

## Exploring the Representation of Schizophrenia in the Main Character of the Black Swan Script

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**Abstract.** *This study explores the portrayal of mental illness, particularly paranoid schizophrenia, in the film script “Black Swan.” Library research method is adopted for this study. The primary source material is the “Black Swan” script, and the secondary sources include theoretical reference books that provide supporting evidence for the analysis. Utilizing a psychological approach, the analysis explores the character of Nina Sayers and her descent into a mental breakdown. The paper examines how the script depicts symptoms of schizophrenia, including hallucinations, delusions, and emotional instability. Additionally, the analysis investigates potential contributing factors such as neuropsychological vulnerabilities, immense pressure from ballet world, and a strained family dynamic. The Black Swan script serves as a valuable case study for understanding the complex interplay between internal and external forces that can trigger a mental illness. By examining Nina’s character, the study shed light on the challenges faced by individuals with schizophrenia and the importance of recognizing the diverse range of symptoms with the disorder.*

**Keywords:** *Schizophrenia, Mental Illness, Psychological Analysis, Character Portrayal.*

**Abstrak.** Makalah ini mengeksplorasi gambaran penyakit mental, khususnya skizofrenia paranoid, dalam naskah film “Black Swan.” Penelitian ini mengaplikasikan metode studi pustaka untuk menganalisis permasalahan yang akan dibahas. Sumber primer adalah naskah “Black Swan” dan sumber sekunder berupa buku referensi lain yang dapat memberikan bukti pendukung analisis. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan psikologis, analisis ini mengeksplorasi karakter Nina Sayers dan bagaimana dirinya jatuh dalam gangguan mental. Makalah ini mengkaji bagaimana naskah film tersebut menggambarkan gejala skizofrenia dalam karakter Nina Sayers, termasuk halusinasi, delusi, serta ketidakstabilan emosional. Selain itu, makalah ini membahas faktor-faktor yang berpotensi berkontribusi dalam gangguan mental seperti kerentanan neuropsikologis, tekanan besar dari dunia balet, dan hubungan keluarga yang tidak baik. Naskah “Black Swan” adalah studi kasus yang dapat digunakan untuk memahami interaksi kompleks antara faktor internal dan eksternal yang dapat memicu gangguan mental. Dengan mengkaji karakter Nina Sayers, makalah ini menyoroti tantangan yang dihadapi oleh individu dengan skizofrenia dan pentingnya mengenali beragam gejala gangguan mental tersebut.

**Kata kunci:** Skizofrenia, Gangguan Mental, Analisis Psikologis, Penggambaran Karakter.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are numerous illnesses that can affect the human body, most of them are physical. However, our mental health can also be compromised. Physical ailments can often be detected through visible signs of injury, but mental illnesses are more complex to diagnose. The most common way to identify mental illness is by observing a person’s behavior. According to Rom and Somervill (1976), schizophrenia can cause people to experience unusual thoughts and perceptions, including delusions and hallucinations. It can also sometimes lead to aggressive behavior or unusual sexual desires. Phycologists

will often identify this behavior as abnormal, which can then be used to diagnose a specific mental illness such as schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness that impacts a significant portion of the United States population, affecting an estimated 0.5% to 1.5% of their citizens (Andrearsen, 1999). According to Getzfeld (2010), the illness does not discriminate based on social factors, such as race or socioeconomic status. This statistic shows that schizophrenia can strike anyone, regardless of ages, time, or location.

As Getzfeld (2010) suggest, schizophrenia is diagnosed based on a combination of positive and negative symptoms that last for a significant amount of time. These symptoms can appear within a month, but with successful treatment, they may lessen. However, some signs of the disorder can be continued for at least six months. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition: Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* identifies at least five sub-types of schizophrenia: catatonic, paranoid, residual, disorganized, and undifferentiated (Andrearsen, 1999). This highlights the need for careful evaluation, as individuals with schizophrenia may exhibit symptoms across various sub-types. Positive and negative symptoms, along with the specific criteria, should be considered when making a diagnosis. Getzfeld (2010) further clarifies that paranoid schizophrenia stands out as one of the most common forms of this illness, along with the undifferentiated type. According to Goffman (1963), marginalized individuals experience the biggest pressure to conform to societal norms. They usually are labeled or stigmatized because of their illness.

This study explores the portrayal of schizophrenia in the movie script for Black Swan, examining it through a psychological lens. Literary works can be viewed from a mimetic perspective, which suggests that art imitates aspects of the real world (Abrams, 1953). In other words, literature can be seen as a reflection of human life. This concept is supported by Coleman (1976) that long before abnormal psychology emerged as a scientific discipline, literature and psychology shared a common ground in their focus on human behavior. Many contemporary authors have attempted to depict various types of abnormal behaviors in their work, including schizophrenia, depression, suicide, and others (Coleman, 1976). Furthermore, Daiches (1981) states that literary characters can be analyzed using contemporary psychological theories to gain deeper understanding of their motivations and actions.

Black Swan explores the emotional struggles of a young ballerina striving for perfection in the competitive ballet world. The story centers on the emotional struggles of

the main character, which can provide clues about her psychological state. Black Swan exemplifies a case of paranoid schizophrenia. The main character, Nina Sayers, exhibits characteristics of bizarre behavior, which will be explored further in the analysis. This paper will discuss Nina's characteristic that can be seen as indicative of paranoid schizophrenia and the factors contribute to Nina's mental breakdown and the portrayal of symptoms resembling paranoid schizophrenia.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The study examines the screenplay for "Black Swan" written by Andres Heinz, Mark Heyam, and John McLaughlin (2010). The 206-page script unfolds across 116 scenes, primarily relying on dialogue and stage directions to convey the story.

Characters are fundamental to a story as they represent each individual in the storyline. For instance, they are resemblance of real people (Bal, 2009). Chatman (1978) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002) describe that characters can be defines as a set of attributes identified through textual analysis. Baldick (2001) defines characters as the performers within fictional narratives or plays. These characters are presented to the reader as individuals with specific qualities and behaviors. Their characteristics is revealed through the dialogue and actions. The paper will analyze Nina Sayers, the main character on the Black Swan script and her struggle in facing schizophrenia.

The analysis of Nina Sayers in Black Swan will employ a psychological approach. This method is well-suited as it delves into the human mind to understand the underlying thoughts, emotions, and experiences that influence human behavior (Bressler, 1999). Literary scholar Rene Wellek (1956) identifies three areas of focus within the psychological approach: the author's psyche, the intrinsic psychological elements within the work itself, and the psychological impact on the reader.

In this study, the psychological approach will be used to analyze the psychological elements within Black Swan, specifically focusing on Nina Sayers and her portrayal of abnormal behavior consistent with schizophrenia.

This study utilizes library research method to analyze "Black Swan." It employs both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the Black Swan screenplay, and the secondary sources are various theoretical reference books to support the analysis.

The analysis of the Black Swan screenplay follows a six-step approach: 1) deep reading the script thoroughly multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the story and its themes; 2) literature and psychology research, references specific to Black

Swan, characterization theories, and the psychological concept of schizophrenia are identified and collected; 3) character analysis, characterization theories are applied to the main character, Nina Sayers, to understand her development and portrayal; 4) schizophrenia comparison, Nina's characterization is compared to symptoms of schizophrenia as outlined in psychological sources; 5) examining the underlying factor that may have contributed to the main character developing schizophrenia; 6) conclusion formation, a conclusion is drawn about the main character's portrayal and its connection to themes and character psychology.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The result of the study consists of two parts, the first part is the characterization of paranoid schizophrenia depicted in the main character by exploring into Nina Sayers' portrayal in the story, specifically focusing on the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia evident in her character. It discusses how her emotions, delusions, hallucinations, obsessions, and anger manifest within the narrative.

The second part of this study is exploring the roots of illness and uncover the potential causes of Nina Sayers' paranoid schizophrenia by exploring into by biological and psychological factors that might have contributed to the development of her mental illness.

#### **The Characterization of Nina Sayer**

The Black Swan script centers on Nina Sayers, a young and gifted ballerina looking for the spotlight. Consumed by the ambition that once fueled her predecessor, Nina relentlessly pursues the coveted lead role in Swan Lake. Her dedication is rewarded when she's chosen to be a contender and becomes the Swan Queen. However, the director demands a duality from Nina – the grace of the White Swan and the untamed passion of the Black Swan. This is challenging for Nina, whose reserved nature prevents her portrayal of the darker side.

Nina's personal life mirrors the turmoil inside her. Confined to a small apartment with her overbearing mother, Erica, Nina craves independence. Erica's protectiveness often borders on smothering, leading to friction between them. As the relationship between this daughter and mother strains, Nina finds comfort in Lily, a fellow dancer who initially appears as a rival. Lily's carefree demeanor offers a stark contrast to Nina's anxieties.

However, their newfound connection turns when Lily introduces Nina to a mysterious substance, blurring the lines between reality and Nina's descent into madness.

A glimpse into Nina's personality emerges from her interaction with other character. This dialogue below reveals an information about her, paving the way for a deeper analysis of her actions throughout the story. Following this initial scene, we'll explore Nina's choices in various situations and events, further enhancing our understanding of her character.

Nina's dialogue with Erica:

NINA. It was worse a couple days ago. It's already getting better. ERICA. You've been scratching again (*she pulls out nail clippers. ERICA carefully cuts her nails down to their base*). I thought you'd outgrown this disgusting habit. You haven't done it for years. What is going on with you? – It's the role, isn't it? All of this pressure... I was worried it'd be too much [p.39-40]

The conversation between Nina and her mother reveals two key aspects of Nina's character. Firstly, Erica's use of the word "again" suggests a recurring habit – Nina scratches her body. This repetitive action could be a sign of underlying anxiety, a coping mechanism Nina unconsciously do. Secondly, Erica's concern about the scratching hints at her perception of Nina's stress levels. Although not explicitly stated, Erica might suspect the pressure of the ballet to be the source of Nina's tension.

Nina's dialogue with Brennan:

BRENNAN. Nina, right now, your black swan looks no different than your white – swan. She's just as...frigid. [p.45]

The dialogue stated by Brennan clearly stated Nina's nature as frigid, means that she couldn't animate the role satisfactorily.

Nina's dialogue with the Ballet Mistress:

(*Using the mirror, Nina monitors her movements carefully. The mistress surprising her*). BALLET MISTRESS. Nina. It needs to be looser. Relax. Let it flow. [p.6]

Nina's focus on her movements borders on obsession. While her dedication is undeniable, the dance mistress recognizes the need for a more relaxed approach. This tension shows Nina's underlying ambition for the lead role. Her determination is fueled by desire to prove herself, but it threatens to overshadow the necessary artistic expression.

Delusions depict in Nina's actions:

*(She notices a slender figure watching her from the shadow of adjoining doorway. Obscured by the dark, she looks like Nina. – Spotted, the figure backs up, seeming to disappear) [p.34]*

The example of Nina's action above hints at a possible detachment from reality. This scene raises questions about Nina's mental state and suggests that Nina might be experiencing delusions, since she perceives things that other don't.

Hallucination depicts in Nina's action:

*(Nina flings open the door, but Erica's not there. She hears rustling, then whispering. Nina looks around the room. The pictures of her seem to move slightly. Blink. Mouth move). [p.86]*

The scene offers a glimpse into Nina's deteriorating mental state. Her actions suggest she's experiencing hallucinations – a symptom where she perceives things that aren't real. In this instance, she seems to be seeing a visual representation of herself moving slightly in the picture. This event highlights Nina's potential struggle to distinguish reality from her own distorted perceptions. The hallucination could be a symptom of a deeper psychological issue, showing the unraveling of her grip on sanity.

### **The Cause of Nina Sayers' Paranoid Schizophrenia Type**

Drawing on the dialogues and actions depicted in the script, we can identify several factors that could be contributing to Nina's mental health. These factors may not definitely point towards a diagnosis like paranoid schizophrenia, but they offer valuable insights into her deteriorating mental state.

One potential contributing factor to Nina's mental state could be neuropsychological factor. These factors encompass disturbances in the nervous system that can manifest in various ways. While not a direct cause of schizophrenia, a study by Smith (1983) suggests that such disturbances might be linked to feelings of insecurity and vulnerability.

In the script, Nina displays characteristics that align with these potential neuropsychological effects. Her intense fear of losing the lead role to Lily and her overall sense of insecurity could be interpreted as signs of this vulnerability.

Extensive stress can be seen as the psychosocial factor that can contribute to the onset of paranoid schizophrenia (Smith, 1983). In the case of Nina Sayers, we witness a character under immense pressure. Her struggle to embody the dual nature of the Swan Queen – the innocent White Swan and the sensual Black Swan – creates a significant

internal conflict. This inability to fully inhabit either role, added with the fear of losing the coveted part to Lily, generates a crippling level of stress for Nina.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Mental illness as a spectrum of conditions impacting a person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, affects millions globally. Among them, schizophrenia stands out for its complexity. The topic about this specific mental illness can be found in literature for centuries, it often serves as a tool to explore the complexities of the human mind and the nature of reality itself.

The analysis of the *Black Swan* script reveals a compelling portrayal of a character succumb to a mental breakdown. The exploration of Nina Sayers' character shows several symptoms indicative of paranoid schizophrenia, including hallucinations, delusions, and emotional instability.

There are many factors that can contribute to trigger mental breakdown. In the case of Nina Sayers, the contributing factors are the neuropsychological and the psychosocial factors. Those factors can occur due to psychological stress, a demanding artistic environment, and a strained family dynamic.

Because of the limitation of the study and the analysis relies solely on the script, and lacks access to clinical diagnosis of Nina's condition, the researchers suggest to further explore beyond this limitation. Future researcher may discuss how the depiction of mental illness portrays in *Black Swan* can raise awareness to face this challenge. The researchers also suggest to explore the experiences of dancers and performers to understand the specific pressures they face and the potential mental health risks associated with their profession.

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