

# MATERNAL RELATIONSHIP IN DARREN ARONOFSKY'S *BLACK SWAN* (2010): A PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH

<sup>1</sup>Yuliana Allisa Erwanda\*, <sup>1</sup>Silvy Cinthia Adelia,

<sup>1</sup> English Literature Study Program, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

**\*Corresponding Author**

Email: [yulianaallisa.22027@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:yulianaallisa.22027@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

Received:  
15 June 2026

Revised:  
28 September 2026

Accepted:  
29 September 2026

Published:  
30 September 2026

## How to cite (APA 7<sup>th</sup> style):

Erwanda, Y. A., & Adelia, S. C. (2026). Maternal relationship in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010): A psychoanalytic approach. *FRASA: English Education and Literature Journal*, 7(2), 369-384. <https://doi.org/10.47701/frasa.v7i2.6131>

## Abstract

*This study examines how Darren Aronofsky's film Black Swan (2010) depicts maternal relationships and how it affects the protagonist's psychological growth. By applying Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, specifically, the notions of the "holding environment," the "good enough mother," and the "true self and false self". The study uses content analysis to examine the complicated and harmful relationships that exist between Nina Sayers and her mother, Erica. Nina's identity formation, mental health, and self-esteem are negatively impacted by Erica's controlling and obsessive behavior, which produces an unhealthy environment, according to the analysis. Key elements from the movie show Nina's battle with anorexia, hallucination, and insecurity, highlighting the catastrophic consequences of a toxic mother-daughter relationship. This study highlights the significance of a nurturing and supportive mother role in promoting the growth of mental health by demonstrating the challenges faced by children whose mothers place unreasonable demands on them or fall short of the standards she has set. Using psychoanalytic lenses based on the Black Swan movie, it adds a significant perspective on how mothers should treat their daughters by demonstrating that there are instances when having too high expectations may be harmful.*

**Keywords:** *Black Swan, Donald Winnicott, Mother-daughter, True Self and False Self, Relationship, Maternal Control.*

## INTRODUCTION

An individual's early interpersonal environment serves as a foundation for their psychological trajectory. As human beings, we cannot be separated from the parental dynamics that have a significant role in individual development as they contribute to children's cognitive and social development (Meng et al., 2023). One significant aspect is the maternal relationship. Ideally, a positive body image, emotional strength, and self-esteem can all be developed in a girl by a strong mother-daughter bond (Singh, 2023). Yet, in the movie *Black Swan* (2010), Darren

Aronofsky does not portray such dynamics through the protagonist of his movie. The movie depicts the protagonist, Nina Sayers, a ballerina who is obsessed with perfection due to her controlling mother, Erica, which leads to the destructive relationship between the mother and daughter that eventually transforms Nina's personality into a rebellious state. This imbalanced relationship between Nina and Erica could eventually lead to serious mental illness that Nina experiences throughout the movie. Avoidant or anxious parents may reject, react excessively, or misread signals, which complicates behavioral or emotional disorders and prolongs the child's sense of insecurity (Vaporidis & Njoroge, 2025).

Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory will be utilized in this study, specifically the concepts of the "good enough mother" and the "holding environment". According to Winnicott (1960), a child's psychological development depends significantly on a mother who is nurturing and supporting. By analyzing Erica's actions and how they affect Nina's behavior, this study will explore how the lack of supportive maternal environment is one of the factors of Nina's psychological instability and identity struggle. Winnicott's theory provides a crucial lens for this analysis, as it directly explains for how the absence of a "good enough mother" distorts a child's psychological development, explaining Erica's role in driving Nina's inner turmoil.

The motherhood theory by Donald Winnicott provides the theoretical framework for this study. Winnicott's beliefs focused on the caregiver-child interaction. Since birth, newborns have been tied to the realm of emotions. Winnicott famously stated, "There is no such thing as an infant," implying that mother care is essential for an infant's life (Winnicott, 1965). He coined the term "holding environment" to show that maternal care extends beyond physical touch. Instead, it refers to the parental technique of offering understanding and actively addressing the child's psychological necessities. In therapy, appropriate interpretations can give the client a sense of 'holding' even if there is no physical touch. The ideas presented above are simply examples of the importance of relationships and emotional support in human development and health (Hoyes et al., 2017). In *Black Swan*, the key to understanding the protagonist's psychological struggle is Erica's inability to provide Nina an emotionally nurturing environment.

Numerous studies have explored the dynamic between mother and daughter represented in films. Vagmita (2023) in the study titled *Daughter's Soaring Ambitions and Mother's Growing Pains in Lady Bird* examines the movie *Lady Bird* (2017), showing how the mother's "growing pains" and the daughter's quest for independence reflect themes of matrophobia, the fear of becoming one's mother, and eventual reconciliation through Lowinsky's concept of "Motherline." The Voice of Silent Toxic Mothers in Morrison's *A Mercy* and Albeshr's *Hend and the Soldiers* by Aldeeb (2022) compares Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and Albeshr's *Hend and the Soldiers* (2017), arguing that mothers labeled "toxic" by their daughters are actually protective figures shaped by patriarchal oppression, and that their voices are recovered through daughters' memories, maternal self-narration, and surrogate mother figures. Dewanti, et al. (2025) apply Lacan's Imaginary-Symbolic-Real framework to Pixar's *Turning Red* (2022) in the study titled *Unmasking Mei: A Lacanian psychoanalytic study of identity formation in Turning Red movie*, showing how Mei's transformation into a red panda represents her journey from an idealized self-image (Imaginary) through family/cultural

conflict (Symbolic), to self-acceptance by rejecting the sealing ritual (Real). Another study that explores *Turning Red* (2022) is *An Analysis of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in the Film Turning Red from a Feminist Perspective* by Fan (2023) that uses de Beauvoir's feminism concept of "the Other" which concluded that the mother in the film is a strong character as an image with high demands on her child. Mother-daughter relationship eventually affects how ones perceived their body, as examined in a study by Alzaghal & Hamamra (2024) titled *The (m)other-daughter relationship in McCurdy's I'm glad my mom died: codependency, anorexia nervosa, and self dis(re)covery* that offers a clinical-literary case study showing how an enmeshed, controlling mother-daughter relationship can directly produce and sustain eating disorders (anorexia shifting to bulimia after the mother's death), with memoir-writing serving as the daughter's path to disentangling her identity from her internalized "anorexic" mother.

Despite the numerous studies examining psychological issues and interpersonal relationships in films, the reviewed studies employ various theoretical perspective to examine their respective research subjects. These studies demonstrate that film can be analyzed as a medium for representing psychological development, interpersonal relationship, and identity formation. However, the reviewed studies have not specifically examined the representation of the mother-daughter relationship through Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic concepts of the "good-enough mother" and the "holding environment." Winnicott's theory provides a framework for understanding how maternal care and the environment provided by the mother my contribute to a child's psychological development. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Erica's maternal relationship with Nina in *Black Swan* (2010) through Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, particularly focusing on the relationship between maternal care, psychological development, and identity formation.

## METHOD

This study takes content analysis approach to explore the maternal relationship in the movie *Black Swan* (2010). Content analysis is a qualitative research technique used to produce systematic, replicable, and context-sensitive interpretations of texts or other meaningful materials, enabling researchers to examine data that are significant, informative, and communicative within their specific social and narrative contexts (Krippendorff, 2019). This method is ideal for researchers to analyze a movie in detail, allowing the researcher to review key sequences, dialogues, and visual symbols that highlight the mother-daughter dynamic.

The focus of the study is on the characters Nina Sayers and Erica Sayers in *Black Swan* (2010), particularly on their interactions and the ways Erica's maternal behavior is represented in relation to Nina's psychological development. Nina is selected as the primary character because her psychological experiences and transformation constitute the central narrative of the film, while Erica is examined as the maternal figure whose actions, attitudes, and interactions with Nina are relevant to the application of Winnicott's concepts of the "good-enough mother" and the "holding environment." Therefore, the relationship between Nina and Erica serves as the primary focus of the analysis.

The data collection process involves repeatedly watching *Black Swan* (2010) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the film and its portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship. During each viewing, the researcher identifies and documents key scenes,

dialogues, character behaviors, and visual elements that reflect the interactions between Nina and Erica. Particular attention is given to aspects of *mise-en-scène*, elements that carry narrative significance by constructing the film's world and conveying meaning, emotion, and character development beyond dialogue (Ghosh, 2022). This including setting, costume, lighting, color, and character positioning, as these elements contribute to the representation of maternal influence and psychological tension. Relevant scenes are then transcribed and organized to facilitate analysis. The collected data are subsequently categorized according to recurring themes related to motherhood, such as maternal control, protection, emotional dependency, and identity development.

The collected data are analyzed using a thematic approach guided by Donald Winnicott's theory of motherhood. The analysis begins with identifying scenes that prominently depict interactions between Nina and Erica, followed by an examination of dialogues, character behaviors, and elements of *mise-en-scène* that support the portrayal of their relationship. The findings are then categorized into relevant themes and interpreted using Winnicott's theoretical concepts, particularly those related to maternal care and child development. Through this process, the study aims to understand how both narrative and visual elements represent motherhood and influence Nina's psychological development throughout the film.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that *Black Swan* reveals a varied and complicated maternal relationship, with the elements of control, dependency, and psychological projection. In the movie, Erica Sayer, who was a ballerina herself, has an overwhelming control over Nina's life, projecting her unfulfilled ambitions through her daughter. This interaction builds a sense of dependency in Nina, who has trouble expressing her independence and identity. Furthermore, Erica's pressure towards Nina has eventually led Nina to the development of eating disorders.

### Portrayal of Maternal Relationship in *Black Swan* (2010)

In the movie, Erica is seen as a mother who has an unhealthy obsession towards Nina's career as ballerina, a toxic, over-involved fixation where boundaries are dissolved due to her own unfulfilled ambitions, eventually developing into controlling behavior over both Nina's personal and professional life. This portrayal of behavior is far from the concept of Winnicott's "good enough mother" and "holding environment". The "good enough mother" is one who actively adapts to the child's needs and then gradually reduces this support as the child develops the capacity to handle independence, and the "holding environment," which refers to the mother's ability to provide a sense of safety and security for the child (D. W. Winnicott, 1960, 1971). This setting is characterized by the mother's quick and loving response to the child's needs, generating a sense of trust and security. In *Black Swan* (2010), Erica's behavior towards Nina can be interpreted as a departure from the "good enough mother" expectations. Erica's controlling and compulsive behavior produces a restricted and stressful environment rather than one that is nurturing.



Figure 1. Erica removing Nina's earring (00:18:18)

Figure 1 shows the moment when Erica removes Nina's earring after her ballet rehearsal. Although the action appears to be a simple action of care, it also reflects Erica's tendency to maintain control over Nina's personal boundaries despite Nina being an adult. By physically removing the earring herself, Erica treats Nina as if she is still dependent on maternal assistance, limiting Nina's autonomy and reinforcing child-like position. Maternal care is necessary for a child's development; however, excessive involvement may hinder the individual's ability to develop independence (Abramovitch, 2021). This scene suggests that Erica struggles to recognize Nina's growing maturity, resulting in an overprotective relationship that restricts Nina's sense of self. The *mise-en-scène* further emphasizes this dynamic through the intimate bedroom setting, a space filled with childlike decorations and personal belongings that symbolize Nina's prolonged dependence on her mother (Figure 2). The proximity between the two characters and the warm but confined visual composition reinforce Erica's intrusive presence in Nina's life, highlighting the blurred boundaries within their mother-daughter relationship.



Figure 2. Nina's pink dominated bedroom (00:18:40)



Figure 3. Erica surprises Nina with a pink cake (00:25:43)

The use of pink throughout Nina's environment reinforces the film's portrayal of her restricted psychological development. In Figure 2, Nina's bedroom is dominated by pink tones, including the wallpaper, bedding, lamps, and decorative objects. In the film's visual design, the frequent appearance of pink functions as a direct extension of Nina's arrested psychological state and enforced submissiveness. Visually, the soft hues of pink connect the color to childhood, representing themes of innocence, naivety, or girlish immaturity, making the room resemble that of a young girl rather than a 28-year-old woman (Tarajko-Kowalska & Kowalski, 2023). The abundance of childlike decorations creates a visual impression that Nina remains trapped in a developmental stage controlled by her mother. Winnicott (1965) argues that a child gradually develops independence through a healthy process of separation from the mother. However, Nina's bedroom suggests that this separation has not fully occurred, as the space preserves an atmosphere of dependency and infantilization.

The pink color scheme appears again in the cake Erica gave to celebrate Nina's achievement of being the Swan Queen (Figure 3) which, again, symbolizes Nina's infantilization, as its pastel colors and floral decorations resemble those commonly associated with childhood celebrations. However, the significance of the scene extends beyond the cake's appearance. Erica's statement that the cake is "*our* favorite," (00:25:48:00—00:25:49:33) further highlights the enmeshed nature of her relationship with Nina. The use of possessive pronoun "*our*" suggests that Erica does not fully recognize Nina as an autonomous individual with separate preferences and desires. This tendency aligns with Erica's broader pattern of controlling behavior throughout the film, in which she remains heavily involved in Nina's personal decisions and daily life. Erica's behavior further demonstrated when Nina refuses to eat the cake because of the knots in her stomach after the rehearsal, Erica responds by saying "Fine. Then it's garbage!" (00:26:01:32—00:26:04:11). This reaction functions as a form of emotional manipulation, creating guilt and pressuring Nina to comply with her mother's wishes. Notably, Erica's behavior shifts immediately after Nina apologizes and agrees to eat the cake, returning to a warm and affectionate demeanor. This contrast suggests that maternal affection is offered conditionally, depending on Nina's obedience. Healthy motherhood involves gradually adapting to the child's growing need for independence and allowing the development of a separate identity. Erica's behavior, however, demonstrates a failure to acknowledge this process of separation. By using guilt to secure Nina's compliance and treating her preferences as subordinate to her own, Erica maintains a relationship of dependence that inhibits Nina's individuation.



Figure 4. Erica's collection of Nina's portraits  
(00:24:48)



Figure 5. Erica drawing Nina's portrait in  
her room (00:45:11)

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate Erica's extensive collection of portraits of Nina, as well as a scene in which she is shown drawing Nina's portrait. The repeated depiction of Nina as Erica's artistic subject suggests an intense maternal fixation that extends beyond ordinary parental admiration. Rather than viewing Nina as an independent adult, Erica continuously observes, captures, and reproduces her image through her artwork. This behavior can be interpreted as Erica's attempt to preserve an idealized version of Nina that aligns with her own expectations and desires. The portraits also function as a visual reminder of Erica's constant presence in Nina's life, reinforcing the lack of personal boundaries between mother and daughter. Furthermore, the emphasis on Nina's appearance reflects the importance placed on physical perfection within both Erica's household and the ballet environment. Mother-daughter relationships can directly and indirectly influence a daughter's body image and self-perception (Goslin & Koons-Beauchamp, 2023). Erica's continual observation and artistic representation

of Nina may therefore contribute to Nina's heightened self-consciousness and perfectionism. Erica's persistent fixation on Nina's image, however, suggests a failure to acknowledge Nina's individuality, as she remains attached to an idealized version of her daughter. Consequently, Erica's behavior reflects an overinvolved form of motherhood that restricts Nina's autonomy and hinders the development of an independent sense of self.

Controlling and manipulating is further demonstrated by Erica in minutes 00:57:21:43—00:57:23:23 when instead of letting Nina see Lily, she said that there is no one outside. Indicating that Erica does not want Nina to have another life besides being with her mother and remaining dependent on Erica's controlling behavior. This behavior is what we usually call strict or authoritarian parenting. Strict parents discipline their children using demands and allow them only a little room for independence while showing little warmth in terms of affection as well as emotions when relating with their kids (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018). This style of parenting contrasts with the "holding environment". To Winnicott, the holding environment enables mothers to confidently hold newborns and promote their independence by rapidly identifying and addressing their needs (Bahn, 2022). Strict parenting seeks to establish discipline and control, but it may end up harming children's emotional development, as well as their ability to build healthy connections and self-identity.

### **Nina's Attempt of Individuation**

Erica's controlling, obsessive, and strict approach has a big impact on Nina's growth, and her overwhelming nature is likely to produce a restrictive environment for her. Nina's rebellious nature grows as a reaction to Erica's limitations. It becomes a way for Nina to express her independence and resist the restrictions imposed on her. The White Swan persona is what Erica expected from Nina, an idealized version of Nina that portrays an obedient and innocent nature. The way Nina struggles to embody the Black Swan persona is the symbolism of how Erica always restricts Nina to be the White Swan. It also represents the internal conflict within her true self and the false self. Winnicott argues that a child's true self can only emerge in a supportive setting where they feel secure to express their authentic emotions and desires (D. Winnicott, 1965).

Lily, metaphorically perceived as Nina's shadow, is gradually accepted by Nina as she begins to embrace the aspects of herself that have been suppressed by her perfectionism and her mother's control. This process is apparent when Lily invites Nina to go out for drinks to pay her sorry after the rehearsal. After contemplating, Nina decided to step outside the boundaries and joins Lily for a night out, marking one of her first acts of independence in the film. During their night out, Lily offers Nina an ecstasy pill, which Nina initially refuses. However, after Lily secretly spikes her drink, Nina begins to experience a sense of liberation from the rigid self-discipline that has governed her life.



Figure 6. Nina trying out a black garment in the club bathroom (01:00:50)

As shown in Figure 6, Nina is seen examining herself in a bathroom mirror while wearing a black top, a notable contrast to the pastel colors that frequently characterize her appearance throughout the film. Through costume as an element of *mise-en-scène*, the color black symbolizes Nina's growing acceptance of her shadow as the Black Swan. Black color often associated with sin, dirtiness, and despair (Honeycutt & Honeycutt, 2021). The mirror further emphasizes her ongoing identity transformation, suggesting that Nina is confronting a version of herself that has long remained repressed. From this point onward, Nina increasingly challenges the boundaries imposed by both ballet culture and Erica's overprotective control, reflecting her desire to establish a more autonomous sense of self.



Figure 7. The initial manifestation of the shadow self/projection as Lily (01:08:10)

The hallucination in which Nina went home with Lily further symbolizes Nina's psychological transformation (Figure 7). Significantly, the scene takes place within Nina's bedroom, a space that has previously functioned as a symbol of childhood and maternal control. Lily's presence within this environment can therefore be interpreted as the intrusion of Nina's repressed desires into a space dominated by Erica's influence. Moreover, Nina's decision to yell at her mother "it's called privacy. I'm not twelve anymore," (01:08:08:02—01:08:10:30) functions as a rare act of resistance against Erica's authority. From a Winnicottian perspective, this moment reflects Nina's attempt to establish personal boundaries and separate her identity from her mother's control. Although the scene is presented through hallucination, it nevertheless illustrates Nina's growing desire for autonomy and individuation. If a parent continues to treat their grown-up kids as if they were children, the children may suffer from a variety of negative consequences. For example, they may fail to acquire emotional maturity because they are not given the opportunity to successfully manage their emotions and make their own judgments. This can lead to a lack of self-confidence and self-reliance, making it difficult for the youngsters to live freely (de Roo et al., 2022).

Furthermore, highly controlling parents can instill a sense of reliance in their children, resulting in low self-esteem and difficulties setting boundaries and forming healthy relationships, which defined by emotional independence, reciprocal support, and distinct

personal boundaries. Grown-ups who are treated like children by their parents may experience parentification, which can result in emotional tiredness, rage, and a sense of being imprisoned in a never-ending childhood. They may also struggle to build healthy, equal relationships with others, be afraid of abandonment or rejection, and have limited problem-solving abilities. The way Erica stated that Nina is not "her Nina right now," (01:08:10:12—01:08:11:34) provides evidence that Erica has an expectation of the idealized version of Nina in the form of the 'White Swan' persona.

The scenes captured show Nina's desperate attempts of carving out a space of transition for herself while fighting against Erica's restrictions. However, in the absence of a meaningful holding environment, these attempts are filled with worry and terror, increasing Nina's psychological despair. Erica's actions ultimately prevent Nina's ability to create a cohesive and tough sense of self, which is consistent with Winnicott's idea that such development necessitates both autonomy and support.

### Consequences of Unhealthy Maternal Relationships

The unhealthy relationship between Nina and her mother results in severe psychological and physical consequences. On a psychological level, Erica's relentless expectations push Nina toward hallucinations and mental instability, while physically, the overwhelming pressure manifests as an eating disorder. Her eating disorder was the first consequence that can be seen at the beginning of the movie where she threw up in the dance studio toilet (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Nina throwing up in the toilet (00:15:06)

Due to Erica's high expectations of Nina to become a perfect ballerina, Nina eventually gets a deep obsession of perfection with her ballet career that she develops Anorexia Nervosa which her mother was not aware of. According to a study by Okumuş (2020), the condition known as "anorexia nervosa" refers to a "nervous loss of appetite," and early accounts emphasized food avoidance as the main issue. Then it was discovered that patients with AN (Anorexia Nervosa) do not lose their appetite; rather, their minds are completely concerned with consuming food. This condition is sadly common in the ballet world.

Nina's diagnosis of anorexia is prominent where Erica insisted Nina eat a piece of cake to celebrate Nina's role as the Swan Queen, but Nina resists by saying, "mom, not too big. Oh, that's way, way too much," (00:25:51:34—00:25:53:11). This is showing a clear sign that Nina has anxiety and control over her food intake. As mentioned before, Erica's reaction regarding Nina's food intake shows a mixed signal of compulsion and guilt-tripping, which made Nina's relationship with food and her body image becoming increasingly complicated. The effort required to preserve a ballerina's physique worsens Nina's problem, mirroring the significant

frequency of eating disorders in ballet dancers, who are frequently driven to extreme measures to achieve and maintain a certain body standard.



Figure 9. Liz measuring Nina's body (01:16:33)

Another sign of Nina's anorexic behavior was depicted in Figure 11 when she was measured by her costume designer, Liz. Liz's explicit dialogue, "you lost weight," (01:16:34:11—01:16:35:33), drawing attention to a noticeable change in Nina's physical appearance. This dialogue serves as direct evidence of Nina's weight loss, which is widely recognized as one of the primary symptoms of anorexia nervosa. The scene is particularly significant because the observation comes from another character rather than Nina herself, providing an external confirmation of her deteriorating physical condition. Through both the dialogue and the visual presentation of Nina's increasingly thin body, the film highlights the physical consequences of her obsessive pursuit of perfection.

Nina's deteriorating psychological state becomes increasingly apparent following her visit to Beth in the hospital. During their interaction, Nina tells Beth, "I was just trying to be perfect, like you," (01:22:05:44—01:22:07:15), revealing the extent to which perfection has become central to her identity. Beth, a former Swan Queen whose career ended tragically, functions as a cautionary figure who embodies the destructive consequences of perfectionism. Shortly after this encounter, Nina hallucinates Beth stabbing herself with a nail file, only to discover that the object is actually in her own hand. This hallucination blurs the boundary between Nina and Beth, suggesting Nina's fear that she is following the same self-destructive path.

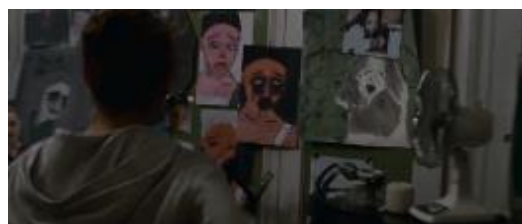


Figure 10. Nina's hallucination of the portraits screaming at her (01:24:00)

Upon returning home, Nina continues to experience disturbing visions, culminating in a scene where she enters Erica's room and sees the numerous portraits of herself screaming at her (Figure 10). The portraits symbolize Erica's persistent fixation on Nina and her idealized image of her daughter. Their transformation into screaming figures reflects Nina's growing psychological distress and the overwhelming pressure created by the expectations imposed upon her. The scene suggests that the image of perfection cultivated by both the ballet world and Erica has become a source of torment rather than achievement. Nina's hallucinations can

be interpreted as the consequence of a fragile sense of self that has developed under excessive maternal control and unrealistic expectations. Rather than supporting Nina's individuation, Erica's fixation on perfection contributes to Nina's psychological fragmentation, ultimately making it difficult for her to distinguish her own desires from the identities imposed upon her.



Figure 11. Close-up of Nina's back as she hallucinates growing swan feather (01:24:43)



Figure 12. Close-up of Nina's red eyes as she hallucinates becoming the Black Swan (01:24:49)



Figure 13. Close-up of Nina's distorted knees (01:25:14)



Figure 14. Full-body shot of Nina's distorted form (01:25:16)

The sequence of hallucinations depicted in Figures 11 through 14 serves as a manifestation of Nina's fractured psyche, linked to the suffocating environment of her toxic maternal relationship. When Nina begins to hallucinate, it is not merely a symptom of mental illness, but the physical rebellion of a woman who has been denied an independent identity. The cramped, hyper-feminine, and pink-toned bedroom acts as a claustrophobic cage, where this visual clutter forces a sharp, jarring contrast against the jagged, organic horror of Nina's transformation. In Figures 13 and 14, the *mise-en-scène* shifts from domestic claustrophobia to a disturbing reflection of body dysmorphia; these shots signify Nina's inability to reconcile the "perfect ballerina" she must be for her mother with the imperfect, dark, and autonomous creature she is becoming. The contorted, unnatural angles of her body represent a subconscious sabotage of the rigidity and "perfectionism" demanded by her mother. By physically distorting her form, Nina rejects the passive role of the "perfect little girl," effectively destroying the aesthetic of innocence used to maintain her confinement.

This physical decomposition functions as the visual bridge to Donald Winnicott's theory of the True Self versus the False Self, providing a clinical framework for Nina's breakdown. In his foundational work, Winnicott (1965) proposes that the True Self reflects the authentic inner core while the False Self is constructed as an adaptive defense to satisfy external expectations. Building on this framework, Ehrlich (2021) notes that the True Self remains concealed to avoid psychological annihilation, whereas Tiapale (2023) highlights how the False Self manifests as a performative façade to meet societal demands. Within this context, Nina's transformation into the Black Swan is not merely a hallucination, but the violent collapse of her False Self and the

desperate emergence of her True Self. The Black Swan embodies the suppressed desires, sexuality, and darker emotions that Nina has long stifled to remain her mother's obedient daughter and the company's pristine lead.

As Nina attempts to portray both the White Swan and the Black Swan in Tchaikovsky's ballet, these hallucinations grow increasingly volatile, distorting the border between reality and fantasy. This psychological fracturing is a coping mechanism: Nina's mind constructs a visceral, nightmarish reality to explore and express the aspects of her identity she is unable to acknowledge in her waking life. The mirror as a recurring motif in the film's *mise-en-scène* serves as an unblinking witness to this disintegration, confirming that the "monster" is not an external force, but the inevitable consequence of a lifetime spent trapped under the weight of maternal projection and suppressed selfhood.



Figure 15. Nina confronting her "double", projection as Nina's repression desired onto Lily (01:33:19)



Figure 16. The visual shift between Nina's reality and her hallucination (01:33:23)

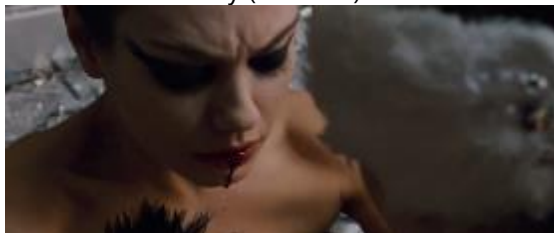


Figure 17. Visual of Lily as the "double", the hallucinated aftermath of the violent struggle between self and the projection (01:33:47)



Figure 18. Nina's red eye as a signifier of the Black Swan's dominance following the act of self-harm (01:34:32)

The confrontation with her "double," Lily, as depicted in Figures 15 through Figure 18, represents the final stage of this psychological disintegration. When Nina attacks Lily, she is engaging in a process of psychological projection, where she externalizes her repressed desires onto a rival she believes is attempting to steal her role in the ballet. The violent struggle which concludes with Nina believing she has defeated her opponent is, in reality, a singular act of self-destruction. The shattered mirrors in these sequences are no longer mere reflections; they are the debris of an identity that has been irreparably demolished. Nina's hallucination of "killing" her rival confirms that for her, the only means of escaping the suffocating expectations of her mother and the ballet world is to collapse the distinction between subject and object, effectively finalizing her total psychological breakdown.



Figure 19. Nina's 'final transformation as the Black Swan (01:36:37)

Nina's journey reached its climax when she finally bridges the divide within her fractured psyche. Her descent into hallucination is not a sign of total failure, but a violent, necessary confrontation with her suppressed "dark side", the Black Swan. As shown in Figure 19, this transformation is agonizing, reflecting the mental torture required to dismantle the persona her mother built for her. This process aligns with Donald Winnicott's theory, which posits that true mental health involves accepting and integrating the contradictory, often messy aspects of one's own nature. By finally embracing the shadow she spent her life denying, Nina achieves a terrible, final form of self-actualization; she collapses the binary of "mother's girl" and "performer," and in her final moments as the White Swan, she bears the red mark of the autonomous woman she has become, achieving a grim, lethal freedom that finally releases her from the suffocating expectations of her past.



Figure 20. Nina's final moment after the ending of Swan Lake (01:42:22)

Figure 20 where Nina is depicted as the wounded White Swan by the end of the film can be interpreted as the death of her innocent persona she has always carried. Lying flat on her back, her white tutu is visibly stained with her own blood that acts as a stark visual disruption of the innocence her mother fought so ruthlessly to preserve. This physical destruction marks the absolute point of no return; the fragile, infantilized False Self that existed merely to satisfy maternal expectations has been annihilated. While muttering "I felt perfect. I was perfect." (01:42:34:25—01:42:46:10), Nina does not express regret or agony, but a chilling sense of validation. Through this fatal self-inflicted wound, she has broken free from her mother's suffocating gaze. The utterance of perfection signifies that she has finally achieved total artistic and personal autonomy, fusing the light and dark halves of her psyche in a tragic, definitive act of self-actualization where liberation can only be realized through physical erasure.

## CONCLUSION

Darren Aronofsky showed how complex a mother-daughter relationship can be through *Black Swan* (2010). The analysis serves as a deep examination of how Erica Sayers' overbearing control and constant surveillance force her daughter, Nina, into severe psychological and physical disorientation. Utilizing Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic framework of the 'good

enough mother" and the "holding environment", this case study highlights the necessity of a supportive maternal figure in fostering healthy identity formation and emotional development.

According to Winnicott's theory, Erica's authoritarian parenting style is evidence of her not being able to give a balanced and encouraging environment. Because she fails to act as a "good enough mother," her overbearing control suppresses Nina's emotional growth. The pressure to fulfill her mother's ambitions drives Nina to adopt a False Self that manifested as the rigid, unassertive 'White Swan' persona to gain maternal approval. Consequently, her authentic true self is suppressed, only emerging destructively as the unconstrained 'Black Swan' as she struggles to break free from her mother's control. This toxic relationship eventually leads Nina to anorexia nervosa, which gets worse by ballet's demands and her mother's high expectations. Nina's eventual transformation this represents the desperate, destructive emergence of her suppressed True Self attempting to break free from a mother-pleasing facade.

Black Swan provides a persuasive story indicating the major role that mothers play in determining how a person thinks psychologically. It is clear to us from these findings that the failure of a 'good enough' mother' combined with a secured 'holding environment' can result in major psychological ailments as well as identity crisis by applying Winnicott's psychoanalytic approach rigorously. Erica's inability to provide emotional support and her overbearing nature create a cautionary tale of the consequences of unhealthy maternal relationships. Practically, this study contributes to media industry by demonstrating how Winnicott's psychological frameworks can be applied to screenwriting and film analysis to construct deeper character motivations and portray toxic family dynamics in modern psychological narratives.

For future research, other films that depict intricate connections between mothers and daughters should be explored to recognize the same mental influences and improve our knowledge concerning maternal dynamics in different cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the utilization of Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas within wider media ranges like novels, drama films or TV serials might present wider perceptions related to motherhood. Integrating Winnicott's theory with other psychological frameworks, such as attachment theory or trauma theory, would provide a multi-dimensional analysis of these interactions. Longitudinal studies on real-life mother-daughter relationships could offer empirical evidence to support or challenge film-based findings. Investigating the influence of socio-cultural factors on maternal behaviors and their psychological impacts can provide insights into cultural expectations and societal norms. Lastly, by promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration among psychologists, film scholars, and cultural theorists, the analysis and application of these findings can be enhanced.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION**

**Author 1:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing Original Draft; **Author 2:** Supervision, Validation, Reviewing.

## **REFERENCES**

Abramovitch, H. (2021). When is it time to stop? When good enough becomes bad enough. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 66(4), 907–925. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12700>

- Bahn, G. H. (2022). Understanding of Holding Environment Through the Trajectory of Donald Woods Winnicott. *Journal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 33(4), 84. <https://doi.org/10.5765/JKACAP.220022>
- de Roo, M., Veenstra, R., & Kretschmer, T. (2022). Internalizing and externalizing correlates of parental overprotection as measured by the EMBU: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Social Development (Oxford, England)*, 31(4), 962. <https://doi.org/10.1111/SODE.12590>
- Ehrlich, R. (2021). Winnicott's Idea OF The False Self: Theory as Autobiography. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 69(1), 75–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00030651211001461>
- Ghosh, A. (2022). *Analysis of Single-Shot and Long-Take Filmmaking: Its Evolution, Technique, Mise-en-scène, and Impact on the Viewer*. <https://doi.org/10.54105/ijmcj.B1023.122222>
- Goslin, A., & Koons-Beauchamp, D. (2023). The Mother-Daughter Relationship and Daughter's Positive Body Image: A Systematic Review. *Family Journal*, 31(1), 128–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221104109> ;WGROUP:STRING:PUBLICATION
- Honeycutt, L. D., & Honeycutt, L. D. (2021). A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO VISUAL ANALYSIS OF DRESS: SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION OF CLOTHING COLOR, CUT, AND COMPOSITION THROUGH THE FRENCH FILM COSTUMES OF ANAÏS ROMAND. *LSU Master's Theses*. [https://doi.org/10.31390/gradschool\\_theses.5408](https://doi.org/10.31390/gradschool_theses.5408)
- Hosokawa, R., & Katsura, T. (2018). Role of Parenting Style in Children's Behavioral Problems through the Transition from Preschool to Elementary School According to Gender in Japan. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/IJERPH16010021>
- Hoyes, B., Omand, H., & Salim, D. A. (2017). A Collective Response to the Collected Works of D.W. Winnicott. With artwork and written responses from the Winnicott Wednesdays Artist Art Psychotherapist Collective. *Art Therapy Online*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.ATOL.V8I2.463>
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Meng, Z., Luen, L. C., & Hj. Zainal Abidin, N. (2023). PARENTAL ROLE ORIENTATION'S INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S PERSONALITY FORMATION. *International Journal of Education & Technology*, 1(3). <https://doi.org/10.59021/IJETECH.V1I3.22>
- Okumuş, F. E. E., & Okumuş, F. E. E. (2020). Anorexia Nervosa. *Weight Management*. <https://doi.org/10.5772/INTECHOPEN.91278>
- Singh, N. (2023). The Role Of Mother-Daughter Relationship On Daughters Self Esteem. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT) Www.Ijcrt.Org* C761, 11(6), 2320–2882. [www.ijcrt.orgwww.ijcrt.org](http://www.ijcrt.orgwww.ijcrt.org)
- Taipale, J. (2023). Winnicott and the (un)integrated self. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 104(3), 467–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2023.2194364>



- Tarajko-Kowalska, J., & Kowalski, P. (2023). "Pretty in Pink"—The Pink Color in Architecture and the Built Environment: Symbolism, Traditions, and Contemporary Applications. *Arts*, 12(4), 161. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ARTS12040161>
- Vaporidis, A., & Njoroge, L. (2025). The Effects of Attachment and Trauma on Parenting and Children's Mental Health. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, IX(VII), 4262–4272. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000345>
- Winnicott, D. (1965). *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. London (Hogarth) 1965.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1960). The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 41, 585–595.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock Publications.