

Perfection and Effortlessness: Nina Sayers Struggles for Both

Perfection is something many people try to attain for. They will spend much of their life trying to reach it without realizing perfection doesn't truly exist. *Black Swan*, a film by Darren Aronofsky takes the idea of being perfect to new extremes and brings out the best and worst in the protagonist Nina Sayers. Nina is a ballerina in the New York City Ballet and is anticipating the moment when she can finally be immersed in the spotlight. She is given that chance when she gets the lead in *Swan Lake*. Nina's many moments of struggles are apparent throughout the film, and it shows her descent into true madness in the process of becoming the swan queen. The film *Black Swan* uses evil doppelgangers, her transformation in the black swan, and the simple uses of dark and light to portray Nina's journey to find perfection, and ultimately her journey to destruction.

Aronofsky uses many methods to portray these things in the film. From the very first shot of the film we are given Nina. She is dressed in white, bathed in light, and surrounded by complete darkness. It is an extreme long shot at first and then transforms into a medium close up shot of her feet while they danced. This shows her techniques, and how they are precise. The following shot is a rear shot of a dark figure from the left and a long shot of Nina still bathed in light. She is also in a rear shot. This dream sequence depicts the greater conflict of the film. Nina is used to being the innocent girl and with the imminent struggles of being the Black Swan and trying to attain that level of perfection she loses many parts of herself. With the film beginning this, it also shows how Nina feels throughout most of the film. She feels paranoid.

The dream she has becomes prophetic when Thomas, the director of the company decides that *Swan Lake* would be the next ballet performed. While he goes through the

classroom tapping shoulders he tells the story of Swan Lake, he states: "We all know the story. 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 nearly 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 of a cliff killing herself and, in death, finds freedom." Now to break up each part he says it tells the story of *Black Swan* perfectly. "Virginal girl, pure and sweet," This first statement describes Nina at the start of the film. She is constantly reminded from Thomas that she has the white swan qualities, and that she easily portrays the virginal innocent side of the coin. Her mother also reminds her of these qualities, she even goes as far as to nickname her "sweet girl" a name that comes up several times in the film. "Trapped in the body of a swan." While Nina isn't literally a swan, she is trapped in this lifestyle she has built around herself. She has built an idea of perfection and an almost childlike disposition, which "traps" her into only being good. "She desires freedom, but only true love can break the spell." Nina desires perfection and is constantly reminded by Thomas that to gain that perfection she needs to let go and be free. Nina envies this quality from Lily among others. While *Black Swan* is anything but a love story, Thomas Leroy can represent the true love figure. Nina views Thomas very highly and several moments throughout the film she comments on him being a genius. Nina views him as a guide to make her better at dancing and finally attain the sense of perfection she longs for. When he invites her back to his apartment and asks personal questions, she blushes and responds in a nervous fashion like any girl with a crush would. The next part is: "Her wish is nearly granted in the form of a prince, but before he can declare his love her lustful twin, the black swan, tricks and seduces him." Nina's wish is granted, but in the form of Thomas and

mostly the lead role in the production. She almost has everything she wants, but it comes at a great cost because she begins to encounter that 'lustful' and evil twin. Several times in the film she sees herself in different people, but mostly in Lily. A new girl who is everything Nina isn't, the black swan. The seducing occurs because after she spends a wild night with Lily she oversleeps and when she makes it to the company Lily is dancing her part. Nina believes that Lily is attempting to take her part and essentially sabotage her. While the audience knows this isn't true and Nina has created the evil doppelganger and projected it onto Lily. While watching Lily perform, Nina casts her a disdainful look and puts all the aggression and lack of control onto this single idea that she is trying to take her role away from her. Another reason Nina is inclined to project the lustful part onto Lily is because there are several instances where Lily is shown to be promiscuous. This made it easy for her to assume Thomas slept with Lily and that's how Lily is able to Bogart the role of the Swan Queen. The final statement says: "Devastated the white swan leaps of a cliff killing herself and, in death, finds freedom" Nina spent most of the movie trying to reach the level of perfection and after the hallucinations become to real she loses it and begins to stand up for herself against her mother. Her mother in a fit of sadness says: "Where's my sweet girl, huh?" And Nina yells while breaking her mothers fingers. "She's gone." The role has been slowly turning her into the black swan and these last few moments of the film is when she makes that final transformation. Much like the story, Nina finds freedom in death as well, but it isn't because she is heartbroken, but because she finally reached that level of perfection and she can't ever reach it again.

Doppelgangers are huge things in this film. Nina has several different doppelgangers. She has her mother, which represents what she could turn out to be if she

wasn't successful. She has Beth, which represents what she could turn out to be if she were successful. She has Lily, who is someone she resembles, but also someone who carries a confidence she doesn't have. She also has a doppelganger within herself, that doppelganger represents an even darker person than all of these women combined. Nina's doppelganger within herself is also very self-destructive. The audience first meets her on a dark New York City street late at night. This already sets up an eerie encounter for her. They are at opposite ends of the street and are walking towards one another. Nina has a nervous expression on her face as she hesitates to walk forward while her doppelganger walks towards her with unadulterated confidence. When Nina finally gets a glimpse of her doppelganger, her double is smiling at her. Her double does this several times throughout the film. When Nina smiles in the film it is typically a shy and naïve smile like when Thomas introduces her as the new Swan Queen. When her double smiles it is a smile that is teasing Nina. The double is doing everything Nina can't and giving off a confidence that Nina simply can't exude. The scene also shows the use of light and dark by the costumes Nina and her double are wearing. Nina typically wears white and light pink colors to show how she is white as snow and innocent. The double is always wearing dark colors and many characters are also shown wearing those same dark tones. This is a constant reminder that Nina is the sweet innocent girl and everybody else are bad people who want to corrupt her. In the first encounter between Nina and the double, right as they pass each other on the wall beside the double it says: Ghost in graffiti. This shows how Nina is seeing a ghost, but she is seeing everything she could be to emulate the Black Swan. This is the birth of her transformation into that person.

The encounters between Nina and her doppelganger always catch her off guard and get worse as the film progresses. The more pressure Nina feels the stronger they get. Her double is shown to be responsible for the scratches on her back as well. When Nina is submerged in the bathtub she opens her eyes to nothing. When she opens them again she sees herself standing above her with small drops of blood dropping in the water. When she pops out of the water she sees that her nails are all bloody. This shows that she is the one responsible for scratching her back even though the audience never technically sees it. This also shows that she is trying to break her own skin so that the black swan can emerge from within her.

After Lily has become Nina's understudy, Nina can't take the pressure that someone could replace her and she goes to see Beth. She lays the things she took from her out on the table and Beth reacts in surprise. Nina cries and pleads that she finally understands and that Lily is trying to replace her. Beth remarks in amused irritation: "You stole my things?" and Nina responds in kind: "I was just trying to be perfect like you." Nina carried great respect for Beth and only wished to be her, but she realizes she may be Beth's Lily and everything has suddenly taken a dark turn for her. Beth breathes out: "Perfect? No, I'm not perfect. I'm nothing." Beth begins to stab herself with the nail file that Nina has brought. Beth continues to say: "Nothing." Beth then turns into Nina's double and her double is still wearing that composed expression while stabbing her face saying nothing over and over again. The double does it several times because she is trying to break Nina down and make her squirm, and maybe realize that all of this pressure and stress is becoming too much for her and these hallucinations are reaching an ugly head for Nina's brain.

The audience can infer that the double is neither negative nor a positive thing in Nina's life, but that she is necessary for Nina to branch out at the end and finally perform the Black Swan. The climactic moment between Nina and her double comes at the end of the film and cements Nina's transformation into the "Black Swan." While coming back to her dressing room Nina encounters Lily applying the makeup for the Black Swan and wearing the costume. Her tattoo stretched across her back of bird wings. This tattoo represents why Lily is a better representation of the black swan. While applying the makeup she turns around and reveals herself to be Nina's double. The use of light and dark is expressed again in costume. Nina is still wearing the white swan while her double is wearing the black swan costume. The moment finally brings a change to Nina and allows her to face her doppelganger head on. Nina pushed her double into the mirror and breaks it, shattering the idea of 'doubles' and her double begins to choke her. While this occurs her neck elongates, showing her literal transformation into the black swan. Nina grabs a shard of mirror and stabs her double in the stomach. The double then turns back into Lily and Nina hides her body. After she hides the body Nina has become the black swan and no longer is haunted by Lily or her double. She has finally become the person she has been aiming to be and she can now perfectly dance the black swan. After she finishes the dance and has perfected it she returns to her dressing room to find a puddle of blood. This is soon discovered to be a figment of her imagination when she sees Lily alive and well. Nina soon discovers she stabbed herself and that she was fatally wounded. For Nina to get rid of her fears and doubts she had to kill that innocent part of herself and become the dark double she had been running from.

It is clear that Nina begins her emotional transformation from the beginning to the very end. The literal transformation is something that is also shown from beginning to end and how she goes from dancer to swan. It begins early in the movie when her mother notices scratch marks on her back and Nina brushes it off. It gives the audience the impression that Nina has struggled with self-harm which is an ironic concept because she also strives to be and look perfect. Nina is also a contradiction within herself because even though she strives to be perfect with her looks and techniques as a dancer she will injure herself and starve herself even though these things will only serve to hinder her perfection. The marks on her back soon become worse and worse, but what is even more unsettling is how horrified she looks by the marks on her back. There are also moments where different bodily things are heightened to look grotesque. When she stretches her feet when she get out of the bed in the morning she cracks her feet in ways many cannot and it causes someone to internally cringe. Her feet in that moment almost look webbed like a swan because the toes form into one unique shape. This also mirrors where when she is about to go on stage and perform she is trying to pull her toes apart but they are literally webbed together. The big transformation from dancer to swan is when her and her mother reach their climactic moment and Nina is going through her emotional breakdown. While trying to lock her mother out of her room she goes to her mirror to pull out black feathers from her skin and while doing that her eyes have turned a blood red color. The transformation isn't quite complete because she is still denying it, but it is something that is occurring slowly. While her mom wrestles with the door Nina screams: "Get out!" into her mothers face and slamming the door on her fingers. When she screams she hits high pitch notes that sound birdlike and she sounds like she is squawking. After she slams her mother's hands

her legs bend backwards and snap. She then falls and hits her head. This part in the film shows how she is finally defying her mother and the person that she has always been told to be. She doesn't allow her mother to come into her room even though she always usually does. The final transformation for Nina happens on stage in the middle of the performance. While dancing the black swan and doing the turns she had so much trouble with from the beginning; she is able to nail it. While turning her wings continue to sprout from her shoulders and eventually she doesn't have arms, but just wings. The use of black and white reemerge when instead of just wearing a black costume she is completely submerged in black and black feathers. After she finishes she gets the response she was hoping for, but the trouble was going back to who she was before. Nina couldn't take back everything she had done. She killed her double when her double represented the black swan, but Nina also stabbed herself killing the white swan as well. The perfect performance could only be completed by killing herself and Nina was happy and relieved by that at the end.

The movie takes the audience through a journey about Nina and her transformation into the black swan. She encounters many conflicts on her way to succeeding, but eventually does and reaches the perfection she had always aimed to. This perfection did come at a great price, but Nina didn't care what it took. Her relationships with the people around her were a dysfunctional crutch, more specifically her mother who called her sweet girl and put the idea that she belonged in the corp rather than in the spotlight. Nina proved her wrong and she also proved Thomas wrong. She proved to him that she could seduce him on stage even though he told her she couldn't. Nina didn't take the pressures put forth by them, but the pressures she had created for herself. This caused her demise, but it also caused her perfection too.