emotional determinacy to beat and conquer in order to accomplish her dreams. It is all of these overwhelming thoughts of fear and passion that influence her paranoia and drives her over the edge causing her to hallucinate people attacking her. Nina would see flashes of herself in Lily through darkness, intimacy and aggression, indicating that Lily was a reflection of Nina's concealed wickedness. The Black Swan's character of lust, guile, and sensuality is a sinister

beauty that Lily represented, and what Nina desired to become. Nina gradually started to dress like Lily by wearing darker colored clothing with less material covering her skin. They also have similar appearances so it would be easy to mistake them; the director did this on purpose because Lily often turns into Nina in her visions as another representation as herself being her own worst enemy so their similarities made it easier to confuse the audience and make them do a double take. (Picture below is of Lily, indicated by the tattoos on her back, transforming into Nina)



Therefore, Nina loses even more ethos in the eyes of the audience because she cannot differentiate herself from another individual. Not only does she confuse herself with another person, but at the climax of the film and the climax of her insanity, she physically turns into the Black Swan. The portraits of Nina that her mother painted come to life and start chanting “sweet girl” and “my turn” (*Black Swan* 83), she then runs into her bedroom to get away from the noise. Once in her bedroom, she gets a sharp pain in her shoulder; she pulls off her sweater to reveal inflamed, pulsating skin. Tiny black bumps start to bubble up to the surface of her skin. She pulls at one until she cut through her skin getting it out. It is a tiny, feather like structure. As she looks at it, her eyes turn red, the rest of the feathers sprout, and her knees snap backwards like a bird’s.



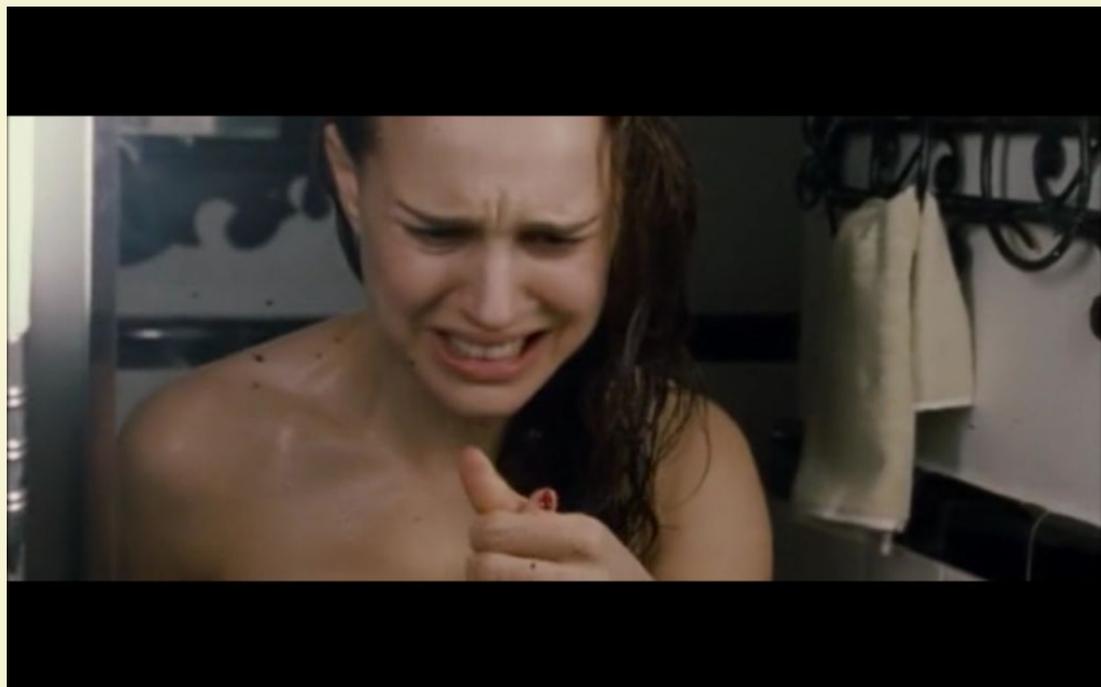
Nina has mentally and physically transcended into the Black Swan. Supernatural elements are used to show the duality between Nina's personality with what she needs to become through color, lighting, and another character with the ideal qualities of the Black Swan.

The other major and most obvious way Darren Aronofsky uses duality is in the symbolism of mirrors. The director's intentions for the mirror was its power to reveal hidden identities. In the scenes where Nina saw herself in the mirror, it reflected the illusion of an evil as her reflection would disassociate from her body and turns on her as if it were about to attack. The mirror presented to her the darkness within herself that metaphorically depicted the evolution into the Black Swan; on one side of the glass was an innocent girl who just wanted to dance, on the other side was a dark demon that wanted to break free from her chains. The film uses the power of the mirror as a source for definition or its reflection that reveals a true identity from the subconscious that is often concealed.



Darren Aronofsky asserts that we all have a dark-side, even sweet and innocent ballet dancers. Mirrors are used throughout the film and as it progresses, mirrors begin to betray Nina and show her descent into madness. Dancers cannot escape the wrath of a mirror; they practice in front of it for hours on end and go home to where mirrors probably hang in their homes'. The director uses this to his advantage because he can logically throw in a mirror everywhere without the audience feeling like it is out of place. Nina is unable to escape the mirror as there is at least one in almost every scene of the film; it feels like hell for her because they are the primary home for her delusions. The first time we see the character of Nina is through her reflection in the mirror. She is beautiful and graceful as she dances but her body is clearly under stress as she cracks her limbs and stretches them. (*Black Swan 2*). Once her transcendence into the Black Swan begins, there is one particular bathroom moment where Nina and her reflection battle, almost literally. Realizing that she's been scratching, Nina frantically clips her nails. As she does, the camera moves to the right. At the same moment, partially camouflaged by camera movement, her expression changes

abruptly: her frantic face is momentarily calm and deeply mischievous. The Black Swan sabotages and the white swan cleans up the mess.



(*Black Swan* 50). The duality makes its first prominent appearance here as the devil inside of Nina comes out to get her. The Black Swan reveals itself physically whenever Nina is in front of a mirror so that the audience can see the parallels along with Nina. The Black Swan lingers a bit longer in a later scene where Nina is being fitted for her costume and while looking into an infinite array of mirrors,

“Nina looks uncomfortable, disliking the scrutiny of her body.

She hears a sharp RUSTLE. Like someone’s scratching.

She looks up at the mirror. Her reflection stares back.

Behind the first reflection, another Nina has her arm behind her back, like she’s scratching her shoulder.

Nina leans to get a better look...

COSTUMER

Sit *still*, I’m almost done.

Nina startles. The reflection has returned to normal, its

hand back at its side.” (*Black Swan* 84)

Nina, the Black Swan, is involuntarily deteriorating her own body; whenever the alternate side of her shines through, she bears a physical disembodiment showing the darker side taking over and controlling her. Due to Nina not being able to reconcile her own reflection, the audience cannot trust what is going on; the only thing they can do is feel for her emotions and try to put the puzzle pieces of the film together as logically as they can. Nearing the climax of the film, Nina practices in the studio the night before the big opening; the piano player leaves and she is

left alone. She watches herself in the mirror as she dances ever so elegantly; suddenly, she notices her reflection lags, and then doesn't move when she does. Frighten, she steps backwards and nearly bumps into the mirror behind her. With her back to the mirror, her reflection turns around and faces Nina with a devious look on her face and the lights go out.



With Nina not witnessing the second reflection, the audience is left wondering how much is actually in her head and how much of it is a dark magic. Ethos comes into play here because the audience has no expertise to build off of; they are completely in the dark and are left to develop their own interpretation of the events. The last time Nina deals with a mirror in the film is the most significant and perhaps the most confusing scene of them all. In the scene, Nina returns to her dressing room after dancing the white swan on opening night and falling because of her inability to lose herself in the dance; a quality the black swan has, but the white does not. She burst through the doors ready to cry when she sees Lily in the black swan costume

“LILY

How about...I dance the Black Swan for you?

Nina looks into the mirror. Instead of Lily's reflection there's the Double.

NINA

Leave me alone. Leave me alone.

DOUBLE (in mirror)

But it's my turn.

Nina's fury rises up from inside.

NINA

Leave me alone!!!

She charges... And smashes her into the WALL LENGTH MIRROR, shattering it. Shards fall everywhere.

The Double flips Nina over and wails on her. Punch after punch.

Nina does her best to block the onslaught.

They scuffle, knocking things over, bumping into walls. The Double gets her hands around Nina's neck...

Gasping for air, Nina tries to pull the hands free, but she's too strong.

Her hands frantically scramble along the surface of the floor. The fingers barely touch the edge of a MIRROR SHARD, but can't grasp it.

The Double squeezes down.

The blood vessels in Nina's eyes BURST again. Her neck starts to stretch unnaturally. Strength surges through her body and she lunges...

Finally grabbing the SHARD.

And DRIVES it into the Double's stomach.

Nina glances at her hand, cut by the mirror, then back up.

The Double is now LILY. Stunned, Lily looks down and touches the stab wound.

NINA (CONT'D)

It's my turn.

Lily coughs up blood and collapses, dead." (*Black Swan* 96)

It is later discovered that Nina did not stab and kill Lily, but she used the broken mirror shard to kill herself. The mirror comes back into play to hurt her again, but more permanently and undeniably this time. Nina dies just as the final act of the play is over. Her dancing was perfect, she was perfect. Nina, the white swan, finally took back control of her own life and put an end to her demons; she was content and died with a sense of freedom; she had accomplished everything she ever wanted to. Nina eventually triumphed over the dichotomy of the mirrors and the supernatural devil that lived with them will never return.

Black Swan received five Oscar nominations in 2011 due to its effectiveness as a story and its ability to disturb people while simultaneously making them realize the destructive beauty that accompanies any art form. Supernatural elements are used to make that come across; due to their inexplicability and a negative connotation, the trope disturbs people because of its anomalous effect. The trope takes the form as a demon in the mind of a schizophrenic who obtains the illness from the stress put on her by her art. Therefore, supernatural elements are used

to show how the mind of an artist deteriorates as a result of stressing over their work. The contrast between good and evil drives the story and makes it such a fascinating watch; Nina represents the good and naivete while her double, the inexplicable vision, represents the evil and the devil that lives inside every person. This is most effectively communicated through the use of mirrors in the film. Nina may look relatively similar on both sides of the mirror, but the person looking into the mirror and the one looking back are polar opposites. The supernatural elements come to life whenever a mirror is present and usually progress. The first glimpses of the double are caught in a mirror and also the visual cue that tells the audience her psychotic rampage is escalating. The mirror carries great metaphoric weight for both Nina the psychotic, and Nina the dancer. Mirrors are never thought of as 'untrustworthy', so when they differ from the norm, Nina loses her ethos as a character. The hallucinations of the demon that takes the form of an evil Nina makes the protagonist unreliable as a narrator. The audience sees everything through her eyes: the windows to her soul; but those windows become clouded as what truly loves inside of her begins to come out in the form of a Black Swan keen on introducing her to a dauntless life. While most hide from the darkness inside, Nina illogically faces it until it engulfs her and she loses power over her former self. She fears the darkness but the light seems like even more of a hell for her. She has to face the music and grow into her true being in order to live out her dream of dancing in *Swan Lake*. The uncanny supernatural trope in *Black Swan* optimizes the themes of destructive beauty and how people are their own worst enemy supremely.

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