



# A Ballerina's Self-Defence Mechanism: An Analysis of Nina Sayers' Character in Black Swan by Mark Heyman et al

**Titi Marlina Halawa<sup>1\*</sup>, Yohanes Tuaderu<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Prayoga, Padang 25221, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* as the object of analysis. It portrays the psychological struggles of Nina Sayers, a ballerina who faces intense pressure to achieve perfection. The film illustrates how Nina confronts both internal conflict and external demands from her professional environment and family, reflecting the challenges of mental health in real-life experienced by individuals in competitive settings. The research applies a psychoanalytic approach to analyse the film script, employing Anna Freud's theory on defence mechanisms, including repression, denial, reaction formation, and identification with the aggressor. The study identifies how Nina's reliance on these mechanisms as an emotional survival strategy but gradually contributes to her psychological instability. The findings indicate that the persistent use of defence mechanisms leads Nina to rebel against her surroundings by acting in ways opposite to her true feelings, which results in her psychological breakdown. The study concludes that while defence mechanisms may temporarily protect individuals from stress, their excessive use can distort personality development. This research emphasizes the importance of recognizing the psychological impacts of pressure in high-performance environments and highlights the need for greater mental health awareness, particularly in the performing arts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

People frequently encounter emotional and psychological challenges when facing fear, stress, or failure. To cope with such difficulties, individuals unconsciously employ strategies known as defense mechanisms. Freud (1966) defined defense mechanisms as behaviors that protect people from unpleasant events, actions, or thoughts. These mechanisms enable individuals to manage stress by avoiding painful realities about themselves or their environment. In demanding fields such as art and entertainment, performers often rely on defense mechanisms to cope with criticism, high expectations, and fear of failure. Common forms include denial, repression, and projection, which serve to maintain outward confidence despite internal struggles.

The film *Black Swan* (Aronofsky, 2010) provides a vivid representation of these dynamics through the character Nina Sayers, a ballerina striving for perfection. Nina is pressured by her professional environment, her mother's control, and the dual role of the White Swan and Black Swan in *Swan Lake*. This duality forces her to confront repressed aspects of herself, leading to deep psychological conflict. Her struggle demonstrates how defense mechanisms such as denial, repression, reaction formation, and identification with the aggressor temporarily preserve her stability but ultimately contribute to her breakdown.

Several scholars have analyzed *Black Swan* from psychological and literary perspectives. Thomas (2024) highlighted Nina's trauma using Freud and Caruth's concepts,

while Burkush (2012) applied psychoanalysis and feminism, viewing Nina as embodying the “monstrous-feminine.” Haryanti (2022) focused on Nina’s anxieties through Freud’s theory of anxiety, and Putri and Nugroho (2024) examined the interplay of the id, ego, and superego in her ambition. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they do not specifically analyze Nina’s use of Anna Freud’s defense mechanisms as the central theme.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing Nina’s psychological struggles through Anna Freud’s theory of defense mechanisms. Specifically, the research examines four mechanisms: repression, denial, reaction formation, and identification with the aggressor as reflected in Nina’s behaviors and personality development. The aim is to explore how these mechanisms operate as both protective and destructive strategies, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the psychological impacts of internal and external pressures. By focusing on this framework, the study also underscores the importance of mental health awareness in competitive environments such as the performing arts.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a psychological literary approach to analyze the defense mechanisms of the main character in Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan. The focus is on how Nina Sayers uses defense mechanisms, specifically repression, denial, reaction formation, and identification with the aggressor to cope with internal conflicts and external pressures. The qualitative design is chosen because it emphasizes description, interpretation, and meaning rather than numerical data, allowing a deeper exploration of the character’s psychological condition (Miles, 2014).

The object of this study is the film Black Swan (2010), which serves as the primary data source. The film provides direct material for analysis through its narrative, character behavior, dialogue, and visual representation of Nina’s psychological struggles. Secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles, and online publications related to Freud’s and Anna Freud’s theories of defense mechanisms, psychological approaches in literature, and prior film studies. These references support the theoretical framework and strengthen the analysis.

Data collection is conducted through library research. Relevant scenes, character actions, and dialogues from the film are carefully observed and noted, while secondary sources are reviewed to provide context and scholarly grounding. The data are then analyzed using a descriptive-qualitative method, which involves identifying the forms of defense mechanisms used by Nina, classifying them according to Anna Freud’s theory, and interpreting their impact on her personality and mental state. The descriptive method ensures the findings are systematically presented, making the psychological aspects of the character clear and accessible to readers.

## 3. RESULTS

Defence mechanisms are psychological processes that occur automatically and unconsciously without us realizing it, to protect ourselves from painful emotions or thoughts. This process occurs in the main character of the movie Black Swan. According to Freud (1966, p.42), a defence mechanism is to describe the ego’s struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects. In this film, Nina uses various defence mechanisms such as repression, denial, to deal with the immense pressures of her career, her relationship with her mother, and her struggle to achieve perfection. This chapter is divided into two sub-chapters: (1) the form of self-defence mechanism Nina applies, and (2) how the defence mechanism affects Nina’s personality. The subheading should be as follows:

### 3.1 The Form of Self-Defense Mechanism

A person often faces emotional pressure that is difficult to deal with, whether it is due to family problems, friendships, work, or painful past experiences. Not everyone is able to express their pain or disappointment directly. Because of that, without realizing it, they will use what is called a self-defense mechanism, an automatic way that arises from within themselves to protect their hearts and minds from painful or threatening things. These mechanisms just appear, not because someone intentionally brings them up, but because the body and mind want to make things feel emotionally safer. Freud states, "defense mechanisms are the ego's way of protecting itself from ideas or feelings that are too painful to face". According to Freud, without realizing it, our minds will look for ways to stop the feelings such as too sad, anxious, or threatened. The ego, as part of our personality that is responsible for maintaining balance, will be active and use certain ways to keep us feeling emotionally safe. So, this mechanism appears not because we do it intentionally, but as a natural reaction from within ourselves so that we can survive in mentally difficult situations. In this sub- chapter, the writer explains two forms of self-defense mechanisms by Freud theory is Denial and Repression

#### 3.1.1. Denial

Denial is a defense mechanism in which a person unconsciously refuses to accept a painful or frightening reality because they are not ready to face it. For example, someone who has just lost a loved one might say that the person is only away temporarily, or someone diagnosed with a serious illness may insist that they are perfectly fine, Freud states:

"Just as, in the neurotic conflict, perception of a prohibited instinctual stimulus is warded off by means of repression, so the infantile ego resorts to denial in order not to become aware of some painful impression from without." (1966,p.89)

Denial appears as a way for the mind to protect itself from overwhelming emotions such as sadness, guilt, or fear. However, if denial continues for too long, it can prevent someone from solving problems or accepting reality in a healthy way. This can be seen in the following quotation:

Erica rushes in and finds Nina half-naked, her skin inflamed.

ERICA (CONT'D) : Oh my god...Nina starts forcing her out the door. Erica pushes back.

ERICA (CONT'D) : Stop, you're sick!

NINA : Get OUT!

She manages to get her all the way out the door. But ROTHBART'S HAND grabs the door frame. Nina SLAMS the door, SMASHING the hand. Erica SCREAMS in pain. Nina slams the door again, and again. The hand now human. She finally gets the door all the way shut. She steps away from it, nervous... She looks down, sees one of her knees SNAP backwards, like that of a bird. Then the other knee SNAPS back. Nina stumbles and falls. And SLAMS her head into the radiator ( Scene 93, Line 19)

In the quotation above means that Nina exhibits a strong denial response to the painful reality she is experiencing. This is shown when her mother, Erica, enters the room and notices Nina's physical condition worsening, her skin inflamed, and her behavior unstable. However, instead of accepting her mother's help and admitting her condition, Nina immediately pushes her mother out of the room, shouting, "GET OUT!" This reaction shows that Nina is not ready to accept the fact that she is physically and mentally ill. She chooses

to close herself off and deny the reality of her instability. After her mother left, Nina's condition worsened, she began to hallucinate that her knees were bending backwards like a bird, as a result she fell and hit her head on the radiator.

### 3.1.2 Repression

Repression is when someone tries to forget a bad or painful experience because it hurts too much to remember. In daily life, repression happens when we try to ignore or hide feelings like sadness, anger, or trauma by pretending everything is okay. Freud states, "Repression is the basic mechanism employed by the ego in its attempts to exclude from consciousness instinctual impulses that are unacceptable." (1966,p.12) This idea clearly applies to Nina Sayers, the main character in Black Swan. As a young ballerina who is always pressured to be perfect, Nina hides her fear, anxiety, and inner desires behind a calm appearance. She avoids dealing with her true feelings and acts like everything is fine, even when her mind and body start showing signs of serious stress. This can be seen in the following scene:

LEROY (CONT'D) : Show me your Black Swan, Nina.

Nervous, she glances over at Veronica and Galina, who anxiously await their turn. She takes a few breaths, then looks towards the piano player and nods. The music begins. Nina dances a few steps, and then launches into the most difficult and famous part of Swan Lake: The Black Swan's Coda. It consists of consecutive fouettes (spins).

LEROY (CONT'D) : Come on, not so controlled.

The music builds in intensity, she pushes herself into the next turn. LEROY (CONT'D) : Seduce us! Not just the Prince, but the court, the audience, the entire world! The fouettes are like a spider spinning her web. Come on! Attack it! Attack it!

Leroy runs his hand through his hair, dismayed. A look of worry spreads across Nina's face. Knows she's blowing it. The door CLANGS open and throws Nina's focus completely. She stumbles, several spins short of finishing (Scene 12, Line 7)

This quote is a conversation between Nina and Thomas Leroy during ballet rehearsal. In this scene, Leroy asks Nina to show her "Black Swan" side. His request feels very intense because it pressures Nina to become someone completely different from who she really is. When Leroy says, "Show me your Black Swan, Nina," Nina looks nervous and unsure of herself. Her reaction shows that she is trying to hide her fear and anxiety caused by Leroy's pressure. Even as she starts dancing, Leroy keeps giving her comments like, "Come on, not so controlled," and "Seduce us!", which push Nina to hold back her real feelings and pretend that everything is okay. Leroy is not just giving dance instructions, he wants her to act sensual, seductive, and aggressive, which are not part of Nina's natural personality. This is clear in his words like, "Attack it!" and "The fouettes are like a spider spinning her web." Leroy expects Nina to act in a way that goes against who she really is someone quiet, gentle, and very focused on being perfect. Because of this, Nina works hard to hide her feelings of fear, shame, and confusion just to meet Leroy's expectations.

### 3.2.The Role of Self-Defense Mechanism in Personality Development

Everyone has their own way of protecting themselves when they feel stressed, afraid, or anxious whether because of external situations or inner conflicts. This is called a defense mechanism. These mechanisms work unconsciously, meaning they happen automatically, to help a person deal with unpleasant emotions. However, if these mechanisms are used

too much or too often, they can actually harm a person's personality and mental health. This is what happens to Nina, the main character in the film *Black Swan*. The pressure from her mother, the intense competition in the ballet world, and the demand to be perfect push Nina to use different defense mechanisms to survive emotionally. At first, these mechanisms make her appear disciplined and obedient. But over time, they begin to destroy her. She starts to lose her sense of self and becomes rebellious, such as drinking alcohol and stealing.

### 3.2.1. Reaction Formation

Nina refused to admit her anger and her desire to fight against her mother. This denial later turned into reaction formation, where she started to show the opposite behavior from what she truly felt. According to Anna Freud (1966, p. 121), this mechanism happens when someone feels afraid or anxious about their own inner impulses, so they reject those impulses by pretending to feel the opposite of what they truly feel. This happens to Nina in the film *Black Swan*, especially in her relationship with her mother, Erica. Since childhood, Nina has been controlled by her mother. Erica tightly manages Nina's life from her clothes, her ballet training, to how she should behave. As a result, Nina grows up to be obedient, polite, and very organized, just as her mother wants. But deep inside, Nina actually feels angry and wants to be free. She wants to make her own decisions but is afraid to confront her mother directly. Nina's change in behavior slowly begins to show. She starts lying to her mother, sneaking out at night, trying alcohol, and acting more boldly. Nina begins to rebel and becomes disobedient. It can be seen from the following quotation:

Nina rifles through her dresser drawers. She notices her mother sitting calmly.

NINA : Move. ERICA : Nina...

Nina grabs her by the wrist. ERICA (CONT'D) : Stop it.

NINA : You're crazy!

ERICA : What happened to my sweet girl? Nina yanks Erica off the chair onto the floor.

NINA : She's gone.

ERICA : Please, you're not well.

Under the cushion Nina grabs the hidden brass DOORKNOB. Erica lunges for her daughter's legs. ( Scene 87, Line 11)

In this scene, we see a major change in Nina's behavior toward her mother. Previously, she was always gentle, obedient, and never talked back. Now, Nina dares to fight back directly. She tells her mother to move from the chair in a harsh tone, grabs her mother's arm forcefully, and even throws her to the floor. This is completely different from how Nina used to act. When her mother says, "What happened to my sweet girl?" Nina replies, "She's gone." This shows that the version of Nina her mother once knew sweet and obedient is no longer there. It means that "she" is her old self, the obedient girl who always followed her mother's wishes. Now, Nina is no longer that submissive girl and wants to be free to live her own life. Now, Nina is a different person: brave, wanting freedom, and no longer willing to be controlled. This change happens because the psychological defense mechanisms Nina used can no longer hold back the pressure building inside her. Before, she used reaction formation pretending to be the perfect daughter to hide her anger, disappointment, and desire for freedom.

### 3.2.2. Identification with the Aggressor

The emotional pressure that Nina kept inside through repression made her lose control of herself. As a result, this led to the development of identification with the aggressor, as a new way for her to deal with fear and threats from others. According to Anna Freud (1966, p.110), in this process, the ego tries to deal with fear by copying the traits of the person who causes the fear, so that the person can feel more in control or less anxious. In Black Swan, this is clearly seen in the character of Nina. After feeling threatened by the presence of Lily a new dancer who is more confident, bold, and free Nina slowly begins to imitate Lily's style and behavior. Before this, Nina was very obedient and disciplined. But after interacting with Lily, Nina starts smoking, drinking alcohol, becoming more daring, and even exploring her sensual side things she had never done before. This is shown in the following scene:

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. (Scene 50B, Line 6)

This scene is not just about Nina starting to smoke. It marks the beginning of Nina's transformation. Previously, Nina was known as a quiet, obedient girl who always followed the rules. But here, she starts doing something out of character she dares to break the rules. In this moment, Lily sits next to her and offers her a cigarette. Nina initially refuses, saying, "We can't smoke in here." But Lily casually replies, "I won't tell if you don't." Eventually, Nina accepts the cigarette, though she's clearly uncomfortable and inexperienced. She takes a puff without inhaling, and Lily smiles at her. This shows that Nina is beginning to change because of Lily's influence. She starts trying things she used to avoid. Nina's reason for accepting the cigarette is not just curiosity it is because she wants to be like Lily. Lily appears confident, free, and fearless traits Nina has never had.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the main character, Nina Sayers, in Darren Aronofsky's Black Swan employs several defense mechanisms, repression, denial, reaction formation, and identification with the aggressor as psychological strategies to cope with both internal conflicts and external pressures. Initially, these mechanisms serve to protect Nina from overwhelming anxiety; however, their persistent and excessive use contributes to her gradual psychological breakdown. The findings highlight that while defense mechanisms may function as short-term survival tools, their misuse can distort personality development and intensify emotional instability.

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of how psychological defense mechanisms are represented in film narratives and how they reflect real-life mental health struggles, particularly in competitive and high-pressure environments such as the performing arts. By analyzing Nina's trajectory, the research emphasizes the need for greater awareness of mental health challenges and the consequences of unresolved psychological conflicts.

Nevertheless, this research is limited to the analysis of one film and four selected defense mechanisms within Anna Freud's framework. Broader explorations involving multiple films, diverse psychological theories, or comparative studies could provide a more comprehensive perspective. Future research may also focus on audience reception, cultural interpretations, or interdisciplinary approaches combining psychology, film studies, and sociology to further enrich the discussion.

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