

## The Rites of Passage of Nina Sayers in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*

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### ABSTRACT:

This study aims to discuss Nina Sayers' rites of passage which are portrayed through the use of many kinds of symbols. Each stage of rites of passage is represented by symbols. Thus, I will use the theory of rites of passage to match the symbols with characteristics of each stage and the concept of symbols to analyze the symbols so that the meanings are appropriate to the contexts and able to show the ways Nina Sayers' rites of passage are symbolized. The analysis shows that each stage of the rites of passage is symbolized by many forms of symbols. It also shows that symbols of rites of passage can actually hold more than one meaning as they can change meanings in each stage of rites of passage. In the end, it can be concluded that symbols in *Black Swan* have been effectively used to strongly reveal the rites of passage.

**Key words:** Liminal Stage, Pre-Liminal Stage, Post-Liminal Stage, Rites of Passage, Symbols.

Psychological thriller, among other genres, is a unique genre because it is a portrayal of human's mental and emotional development through a plot that is exciting and terrifying at the same time. *Black Swan*, a 2010 psychological thriller movie, presents the uniqueness of the genre by having the main character, Nina Sayers, play as the one who is psychologically and physically victimized by herself. As a result, this formula is able to preserve the exciting yet horrifying feeling as usually offered by all psychological thriller movies, and it successfully leads *Black Swan* to be considered one of top ten psychological thrillers of all times, along with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* ("10 Certified Fresh Psychological Thrillers," 2011).

The story of *Black Swan* revolves around a ballerina named Nina Sayers. Taken care by an overbearing mother named Erica Sayers, Nina Sayers is used to living as mommy's little girl. The audience may notice it from certain symbolic object and gesture, for instance when Nina is about to sleep in her pink bedroom, Erica will play the music box and stroke Nina's hair while humming to the music. The thought of completely discharging herself from her child-like life never crosses her mind until she receives the main role of the Swan Lake, the Swan Queen. Frustrated by her failure in playing the Black Swan which demands her to be loose and sexually appealing, Nina Sayers learns that, in order to successfully play Black Swan, she desperately needs to finally step in to the next crucial phase of her life, womanhood. Again, such transition is clearly seen from the symbols. She suddenly disposes of her dolls and even hates to be controlled by her mother. Such process Nina Sayers experiences can be viewed as a rite of passage, and this view leads me to my topic.

Rites of passage are regular significant rituals attached to the transitional stages in a person's life. This definition can also mean to specifically signify the transition of one's life from childhood to adulthood. In this film, the process that Nina Sayers undergoes to leave her childish side and then enter her mature side is vaguely seen throughout the film. Her rites of passage are only portrayed through the use of symbols. Thus, I would like to discuss the ways Nina Sayers' rites of passage are symbolized.

A symbol is "an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and has that reality suggest another level of meaning" (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p.494). It means that a symbol does not stand neither for just one meaning nor for anything absolutely definite since it can point, hint, or cast long shadows (Kennedy & Gioia, 2007, p.229) based on the context in where it is put. Thus, any interpretation of symbols is possible since the capacity of thinking rationally is different to each person. The presence of symbols may be in many forms. It can be a character, a place, a gesture, an event, or an object (Meredith & Fitzgerald, 1972, p.179). However, the types of

symbols are only two. The first type “includes those embodying universal suggestions of meaning” (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p.494), and it means that the meaning of this type of symbol can directly be understood without creating any misunderstanding. Meanwhile, the second type “secures its suggestiveness not from qualities inherent in itself but from the way in which it is used in a given work” (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p.494). In this case, the meaning of such type of symbol is special for it needs further comprehension of the context first in order to avoid any misunderstanding. Since almost all symbols in *Black Swan* are categorized as the-second-type symbols, this concept is applied to analyze the symbols of Nina Sayers’ rites of passage so that the meanings of the symbols are appropriate to the contexts and able to show the way Nina Sayers’ rites of passage are symbolized.

Rites of passage are regular significant rituals attached to the transitional stages in a person’s life. This definition can also mean to specifically signify the transition of one’s life from childhood to adulthood. There are three stage in rites of passage: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Pre-liminal stage is the first stage where there are rites of separation from a previous world (Gennep, 1960, p.21) by involving symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure (Turner, 1969, p.80). Liminal stage is the in-between stage where one has lost his old identity, but has not yet been fully re-incorporated into the community with a new identity. In this stage, one’s new status is not acknowledged yet despite the fact that he has already lost his childhood period. Thus, one must need to pass a “test” to prove that he is ready for adulthood (Szakolczai, 2009, p.148). Post-liminal stage is the last stage where there are the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world (Gennep, 1960, p.21). With his new identity, one re-enters and is accepted by the society. The acceptance is through ceremonies or rituals involving individuals, immediate family, and larger community. These three stages are the exact stages Nina Sayers takes when she prepares herself to leave her childhood and enter the adulthood.

## THE CHILDHOOD PERIOD OF NINA

Nina Sayers is basically an adult in appearance yet a child in soul that this condition eventually triggers Nina to finally enter adulthood by taking three stages of her rites of passage. Thus, this is why this early condition of Nina is named the childhood period. Nina’s child-like identity is symbolized by names, objects, place, emotion, and events. Firstly, names, such as Nina and ‘sweet girl’, confirm that Nina is a child-like person. Nina means “child-like” (“nina,” n.d.) in Spanish while ‘sweet girl’ is a term of endearment that is usually given by parents to young girls. By having these names which are all closely associated with childhood, Nina is regarded as a person who still lives in her childhood period despite her age. Secondly, through objects, such as paintings and photos owned by her mother Erica, Nina is portrayed as a young girl instead of a woman: “Nina glances at the walls. Where several homemade paintings hang, all of the same subject: Nina as a young girl, posing in a tutu. On a desk, the original photograph is clipped to a painting in progress” (*Black Swan*, 2010). The childhood moments are cherished by her mother through that portraits. Besides, animal dolls which are kept in her bedroom and still treated nicely by Nina also suggest an idea that they must be Nina’s favorite. Among all animal dolls, there is one particular animal doll that the camera focuses on, a teddy bear in a tutu. A teddy bear is commonly known as the representation of innocence, a time when young children see the world as good and wonderful (“What does a teddy bear represent?” 2012). The tutu worn by the teddy bear obviously emphasizes Nina’s interest, ballet. Hence, the teddy bear in a tutu here suggests an idea that this is a symbolic portrayal of the ‘child’ Nina. This is why she is acknowledged as a child-like Nina. Thirdly, a place can also prove the child-like identity of Nina: “[t]he room looks like it hasn’t been redecorated since she was a teenager . . . Pink and frilly” (*Black Swan*, 2010). Nina’s pink and frilly bedroom leads to an idea that she enjoys living in a childish environment. Fourthly, emotions strengthen the similar idea for Nina possesses frail emotions that are usually had by a child, fearful and fragile.

ERICA.	It’s our favorite. Vanilla with strawberry filling.
NINA.	Oh, Mom, not too big. That’s way, way too much . . . Mom, my stomach’s still in knots.
Erica grabs the whole cake and heads towards the trash.	

ERICA. (offended) Fine. Fine. Then it's garbage.

NINA. (guilty) No, Mom. Don't. I'm sorry.

Erica hesitates, but returns. She sets the cake back down. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

When subjected to the pressure her mother shows through her offended look and sarcastic reply, Nina suddenly feels emotionally down and scared like a child that she directly apologizes to her mother. Last but not least, events can also symbolize child-like figure of Nina as initially seen in her capability of being the White Swan.

In the middle of her audition, Nina dances Odette's Variation from Act II of the ballet, a frightened look on her face. Although her movement is incredibly precise, there's a definite vulnerability. Exactly as the White Swan should be: fear tinged with melancholy.

THOMAS. Truth is, when I look at you, all I see is the White Swan.

Yes, you're beautiful, fragile, fearful. Ideal casting . . . (*Black Swan*, 2010)

Nina brings out the frightened and melancholy White Swan in her dancing very naturally because Nina has frail emotions that apparently match the characters of the White Swan. As a result, it is no surprise to see her succeed in personifying the White Swan quite perfectly, and the White Swan can be said as the symbol of child Nina. Nina's child-likeness is further emphasized in another event, and that can be seen in her incapability of being the Black Swan.

THOMAS. . . . [The White Swan's] lustful twin, the Black Swan, tricks and seduces . . .

NINA. I can be the Black Swan too.

THOMAS. Really? She's hungry, volatile. In four years, every time you dance, I see you obsess over getting each move exactly right, but I never see you lose yourself.

Insecure, she looks like she wants to run out of the room. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

Nina fails to personify the Black Swan because she does not have traits that are normally associated with grown women, such as lustful, seductive, hungry and volatile. Hence, this failure once again supports the idea that Nina is indeed child-like.

## THE PRE-LIMINAL STAGE OF NINA

Nina is in the pre-liminal stage, her first stage of her rites of passage. In this stage, Nina withdraws from her current status and prepares to move from childhood to adulthood with the involvement of symbolic behavior signifying the detachment from an earlier fixed point in the social structure (Turner, 1969, p.80). In the previous subchapter, Nina's inability to personify the Black Swan makes her feel humiliated. Despite the humiliation, this inability eventually triggers Nina to be in a journey to comprehend the character of the Black Swan. However, what Nina is unaware is that the journey she is about to go in here will also lead her to a journey of her rites of passage as well. Therefore, there will be two parallel journeys that Nina undergoes at the same time during the process. It is initially symbolized by gestures of detachment from childhood. Here, Nina has attempted to be a woman, but she has not completely left her child-like identity. She has had intentions and even taken actions to look for her new identity as a woman in two figures. The first one is Beth McIntyre, the aged prima ballerina of the company. Nina develops a deep admiration for Beth since she considers her "an amazing dancer" (*Black Swan*, 2010) and even compares Beth to one of the greatest classical ballet dancers of all time, Margot Fonteyn, who "danced into her 50's" (*Black Swan*, 2010). Beth is also considered to be the most successful dancer to perform her role as the Swan Queen, a role which garners a special title from Thomas, 'little princess'. Hence, Beth can be said as the symbol of perfection and it eventually triggers Nina to imitate Beth by stealing and using Beth's possessions.

BETH. What are you doing here?

NINA. I'm so sorry . . .

BETH. You stole my things?

NINA. I was just trying to be perfect, like you. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

Nina takes a shortcut to look mature by using Beth's possessions and imitating her look. However, she still fails to meet her expectation of being the kind of woman like Beth because it is only physical. Since the first attempt fails, Nina makes another attempt by imitating her co-ballerina and rival, Lily. Lily is the one who can emotionally comprehend and even personify the adult-like

character of the Black Swan perfectly. Thus, Nina believes that the answer to her problem is in Lily.

Lily sits down beside her, oblivious of Nina's desire to be left alone. She digs out a cigarette from her bag. Offers it to Nina. Nina doesn't take it.

NINA. We can't smoke in here.

LILY. I won't tell if you won't.

Nina reluctantly takes the cigarette, holds it a little awkwardly, clearly not a regular smoker. Lily sparks a flame for her and then lights one for herself. Nina puffs, but doesn't inhale. Lily smirks. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

Here, Nina has an internal conflict within herself because, in reality, she is too familiar with a way of life that is under control and never in conflict with regulations. Even though she eventually decides to imitate Lily's rebellion, her reluctance and awkwardness show that she is still not comfortable in doing that. Despite the results, this gesture is one of her efforts in finding her identity.

Another effort in finding her identity is by touching herself. She starts finding that identity within herself.

Nina lies wide awake after a restless night. She slowly reaches down under the covers, down between her legs, to complete Leroy's "homework assignment." She closes her eyes and starts to maneuver. She suddenly hears a rustling sound and a short snore. She freezes and opens her eyes. She slowly sits up in bed and sees Erica sleeping on a chair in the corner of the room. Nina glares at her. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

Nina's attempt to find her identity of woman through the exploration of her own body fails because of her mother's presence. Her mother robs her right to have her privacy. Her mother, who can be said as a symbol of comfort for Nina in the previous subchapter, is suddenly regarded as an annoyance. As a result, Nina makes another gesture of detachment, making action of resistance.

Post-shower, Nina's fuzzy reflection stares back in a steam covered mirror. Nina takes her hand and wipes a streak across, to see herself more clearly. She looks nervous. The enormity of what's in front of her setting in. She turns side-to-side, scrutinizing her body.

ERICA. Nina, are you home?

Nina slides the hamper in front of the door to block it. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

When her mother interrupts Nina from the preparation of creating her own privacy in the bathroom, Nina attempts to block the door by using a hamper. Even though the hamper cannot strongly block the door, it symbolizes Nina's effort to delay her mother's interference for seconds before she finally barges in. The hamper here symbolically implies Nina's current power of resistance, which is still weak.

All the efforts show the beginning of Nina's attempt to detach herself from her mother to be to grow up. Nina continues to make an advanced progress as she takes the second stage of her rites of passage, the liminal stage.

## THE LIMINAL STAGE OF NINA

After the pre-liminal stage, Nina is in her second stage of her rites of passage, the liminal stage. Her new status is not acknowledged yet despite the fact that she has already lost her childhood period. In this stage, she must pass a "test" to prove that she is ready for adulthood (Szakolczai, 2009, p.148).

This stage is initially represented by gestures of complete detachment. Firstly, Nina has completely cut ties from all that are related to her childhood. Her mother, who is an important figure when Nina is still a child-like person, suddenly becomes someone unimportant in Nina's life that Nina even ignores.

LILY. [. . .] So how about I take you out to dinner?

NINA. I don't think . . .

ERICA. Sweetie, you need to rest.

LILY. Jesus!

NINA. (to Lily) Wait.

Nina walks to the door, and grabs her coat.

ERICA. What are you doing?

NINA.           Going out.  
ERICA.          What?

Nina ignores her. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

The way she ignores her mother's question, after provoked by the annoyed expression of her same-aged role model, Lily, as she says "Jesus!", shows that Nina already considers that as an adult she should be able to decide what is best for herself. She no longer needs her mother's permission to do whatever she wants in her social life. Her interpretation of being an adult takes her to consider her relationship with her mother. Her ignoring her mother is followed by another attempt, blocking her bedroom door with a piece of broken wood. This action shows Nina cutting her ties from her mother once again.

She grabs the broken piece of wood from the dresser and jams the door.

NINA.           Don't come in here!

Erica tries to open the door, but it gets stuck. She peers her eye through the crack.

ERICA.          What's this?

NINA.           It's called privacy! I'm not twelve years old anymore!

Erica struggles a little with the door, but can't get it to budge. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

Nina finally has her private space, a space that does not have her mother in it. The piece of broken wood successfully stops her mother from barging into her bedroom, her private space. Her power of resistance is reflected through the wood, a solid structure represents strength. Nina is not afraid of letting her mother know about her desire for privacy. She even angrily yells to her mother that she hates the way her mother has treated her. The rage Nina has shown in these two attempts is clearly a symbolic proof that she is now a new person who completely cuts her ties from her mother.

The final confirmation of Nina completely cutting her ties from her mother is when Nina boldly says that she is no longer her mother's 'sweet girl.'

NINA.           Let go of me! . . .

ERICA.          What happened to my sweet girl?

NINA.           She's gone! (*Black Swan*, 2010)

Here, Nina makes it clearer that she no longer considers herself her mother's 'sweet girl', a term of endearment she is ever glad to hear when she is still a child-like girl. As she says "Let go of me!", it can be interpreted as her bold request for her mother to let her be a grown-up. The fact that Nina completely removes the 'sweet girl', the figure her mother wants, proves that she completely cuts her ties from her mother.

After cutting her ties with her mother, Nina abandons and even disposes of all of her favorite possessions as a child.

Nina collapses on her bed. She opens the jewelry box sitting on her night stand. She watches the ballerina spin for a moment. Then suddenly throws the box. She shoots out of bed and starts gathering all her childish possessions – stuffed animals, dolls, keepsakes, etc. Nina shoves her belongings into the trash chute, a pile of her next victims strewn at her feet. She grabs a teddy bear in a tutu, and jams him in. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

The way Nina shows her dislike toward her favorite possessions as a child is full of rage. Such emotion is there because Nina has previously made it clear that she does not like her old self anymore. When Nina shoves the teddy bear which is a symbolic portrayal of the 'child' Nina, it suggests an idea that Nina is no longer the child-like Nina.

Secondly, Nina asserts her adulthood by embracing her sexuality. After Nina manages to create a gap between her mother, she is now finally able to explore her sexuality by pleasing herself.

Lily starts to go down on Nina. Nervous, Nina whimpers . . . She closes her eyes, allows the sensation to invade her body and climaxes. She breathes her way back to earth. Slowly her eyes open. She rolls over towards Lily. But Lily is gone . . .

NINA.           I overslept.

LILY.           Oops. Hey, at least you had a good time, right? . . .

NINA.           And then you just took off in the morning?

LILY.           In the morning? . . .

NINA.           But we . . .

LILY. You fantasized about me! (*Black Swan*, 2010)

In this exploration, Nina succeeds in reaching the emotional level of her sexuality. She finds pleasure alone with her own body by fantasizing about Lily. Moreover, Nina takes an advanced attempt by taking the initiation to explore her sexuality with a partner. It can be seen when Nina suddenly kisses Thomas after ending her Black Swan dancing.

THOMAS. Get back out there. Come on! They want...

She stops his mouth with a kiss. The kind of kiss that you can't stop. Not desperate, but adamant. Finally she disengages, staring at him in the eyes, but before he can say anything, she turns and rushes back on stage. He's stunned. Like he's been run over by a truck. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

In this attempt, Nina finally lands herself in much higher level of her sexuality, the physical level. She surprisingly becomes the one who starts the kiss and she is also the one who stops the kiss. This suggests an idea that this is a show of Nina's sexual power. Here, she takes control over Thomas and seduces him in a way that she wants. Hence, the progress of Nina's sexuality as seen in the two attempts symbolically means that Nina finally transforms into a woman by losing her child-like self completely.

With her success of completely cutting her ties from her mother and exploring her sexuality, Nina can finally be able to understand and even personify the character of the Black Swan. Here occurs the complete process of Nina's two parallel journeys, the journey of comprehending the character of the Black Swan and the journey of her rites of passage, when Nina imagines herself being a Black Swan while dancing the Black Swan part.

For the Coda. She takes a brief pause, closing her eyes once more, and then completely lets herself go. She spins with ferocity. More black feathers burst out from her shoulders and back. At last, she truly embodies the Black Swan . . . Nina looks down at the stage, her face glazed with sweat. She has returned to normal. No feathers. Normal eyes. A woman. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

When imagining herself having black feathers, Nina is described to finally embody the Black Swan. Despite mere imagination, the presence of black feathers implies that Nina is finally able to relate herself to the character of the Black Swan. She is emotionally connected to the character that the feathers on her shoulders and back feel so real as if she did have them in reality. However, once the imagination of the black feathers is gone, Nina knows that she is now a woman. Therefore, the imagination here implies that the character of the Black Swan, which she can relate to and personify perfectly now, has transformed her into a woman. Her transformation into a woman also helps her to understand the character of the Black Swan. The Black Swan then can be said as a symbol of adult Nina.

## THE POST-LIMINAL STAGE OF NINA

In the liminal stage, Nina has recognized that she is a woman, and such recognition is considered as a personal acknowledgement of her new identity as a woman. However, as a member of the society, Nina's new identity as a woman should also be acknowledged by the society as well. Therefore, it leads Nina to the next stage of her rites of passage.

The final stage of Nina's rites of passage is the post-liminal stage, where there are the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world (Gennep, 1960, p.21). This stage is represented by a gesture and an event. The society's gesture of acknowledgement is a standing ovation. This standing ovation initially happens as Nina finishes her dancing as the Black Swan. Even though the standing ovation is described as a strong one, the loudest standing ovation surprisingly happens as Nina finishes her dancing as the dying White Swan.

It's time for her final leap . . . [s]he gets to the top, takes one last look around, at all the eyes watching her. She notices a familiar face in the audience: her mother. She watches with a profound sadness, tears streaking her cheeks . . . [s]he falls through an endless void, her eyes closed. She slowly twists around in the air, so that she's falling backwards. She hears something. Soft and muffled. The faint sound of applause. She lands slowly and comfortably on padding. The sound of applause is now loud, uproarious. A group of ballerinas surround the mattress, clapping for her, each one dressed as a white swan. (*Black Swan*, 2010)

The loud and uproarious standing ovation suggests two important points. The first one is that the society acknowledges Nina as a great dancer for she successfully personifies both Black Swan and White Swan. The second point is that the society celebrates the death of the White Swan or, specifically, the child Nina since the White Swan is the symbol of the child Nina. They congratulate Nina for finally losing her old identity that they need to give a louder ovation than before. In other words, Nina is accepted in the circle of adults in society for she finally meets the requirements of being an adult, which is symbolically portrayed in her progress as the Swan Queen. Given the ovation, Nina just earns her first acknowledgement.

Another of acknowledgement takes place as Nina is crowned by her director Thomas Leroy with a title 'little princess.' He says, "You hear that? They love you. Little princess, I always knew you had it in you. C'mon, let's take a bow" (*Black Swan*, 2010). The title is given after she has proven that she is successful in becoming the Swan Queen. Since the role of the Swan Queen apparently leads Nina to her search of new identity as an adult, then the title is symbolically given to acknowledge the quality of being a prima ballerina as shown by Nina. Nina proves that she can personify two characters at the same time, revealing her child-like identity and adult identity. This ability is actually what makes Nina deserve to be given that title. She gets the title because even though Nina has become a woman, she is able to go into other characters regardless of her condition. In this case, the title is a symbolic acknowledgement of Nina's success in having that special ability.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis has proven that the symbols of rites of passage used in this film can be in any form since any part within scenes can deliberately hold symbolic intentions. Names, colors, objects, place, emotion, gestures, and events are all used to hold meanings that actually explain Nina's condition in each stage of her rites of passage. Moreover, this analysis has also proven that symbols in certain stage can change meanings in another stage of rites of passage. In other words, one symbol can actually hold more than one meanings. For instance, the major symbols, white in White Swan and black in Black Swan, are initially used to represent purity and the opposite. However, these meanings are no longer found in the last stage of Nina's rites of passage as the Black Swan is more "celebrated" than the White Swan. Eventually, there is a change in what the two colors mean. To put in the context of the film, black does not necessarily mean "evil" or any other adjectives to show bad quality. Black in the Black Swan, which is the symbol of the adult Nina, is given a new meaning as "knowledge" because Nina as a woman has learnt adult's way of life. Meanwhile, white in the White Swan, which is the symbol of the child Nina, means "ignorance" because Nina as a child has no knowledge of adults' life at all. In other words, the death of the White Swan implies the death of Nina's ignorance. Another example of how symbols in certain stage of rites of passage can change meanings in another stage can be found in Nina's mother, Erica. In the childhood period, Erica represents comfort since Nina as a child truly enjoys Erica's presence to comfort her. However, when Nina finally enters her rites of passage and gradually becomes a woman, Erica no longer represents comfort. Instead, she is considered the symbol of obstacle for she hinders the process of Nina's maturity. From the two examples, the symbols of rites of passage are possible to have more than one meaning as the meanings are different in each stage. Therefore, symbols in *Black Swan* have been effectively used to strongly reveal the rites of passage of Nina Sayers.

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