

## The Giant Explanation of Black Swan

Welcome to the giant explanation of Black Swan. What follows are the vital details of Black Swan studied, analyzed, deconstructed, dissected, unraveled, and presented for your review. What happened? Why it happened? Let's get some answers.

Here's the outline:

The importance of The Wrestler  
Why it's called Black Swan  
Under Pressure: the personal cost of ballet  
Black Swan explained (mirrors and hallucinations)

### The importance of The Wrestler

I think we can all agree that when you first watch Black Swan the immediate questions you have are, "How much was real? What was real? Why was Nina seeing what she saw?" There's some good news and bad news there. The good news is there's an answer. The bad news is you're gonna have to deal with me for some paragraphs. But, I promise you, you're going to come away from this article with a whole and profound understanding of Black Swan.

To start you on that path of Black Swan mastery, we're actually going to begin with Darren Aronofsky's previous movie—a little ditty called The Wrestler. And, honestly, if you just want the shortest answer, then behold.

I've always considered the two films companion pieces. They are really connected and people will see the connections. It's funny, because wrestling some consider the lowest art — if they would even call it art — and ballet some people consider the highest art. But what was amazing to me was how similar the performers in both of these worlds are. They both make incredible use of their bodies to express themselves.

Black Swan is artsy and full of cinematic tricks and techniques that make art house lovers drool. The Wrestler is a stripped down version of that. In both, Aronofsky employed a handheld camera that not only lends a rawness and reality to the scenes but also serves to visually link two disparate performers and two disparate performances. Combine that with Darren's own admission about them being "companion pieces" and what's happening in Black Swan becomes less mysterious.

The Wrestler is pretty upfront about how Robin Ramzinski's career in the ring as Randy "The Ram" Robinson has left him in less than stellar circumstances. Despite having been a huge star, his twilight years are a struggle. There's a brutality in the contrast of the man beloved in the squared circle vs. the man who wakes up alone in his run-down trailer in such pain he can barely move. We see how the pressures and demands inherent to the industry have left the performer in physical, mental, fiscal, and emotional ruin.

By the end of The Wrestler, our performer has been told that if he wrestles in the ring again his heart could give out, killing him. At this point, he's faced with a choice between building what life he can as Robin or going out as the Ram. In his final match, feeling his heart on the brink, he makes the choice to climb to the top rope for his finishing move. It's what the fans want—the match wouldn't be right without the finishing move. And Ram has decided he needs to and wants to give the fans what they demand and deserve.

### Why it's called Black Swan

Real fast, let's talk about titles. What did they call the movie about Muhammed Ali? Ali. What did they call the movie about Ray Charles? Ray. What did they call the movie about the Oakland Athletics changing the economics and talent evaluation in baseball through the "moneyball" system? Moneyball.

All very specific titles to ensure people understood the topic that was being discussed. Why then wasn't the movie about Facebook called Facebook rather than The Social Network? One potential reason is you're crowning Facebook as more than just a social network, it's the social network—which, at the time, in 2011, yes it was. But another reason is that maybe the focus on the movie goes beyond Facebook. Maybe the founding of Facebook is just an aspect in an examination of the effect of social dynamics on people. How our social networks and interactions bring out the best and worst in us. And how the smallest network possible, that between two people, can often be the most powerful thing in the world. If The Social Network were just called Facebook then you potentially lose that added layer of meaning a title can give. So when you look at Aronofsky's choice to use the generic, The Wrestler, rather than the specific, Ram, it begs the question: why make that choice?

You might already know what I'm going to say.

The Ram's woeful tale is, unfortunately, a common fate for wrestlers. Which means the Ram is representative of the whole. His story is the story of many. The final message, when stripped to its core point, is a bleak one—wrestlers literally kill themselves for our entertainment.

While Black Swan wasn't called The Ballerina, it's nearly the same thing, just more specific. Ballerinas dance in ballets, a famous ballet is Swan Lake, one of the starring roles of Swan Lake is the Black Swan. This specificity might seem the opposite of The Wrestler, but hear me out. The Black Swan metaphorically represents the negative "other". The evil twin. The darker nature. The more dangerous emotions. Aronofsky could have gone with the title, The Ugly, Troubling, Destructive Reality of Being a Ballerina. But that's long as hell and very un-poetic. Instead, you can capture that same connotation and energy and meaning with the more mysterious, Black Swan.

This was a long way to set up the point that Black Swan isn't just a cool movie where a girl goes crazy and just happens to be a ballerina. It's Aronofsky exploring and presenting the pressures ballerinas face in an industry that demands very much of them. In a sense, the point Aronofsky makes with the title is that in the world of professional ballet, these artists aren't allowed to be mere ballerinas...they're forced to be perfect black swans.

Nina's woeful tale is an exaggerated but common fate for ballerinas. Which means Nina is representative of the whole. Her story is the story of many. The final message, when stripped to its core point, is a bleak one—ballerinas literally destroy themselves in an attempt to be perfect.

"My worst injury occurred when I attempted a barrel turn and moved my foot wrong," he said. "I heard four pops, pulling my fibula and tibia apart. I also tore a few tendons in my foot. In the dance world you are expected to go on, so I danced the rest of my set like that before going off stage and collapsing in pain. I didn't walk again for two months and was out for over four months..."

### Under pressure

The Wrestler was concerned with showing the issues that follow a wrestling career. Ram had barely any money, but didn't have the appearance and skills for a part-time job much

less a salaried 9-5. He was physically limited. He didn't have a marriage because the road and work was too problematic for a romantic relationship. Likewise, his relationship with his daughter is in the gutter. Jesus. This is the result of all the fame and pain Ram underwent to be a great performer for so many years. Not to mention then all the humiliating things he still has to put up with just to scrape by (steroid use, shitty local wrestling shows that don't pay well, being yelled at while working at a deli counter, etc).

Black Swan inverts the time frame. Instead of being at the end of her career, we're at the moment Nina could breakthrough to the next level. Despite the difference in age, her situation is, like Ram's, pretty bleak. She doesn't make a lot of money so has to live with her mom. Living with her mom and the little time she has outside of dancing has left Nina infantilized (look at her bedroom!). The infantilization stunts her. Nina being stunted means she barely has a social life much less a romantic one. The lack of social and romantic opportunities means she just focuses on ballet. The focus on ballet means she's a great ballerina, but her whole identity is wrapped up in ballet. It's all she has. Combine the singularity of her being with her stunted emotional development...and we have a recipe for psychological disaster that's very common in ballerinas.

Some context:

Ballet is often a beautiful tragedy. The art of ballet is one of stunning beauty and grace— it is world renowned and it's alluring nature touches many lives. However, the health problems that many ballerinas face is devastating....

Many women, including a majority of young dancers, go to drastic measures to obtain this body type. Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder are all life threatening eating disorders that a large amount of people and a statistically high amount of dancers have. One in five dancers has an eating disorder. Why is this the case?

Some insight:

....dance training may produce or exacerbate some less-than-healthy psychological pressures. New research from Portugal finds evidence of just such a dynamic among young ballet students.

It reports that, compared to both music students and peers who studied neither art form, dancers had higher levels of "psychological inflexibility" — a state of mind that has been linked to anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents.

Researchers Telmo Serrano and Helena Amaral Espirito-Santo define psychological inflexibility as "excessive involvement with the content of internal events," such as emotions, thoughts, and memories. They note that this inward-pointing focus can "bias the way the present moment is experienced," increasing fear of failure, and leading students to avoid stressful situations rather than accepting the challenge.

...

That finding is consistent with previous research linking ballet training with perfectionism.

Can Ballet Hurt Your Psyche

When you have all of this in mind, it's pretty wild to go back and watch Black Swan and see how deliberate Aronofsky is in detailing the emotional and physical pressure in the ballet

world. The competition between dancers that breeds isolation. The parents who are desperate to live vicariously through the success of their children. The injuries. The doubts. The ease at which you can be and will be replaced. The uncertainty of what opportunity you'll have and when you'll have it. Oy vey.

As Aronofsky develops and escalates this ecosystem of very real, very common stressors in the world of ballet, he dramatizes the effects of the anxiety through Nina's hallucinations and self-harm. So the reason why Nina's story plays out how it does is because Black Swan is an extreme depiction of the well-documented psychological issues ballerinas face.

### Black Swan explained

#### Nina and mirrors

We open the movie with Nina's dream. She soon awakens and explains to her mom (and to us) that it's from the prologue of Swan Lake, when the sorcerer Rothbart casts his spell on Princess Odette. The dream has a few purposes. First, it introduces and promises a surreal tone to the film. Second, it aligns the story of the movie with the story of Swan Lake, meaning we should look at the movie as a retelling of the ballet. Third, it's a sign Nina herself has fallen under some kind of trance.

In the very next scene Nina's on the subway. A few defining things happen here. First, it's the introduction of the visual duality. We see Nina reflected in a window on the subway, her mirrored face (purposefully) obscure as this other persona hasn't fully emerged yet. The reflection is a huge motif that escalates all the way to the climax when Nina "fights" in her dressing room, breaking the mirror, then fatally stabbing herself with the shard of glass.

The mortal wound being from a broken piece of glass from a mirror makes sense, right? Black Swan is all about duality. The mirror is representative of duality. Aronofsky highlights that throughout by having moments where the Nina in the Mirror acts separately from the Regular Nina. At first it's harmless, but the Nina in the Mirror grows more aggressive and scary until we get the dressing room fight that occurs right before her transformation into the black swan. She straight up says, after the stabbing, "It's my turn."

"Dancers are always looking at themselves, so their relationship with their reflection is a huge part of who they are. Filmmakers are also fascinated by mirrors, and it's been played with before, but I wanted to take it to a new level. Visually, we really pushed that idea of what it means to look in a mirror. Mirrors become a big part of looking into Nina's character, which is all about doubles and reflection."

#### Nina and puberty

The Black Swan Nina who emerges from the mirror is built up to through the movie not just by the escalation of the Nina in the Mirror, but also by the subplot of Nina going through the stages of growing up.

She starts the movie in a very childlike way—waking up from a bad dream and going to tell her mom about it. You look at her bedroom and it looks like a little girl's room, not that of a 28-year old woman. We know this stunted development is partly due to Aronofsky's critique of ballet as a whole. But it's also there because the story is about Nina's loss of innocence and her struggle to tap into that darker side of herself. By defining her as childlike, it highlights her innocence and why she struggles with the role.

We see her progress, though. For much of the movie, there's a sense of building rebellion when it comes to Nina and her mother. Which is very typical of teenagers and young adults. Then the whole sexual awakening sub-sub plot. God, that first scene where Nina touches herself and starts to get into it until she looks over and sees her mom asleep in the chair beside the bed. It's one of the most awkward and realistically terrifying things I've ever seen in a movie. That's exactly the point too: this is why Nina's stunted as she is, because her mom's presence is so overwhelming it limits Nina's privacy and choices and thus her experiences.

The night out with Lily begins how? It could have simply been: Lily shows up and asks Nina to go out, Nina hesitates, but Lily convinces her. Instead, it's: Nina hesitates, and Nina's mom keeps showing up and demanding Nina come back inside. To the point where Lily is like, "Jesus Christ." The reason Nina ends up leaving is because she wants to rebel from her mother, like a teenager. Of course, then, it's that night she comes home, locks her mom out, and masturbates fully after being denied and frustrated for so long. This is a breakthrough.

One line that's always cracked me up is how not long after Nina "becomes a woman", she has a moment where she yells at her mom, "I'm moving out." It's not something that gets anymore time than being shouted as Nina storms out of their home. But it's the cherry on top of the "Nina goes from a child to a woman" subplot. Aronofsky really wanted to make sure that was clear and the dialogue communicated it.

#### Nina and the hallucinations: part 1

As Black Swan is so heavily reliant on duality, it makes sense there's a duality to the hallucinations. On the one hand, there are signs aplenty that Nina is mentally ill. On the other hand, there's her desire for perfection and what that means when it comes to being the white swan and black swan. Let's first look at the mental illness, then we'll look at her obsession with perfection.

The signs of extreme mental illness, like with everything else in this movie, build up over time. We know Nina's mother is overbearing and representative of an over-involved, over-protective type of never-had-success dancers who obsess over their daughter's careers. But that's not the sole reason the mother babies Nina. It's hinted at, then told to us, that Nina has had psychological issues in the past. These mostly had to do with scratching and other means of self-mutilation.

There's a sad tension. The mom's trying to do her best to help her sick daughter not go over a psychological waterfall for a second time. But the mom is also so jealous and bitter that she's one of several primary reasons why Nina is about to breakdown again. I mean, there's a whole room in their apartment dedicated to grotesque paintings of Nina. This isn't a healthy environment, and it's hard to determine what came first: the mental illness or the mother's obsession.

If Black Swan was only about a mentally ill girl finally tipping into insanity...that's interesting for a story, but it wouldn't be as strongly tied to Aronofsky's larger point about the profession and trappings of the profession. This is why we have the secondary aspect of Nina's hallucinations. And a far more sinister interpretation of the hallucinations.

When Nina confronts the director, Thomas (Vincent Cassel), about whether she'll get the part, this is the conversation:

Thomas: When I look at you, all I see is the White Swan. Yes you're beautiful, fearful, fragile—ideal casting. But the Black Swan? It's a hard fucking job to dance both.

Nina: I can dance the Black Swan, too.

Thomas: Really?! In four years, every time you dance, I see you obsess getting each and every move right, but I never see you lose yourself. Ever. All that discipline, for what?

Nina: ...just wanna be perfect...

Thomas: You what?

Nina: I wanna be perfect.

Thomas: Perfection is not just about control. It's also about letting go. Surprise yourself so you can surprise the audience. Transcendence. And very few have it in them.

Nina: I think I do have it in—

Thomas kisses her. During the kiss there's a strange feminine soundscape that ends with what sounds like playful laughter. Nina then bites Thomas's lip. Ending the kiss.

Thomas: You bit me?! I cannot believe you bit me?!

Nina: I'm sorry.

Thomas: That fucking hurt.

This scene occurs 20 minutes into *Black Swan*. A general rule for movie structure is that there are a few places for important information: the opening scene, the final scene, the climax, and 20 minutes in. Look at many of the movies you love and about the 20-minute mark is when the main story conflict announces itself. The 20-minute mark of *The Lion King* is when the hyenas attack Simba for the first time, a stark contrast to the lightheartedness that had defined Simba's story up to that point. 22 minutes into *Fight Club* is when Brad Pitt speaks for the first time.

It's right after this conversation with Thomas that Nina's announced as the Swan Queen. What's the last thing we hear Nina say? She's finished her masterpiece performance, the crowd's giving her a standing ovation, everyone in the company has surrounded and congratulated her, Thomas has praised her, but then there's horror as they see Nina's nearly eviscerated herself. "What did you? What did you do?" Thomas begs.

Nina responds with, "I felt it."

"What?"

"Perfect," she says. And Thomas gives a look of shock and what could be read as understanding. Nina continues, clearly pleased (despite dying), "It was perfect." That conversation shows Nina was very aware of what happened to her. She's not some confused girl having a moment of stunned clarity. She's a professional dancer who wanted to give a perfect performance, and she did what she had to do to give that performance. She straight up told us at the beginning, "I wanna be perfect." It just so happens that her

understanding of perfect was extreme. But this plays back into what happens in the real world: ballerinas are held to insane standards, and the stress they face to maintain those standards is physically and psychologically destructive, at best. But it can be outright annihilating.

I started doing some googling about the rates of suicides in ballet dancers, and even though there was not a lot of hard hitting solid statistical data, the number of articles was very upsetting. The most noted dancer who committed suicide was a 29-year-old lead dancer with the New York City Ballet, Joseph Duell in 1986 after performing in Symphony in C, and rehearsing Who Cares? But, he wasn't the only one, Juan Carlos Amy-Cordero a principal with Eugene Ballet took his life in 2013, Tallulah Wilson was 15 when she took her life in 2014, in 2012 it was Rosie Whitaker, and the articles went on and on.

Beware of the Ballet Monsters...they wear pink

So while we can pretty safely assume Nina's dealing with some mental illness caused by her career and mother, she's also, in a way, aware of what's happening because she wants it to happen. If she wants to be perfect, to be both the White Swan and Black Swan, then this is what has to happen. Swan Lake is, after all, a tragedy.

The distinction between the White Swan and the Black Swan is, I think, the final piece to the puzzle.

#### Nina and the hallucinations: part 2

In the climax, when Nina finally gets to dance, we see her oscillate between two emotional states. The first is someone completely frayed and overwhelmed and either on the brink of tears or crying. The second is angry, violent, territorial, confident, sexy, dangerous. At one point, these two sides of Nina actually fight one another.

Some read this back and forth as indicative of Nina's mental health woes. And yeah, definitely. But we know that Nina wanted the performance to be perfect. And we're straight up told by Thomas what defines each of the swans.

The White Swan is "beautiful, fearful, fragile."

The Black Swan is about seduction, imprecision, effortlessness, lack of control, letting go, an evil twin, someone with bite.

As we see Nina in those backstage moments, it's easy to read her mood swings as a complete psychological break. But it could also be representative of an artist inhabiting their character in order to perform to the best of their ability and even approach perfection. To dance the part of the Black Swan, Nina allowed herself to fall under a spell. She drove herself to that darkness. By letting go, she surprised herself, surprised everyone else, and found transcendence. To reach that state, she stopped rejecting the pressure and duress of her career and mother. Instead, she let it devour her. She gave into her urges and rage. She allowed the repressed part of her to emerge. At first in the mirror, but then in reality.

That dichotomy explains the hallucinations we see. On the whole, the hallucinations serve to coax out of Nina either the fear and fragility of the White Swan or the darkness and negative energy of the Black Swan. A lot of the time it's a mixture of the two. The hallucinations ramp up for a reason: Nina's getting into character, and the closer we are to the performance the more in character she has to be. The night of show, of course she's at her most psychologically broken because that's what's necessary. She's completely broken and a

fucking lunatic partly because it's what ballet drove her to be, but partly because it's her choice. It's the only way she could be the perfect Swan Queen.

(Real fast, I do love that Nina's dropped during her White Swan performance. It increases the fragility and fear because it's a huge flaw in the overall show. But at the same time, that kind of imperfection is part of what Thomas tells her makes for a perfect performance. So she applies that lesson to increase the vulnerability and fragility of her White Swan character in the moments before the Black Swan emerges).

### Nina and the hallucinations: part 3

With most of the hallucinations, the movie tells us what happened. Like we're told Lily never stayed the night with Nina. We know Nina's legs didn't break backwards because she can walk perfectly fine the next morning. We know she didn't grow feathers because there aren't feathers anywhere and no one is screaming, "OH MY GOD SHE GREW WINGS."

There are two hallucinations we really don't get an answer to. Did Nina see Lily and Thomas fucking after hours? And did Nina stab Beth?

With Lily and Thomas, the answer probably doesn't matter much. Nina wants to be Lily, as Lily is her role model for the Black Swan. So it's likely that Nina imagined Lily and Thomas together because it helps her imagine herself and Thomas together. It's part of her growing sexuality, while also being part of the fear and fragility she needs as the White Swan. So for Nina, it's a win-win.

With Nina and Beth. I honestly don't know. I imagine if she had stabbed Beth, we would have heard someone mention it the next day, the same way we heard about Beth getting hit by the car.

With Beth, we see Beth use the shoe knife on her own face (which then becomes Nina's face), causing Nina to run to the elevator. In the elevator, Nina's holding the shoe knife. The implication is Nina attacked Beth. Which is why we think, later, Nina attacked Lily. But since it turns out Nina just stabbed herself and Lily was never in the room...we're left to wonder...whose blood was on the shoe knife? Given Nina's insanity levels, it could just be she imagined the whole thing—the shoe knife was still on the table, no one had ever touched it. She could have cut herself somewhere (though we never see it). Or she really could have stabbed Beth.

It's a "is the glass half full or half empty" kind of situation. We don't have enough information to say conclusively one way or another what the truth is, meaning that it's up to each of our own interpretations. Personally, I could see Nina attacking Beth as a precursor to her harming herself, also as a means of sealing her own fate—if she doesn't go through with the "perfect" performance then what awaits her is prison. But I think more likely is that she just imagined it as part of her ramp up to the performance.

Overall, the main takeaway from the Beth scene would be, I'd argue, how it plays into the concept of perfection. As Nina tells Beth, "I was just trying to be perfect like you." Beth's response is to say, "Perfect? I'm not perfect. I'm nothing." If it's self-mutilation, it would make sense Nina decides to do everything she can to be perfect because the alternative is to be Beth. If it's Nina attacking Beth, that'd be because Nina's so violently against the ideal of imperfection and ending up imperfect that she tries to destroy the representation of that fate (which is why she sees herself imposed on Beth).



The end

There you have it. I hope this was helpful. I think if you re-watch Black Swan after reading this, then the movie is going to feel way more obvious in what it's doing and why. If there are any other questions you have, then please leave a comment and I'll get back to you! Thanks for reading.