

Come Dance with Us and the Black Swan

by Cathy Shepherd & Van Waddy



Warning: this review contains plot spoilers

We sat before that wondrous screen of fantasy and imagination, surrendering ourselves to images and metaphors that sent us immediately to that Jungian treasure-trove of interpretation and insight we both find so irresistible. We share with you our own fascination with Darren Aronofsky's latest film, "The Black Swan," in hopes it will initiate a dialogue with all those Jungians also intrigued by this film. We do not present ourselves as an authority. Come play with us, instead, come dance with us, to the images, the possibilities, the depth of this film's richness.

We both delighted in the fact that it is a premonitory dream that Aronofsky uses to open the story. The principal character, Nina Sayers, played flawlessly by Natalie Portman, even calls this dream a "prologue," and it is, indeed, a premonition of the unfolding tale. In this dream, the Black Swan/Prince morphs into the Demon Lover that allures Nina down her path of self destruction. Nina is not conscious enough to realize what the dream forecasts, cannot recognize the destructive energy of the Demon Lover's pull toward perfectionism, sees the dream rather as a promissory note of her own attainable perfection.

Her bed pillow in this opening scene – a white pillow with black spirals – is the only trace of black in a room filled with pink and white. Nina's smothering, controlling mother, played eerily by Barbara Hershey, keeps Nina imprisoned in childlike submission, crowded in by her fluffy stuffed animals and dancing ballerina music box, nightly tucking her in, closing all else out.

This play of color, this overall black and white canvas punctuated only by Nina's puella pink, is central to the story. The sets themselves, the white swan costumes, the foreboding black of the intruding dark characters, the dark tunnels and the

mother's dark paintings, all play on our growing suspense and dread. At the film's outset, Nina sees herself passing her in a dark tunnel, a dark Nina, suggesting she needs to face her own dark side -- another premonitory image.

Aronofsky's use of mirrors throughout this film tracks Nina's attempts to gain some sense of self, while also chronicling her progressing psychosis. At one point, Nina sees her own image in the mirror become multiple independent entities, each taking on a life of their own, no longer under her control. The use of so many mirrors also suggests there is no proper mirroring of Nina – only distorted mirroring – from the principal characters in her life.

Nina is continuously reminded by her mother that she gave up her own chance to be a great ballerina in order to have her. That, paired with her mother's inability to tolerate her own aging, projects a mirror-mirror-on-the-wall that disembodies Nina even further. Nina *does* make several attempts to develop her masculine. She wears earrings without mother's input and flaunts her ability to choose something for herself. She eventually uses a large stick to block her mother's access to her bedroom. Her attempts to separate and develop her own masculine, however, activate the Witch in her mother and unleash more negative energy in herself.

Nina's ballet mentor and artistic director, Thomas, played deliciously by Vincent Cassel, is a Puer, a handsome sorcerer, unable to be the Father figure Nina needs in order to balance out and protect Nina from the Negative Mother. He knows Nina needs to develop her masculine, sexual energy in order to dance what he envisions, but doesn't know how to appropriately help her do that. Instead, he raises his glass to "beauty" while dismissing imperfection and menopausal aging.

Nina tries to steal perfection from the reigning princess-of-the-ballet-floor, Beth, played by Winona Ryder, by taking her red lipstick, a metaphor for the vibrant life force absent in Nina. She puts on the red lipstick and tries to seduce Thomas into giving her the leading role (without doing the hard work of developing her own needed masculine ground). Thomas knows she can dance the White Swan but when she bites him when he approaches her, he gives her the role, hoping she can find the Black Swan within herself as well.

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One of the more interesting characters is Lily, the red-hot-seductive Shadow persona of Nina. Lily is everything Nina is not, empowered, seductive, alive with sexual energy, ready at any moment to take over Nina's role as Swan. She even looks like Nina. The interplay between Nina and Lily is evocative, mesmerizing and erotic. Nina is too young, too imbalanced to hold the tension of Lily's dark impulsive side. Opposites collide in scenes both riveting and remarkable.

As she descends in psychosis, Nina's fingernails begin to bleed with no provocation, suggesting something eating away inside her. The unexplained scratches on the right side of her back begin to emit small black feathers. Her paranoia becomes fierce and her determination relentless.

As she finally digs within to find both her white and black swans, Nina witnesses her body grotesquely morphing, cracking, bleeding, betraying her. The ensuing energy is too powerful. Unable to integrate it consciously, she flips into the dark, negative side—symbolized by the growth of enormous black wings that emerge from the scratches on her back—internalizes the artistic moment, plants an archetypal kiss on Thomas, and burns herself up in the flame that erupts when we humans try to dance too close to Spirit.

In the end, it is a mirror that takes Nina down. In a delusional confrontation with Lily on opening night, Nina turns a piece of shattered mirror against herself (thinking it is Lily she is stabbing) and stabs herself. Unable to internalize the mirroring she needs, it becomes a tool of destruction in her own hand. Unable to see true beauty in herself and believing she is loveable only in perfection, Nina—after her triumphant dance, her swan performance -- dies, or surrenders, happily uttering, "Perfect. I was perfect."

This film is a cautionary tale suggesting we humans can embody perfection only for the moment. Nina was unable to develop a strong enough container to hold the tension of the opposites. Her anorexia, her addiction to perfection, her inability to integrate her shadow or her emerging sexual self, and her eventual psychosis tipped the scales.

There are a few gifted individuals able to constellate what we might consider a perfect performance, but they must then move back into the real world and live what it means to be human.

Underground

by Jo Lynne Mariolis

through Manhattan a maiden trips, on stylish
bar stools sits and sips: pomegranatinis go
down without a strain.

later crossing at a stumble, at the platform's
edge she tumbles, and falls into
the path of a train

supine, she lies between the tracks, bystanders
yells have no effect, nor the clatter of
the cars coming near.

then the crowd becomes theatrical, makes gestures bold
yet practical; the conductor stops the train
with feet to spare.

revived and asked if she's been drinking, she answers
mystified and blinking, "just six I think, and
how'd I get down here?"

a station camera shoots the tale, and dailies race
to make a sale: "Subway Miracle, Party Girl
Cheats Death!"

though cunning Hades failed today, amused, he
winks and turns away; this Persephone walks with
liquor on her breath

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