Unreliable Narration: An Analysis of Darren Aronofsky's Black Swan

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Abstract: **In the film BLACK SWAN, the protagonist Nina undergoes a character metamorphosis as she struggles to act out the roles of both the White Swan and the Black Swan in the ballet Swan Lake. In the process, she undergoes several instances of hallucinations which appears as real instances to the audience all through the movie. The movie has been shot entirely with the main narrator being Nina, though her narration takes place not as an interaction with the audience by means of conversations or as in narrating a story, but she manages to take along the audience with her throughout the act, deceiving them along the way. The movie "Black Swan" makes a phenomenal utilization of the classic narrative method known as the method of unreliable narration. The entire movie consists of unreliable narrators, whose roles are intertwined with the narration style that the protagonist Nina Sayers utilizes throughout the movie, making it difficult for the audience to understand who has been lying until the climax of the movie. The main objective of this study is to identify the techniques of unreliable narration used by the protagonist at different stages of her character metamorphosis throughout the movie. The analysis is conducted by means of a scenic interpretation of the movie.**

Keywords: **Unreliable Narration, Black Swan, Aronofsky, Nina Sayers, Narrator, Doppelganger, Ballet, Madman, Evil Twin.**

1.   INTRODUCTION

A narrator whose perception or interpretation of events in a narrative doesn't correspond with the perceptions or interpretations of the audience. A narrator whose credibility has been seriously compromised is termed as an **Unreliable Narrator**. While unreliable narrators are almost by definition first - person narrators, arguments have been made for the existence of unreliable second – and third - person narrators, especially within the context of film and television. (Wikipedia).

When discussing the reliability of specific narrators within a text there is a need to look at the consistency of the narrators and also their trustworthiness. It is also important to assess how the author has used the narrators within a novel and to what extent this use has affected the reader's view of reliability. Stories are often told by a narrator giving his / her point of view, by using omniscient, limited omniscient, or first person. The purpose of the narrator is to give facts and details, be it reliable or not.

Harmon and Holman define the term as a "narrator who may be in error in his or understanding or report of things and who thus leaves readers without the guides needed for making judgments". (*A Handbook To Literature* (p. 537). (2006).)

The term **Unreliable Narrator** was coined by the American rhetorician and literary critic Wayne C. Booth in book The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961). In most narratives, there is an element of trust that the person telling you the story is actually truthful, as far as they know it. However, chances are that the narrator's facts contradict each other at different points of time. If you ask them to go back and tell the story all over once again at a different time, the events come out differently. There is a real story in the narration somewhere , actually bits of it , combined with lies , half - truths and mistruths.

A Rashomon Style Story is where the same event is narrated by different characters and the author invites the audience to hear them all out and then compare and contrast these divergent points of view. Sometimes the work provides no definitive answer as to what actually happened. Basically it could be a cast filled with Unreliable Narrators. At other times, the audience might get the definitive true version of the story at the beginning or end of the episode; and usually both sides would be truthful about some things and exaggerate about others. Rashomon plots are about characters who fail to remember or falsify details about what happened, and the "facts" of the different tellings of the story have to contradict each other in some way ("Rashomon"-Style. (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2014, from http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/ pmwiki.php/Main/RashomonStyle).

According to David Lodge, the point of using an unreliable narrator is to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. (Lodge, D. (1992). *The Art of Fiction*. Viking.)

Rabinowitz's main focus is the status of fictional discourse in opposition to factuality. He debates the issues of truth in fiction, bringing forward four types of audience who serve as receptors of any given literary work :

- " **Actual audience** " (= the flesh – and - blood people who read the book)

- " **Authorial audience** " (= hypothetical audience to whom the author addresses his text)

- " **Narrative audience** " (= imitation audience which also possesses particular knowledge)

- " **Ideal narrative audience** " (= uncritical audience who accepts what the author is saying)

Rabinowitz also suggests that " In the proper reading of a novel , then , events which are portrayed must be treated as both ' true ' and ' untrue ' at the same time . Although there are many ways to understand this duality, I propose to analyze the four audiences which it generates.

"Similarly, Tamar Yacobi has proposed a model of five criteria (' integrating mechanisms ') which determine if a narrator is unreliable. Instead of relying on the device of the implied author and a text - centered analysis of unreliable narration, Ansgar Nünning gives evidence that narrative unreliability can be re - conceptualized in the context of frame theory and of readers ' cognitive strategies . (Wikipedia)

Attempts have been made at a classification of unreliable narrators. William Riggan analysed in his study discernible types of unreliable narrators, focusing on the first-person narrator as this is the most common kind of unreliable narration. Adapted from his findings is the following list:

●**The Pícaro**: a narrator who is characterized by exaggeration and bragging, the first example probably being the soldier in Plautus's comedy Miles Gloriosus.

Examples in modern literature are Moll Flanders, Simplicius Simplicissimus or Felix Krull.

●**The Madman**: A narrator who is either only experiencing mental defense mechanisms, such as (post-traumatic) dissociation and self-alienation, or severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia or paranoia.

Examples include Franz Kafka's self-alienating narrators, Noir fiction and Hardboiled fiction's "tough" (cynical) narrator who unreliably describes his own emotions, Barbara Covett in Notes on a Scandal, and Patrick Bateman in American Psycho.

●**The Clown**: A narrator who does not take narrations seriously and consciously plays with conventions, truth, and the reader's expectations.

Examples of the type include Tristram Shandy and Bras Cubas.

●**The Naïf**: A narrator whose perception is immature or limited through their point of view.

Examples of naïves include Huckleberry Finn, Holden Caulfield, and Forrest Gump

●**The Liar**: A mature narrator of sound cognition who deliberately misrepresents himself, often to obscure his unseemly or discreditable past conduct.

John Dowell in Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier exemplifies this kind of narrator.

This typology is surely not exhaustive and cannot claim to cover the whole spectrum of unreliable narration in its entirety or even only the first-person narrator. Further research in this area has been called for.

It also still remains a matter of debate whether and how a non-first-person narrator can be unreliable, though the deliberate restriction of information to the audience—for example in the three interweaving plays in Alan Ayckbourn's The Norman Conquests, each of which shows the action taking place only in one of three locations during the course of a weekend— can provide instances of unreliable narrative, even if not necessarily of an unreliable narrator. (Wikipedia)

2.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to develop a sound theoretical framework for this study, a review of literature was undertaken. Based on that, the research study has been conducted on the movie, BLACK SWAN, which is a psychological thriller directed by Darren Aronofsky. The study deals with analyzing the concepts used in the movie to portray the character of the protagonist Nina Seyers, which has been effectively characterized by Natalie Portman. Adding to it, the movie deals with an array of emotions felt by the protagonist. So, in order to conduct an effective analysis, the technique of qualitative analysis was chosen. The paper is a study based on a single movie. In order to identify the portions in the movie where the technique of unreliable narration has been employed, the movie has been analyzed psychologically.

3.   HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis of this study was that the narrative technique of unreliable narration has been used throughout the movie. It has been noticed that at several instances of the movie, the protagonist is not sure of what is real and what is unreal, and tends to perceive the unreal as real, which is basically the hallucinations experienced by the character, which very effectively deceives the audience as well. The study attempts at breaking down such instances where there are chances that the protagonist tends to deceive the audience with her act.

4.   DATA ANALYSIS

To identify in which all portions the technique of unreliable narration is used, a scene by scene analysis of the film BLACK SWAN has been conducted. The following are the scenes that have been interpreted as the instances where the protagonist is deceiving the audience by making the audience fall for her narrative with her act.

Throughout the movie, it has been observed that Nina is obsessed with herself. She is portrayed as a very skimpy and skeletal person who is very much conscious of her body, and constantly worried if an extra Calorie on her diet would negatively affect her perfection in ballet. She is seen to eat very little food, and constantly observing herself in the mirror wherever possible. Her obsession towards mirrors can be seen in several portions of the movie, where she can be seen observing herself. Her obsession goes to such an extent that there are instances where she sees herself in other people as well, leading to scenes where the audience may tend to wonder if she has a twin sister or a doppelganger. For instance, in the subway train scene (this is how the scene goes by as per the script):

5 INT. SUBWAY TRAIN - DAY 5

Nina rides inside a crowded subway, staring absentmindedly at her faint reflection in the train's window. Suddenly, another train roars by on the opposite track, snapping her awake. In the next train car, she sees the back of a BALLERINA standing in the midst of the crowd. Her head bops to music playing through iPod earphones. Nina moves a strand of hair out of her eyes, and at that exact moment, the girl in the next car moves in the same way. Mirroring her. Unnerved, Nina slowly lowers her arm. So does the other girl. Although Nina can't quite see her face, the girl seems IDENTICAL from Nina's vantage point. The train jerks to a stop as it arrives at a station. Nina sees the girl head to the exit. She cranes to see her face, but her view's obscured. The doors slide shut and the train pulls out. Nina watches the platform whisk by, keeping her eyes peeled, but she doesn't see the girl.

Interpretation: After she leaves her home, she boards a subway train where she subconsciously observes herself in the reflection of the train's window, which is disrupted when another train passes by. As she turns from there, the very next thing she observes is another woman, who shares a lot of resemblance to her in her style, the only difference being that while Nina chose to wear lighter shades, the other woman chose to wear black. How does Nina instantly know that even

that lady could possibly be a ballerina? Possibly because of her hair which is tied in a tight round bun, just like Nina. Moreover, the other woman also happens to imitate whatever action Nina does, without seeing her. So Nina is trying to convey to the audience that that lady is definitely a ballerina, which turns out to be true in a later scene, a believable instance.

An interesting shot is the frequent appearances of Nina's doppelganger/evil twin. It cannot be suggested that it is her doppelganger because basically a doppelganger is a different individual who looks the same as another person. But in the case of Nina, she continues to deceive the audience with her mind games, unless the audience observes the shots closely, and deciphers what is real and what is unreal. For instance, the first appearance of the so called identical appearance of Nina, was first noticed in the shot mentioned above. Though it appears to be fairly ambiguous to the audience that it could be identical, until they show similar actions, which could also be coincidental. However, in the second scene where the "double" makes another appearance, Nina confuses the audience, unless they have their full attention on the movie. It is noted that the "double" tends to bully the naive side of Nina, by imitating several actions of hers. For instance in the following scene:

15 EXT. STREET - NIGHT 15

Nina walks along a quiet side street. She clutches her jacket, for warmth and comfort. Her CELL PHONE starts ringing. She digs it out of her bag and checks the CALLER ID: MOM. She silences it and puts it away. Up ahead, she sees the sidewalk dead end at a construction site, and detour into an enclosed PASSAGEWAY beneath the scaffolding. Nina slows, a little scared, but decides to push on. The passageway is dark. The temporary lighting dim and flickering. She walks quickly, trying to get to the other side. She hears the sound of soft FOOTSTEPS approaching. She stops, and the other FOOTSTEPS stop. She looks up and sees the faint outline of a SLENDER WOMAN standing there, almost ghostlike. Nina starts walking again, keeping her head down, and the other woman continues as well. As they pass each other, Nina glances at the woman's face and discovers... The woman looks EXACTLY LIKE HER. But the moment passes as the woman continues walking. Nina stares after her, perturbed. Her cell phone starts RINGING again, piercing the silence. Nina continues out, ignoring the phone.

Interpretation: Nina is constantly afraid of someone following her, which is none other than her repressed emotions. Even the doppelganger or her "double" that she happens to encounter at various instances is an indicator to her fear of being followed by the repressed dark side of herself. During a major portion of the movie, Nina portrays herself to the audience as a naive, innocent and vulnerable young lady, who is her mother's "sweet girl". Even the semiotics of the movie suggest the same, there is all pink in her room, stuffed toys, dolls; it appears as if Nina is just physically grown up and innocent at heart. However, as the movie progresses, Nina brings out another dark side of her true self, which she refuses to take out due to her obsession for perfection. Nina is a perfectionist and goes by the rules of the book always. However, she tastes perfection only when she learns to free herself from the cage that she has set for herself.

In another instance, the good girl Nina turns bad, though it appears to be for a few seconds. But she does have some idea in mind that has been cooked up by her repressed dark side. The scene being mentioned here is that part where she gets decked up to seduce Leroy into giving her the role of the Swan Queen. But her naive side quickly covers up her plans the moment she meets Leroy. She shows her innocent and "good girl" side, who "just came to inform him about her completing the coda and to ask for her part". Nothing else. However, Leroy seems to read her intentions very well and asks her directly on her face, if she isn't going to do anything to make him offer her that role. She realizes her game has been caught red-handed and decides to leave when Leroy stops her and without any sort of a warning, kisses her. Her evil side, resurfaces for a second, now happy that the plans have been a success, bites the master in a seductive manner, which comes as a shock to him. He immediately withdraws, and Nina returns to her original, controlled self, appearing disappointed at what happened. She quickly leaves, shell-shocked. But it appears to the audience that the "bite" won her the role she wanted.

Interpretation: Not much is there to interpret on this scene, but the part where Nina bit Leroy, happens to be the first direct expression of her repressed darker side, which is pretty much significant.

The mind games that Nina plays with the audience is the essential crux of the movie and why the movie came to be a part of the psychological-thriller genre. Many of the instances leave the audience confused and spellbound at the same time. After Nina wins the role of the Swan Queen, the first thing that she does is, she rushes to the washroom, and rings up her

mother, Erica, to inform her of the good news. However, on the inner side, Nina seems to be guilty, which is a hidden emotion. The moment she comes out of the washroom, she sees the word "WHORE" written in bold letters with red lipstick on the mirror.

Interpretation: As mentioned earlier, the naive side of Nina is indeed guilty of her actions, the path she chose to win her dream role. First, she steals Beth's (the principal dancer of the troupe and Nina's role model) lipstick, assuming that by using Beth's lipstick, she could win the role. Secondly, her attempt to seduce Leroy into giving her the role. She seems to be so guilty that her mind projects her guilt on to a mirror, with the same red lipstick that she stole from Beth's room, and a guilty feeling that she might have behaved like a whore in front of Leroy, to get her the role. Though, the audience might tend to think that some of her rivals who were also competing to get that role wrote that insult with a red lipstick, the truth is that, Nina's mind wrote it.

Besides all these events, there is a frequent show of Nina's back-rash and bleeding cuticles and broken nails, which are also a part of the mind game.

After the party organized by Leroy to introduce Nina before the crowd, Leroy asks her to do a "homework assignment". He asks her to touch herself in order to free herself and get rid of the rigidity that she is holding on to. Though she appears embarrassed at that moment, she takes a note of it in her mind. The next day morning, as soon as she wakes up, she makes an attempt at masturbation. She almost began to lose herself in the act when she spots Erica sleeping on the chair and freezes.

Interpretation: This act seems to be a pretty much real as the naive Nina is always obsessed with perfection, and she would go to any extent to play the Black Swan perfectly. So if Leroy asks her to loosen up, she would do just that.

The next scene is one that welcomes Nina with the news of Beth's accident. She appears to be crushed on hearing the news. When Leroy comments that Beth might have done it on purpose, because most of whatever she did came from a dark impulse within her, Nina appears to be curious. Perhaps her subconscious might have noted that point, the result of which can be seen towards the climax of the movie, where a dark impulse swallows Nina completely.

Then comes a scene where she leaves Leroy disappointed with her act of the Black Swan, and he himself makes an attempt to help her free herself. He ends up seducing her, but she fails to seduce him, making him leave. Nina sits on the floor, distressed and crying, when she hears footsteps and turns to see a dark slender figure, which looks just like her. Another appearance made by her "double". The resemblance, though blurred, is fairly clear enough if one makes an attempt at focusing on the face in the dark. When Nina enquires on who it is, the figure emerges from darkness to light, only to reveal that it was Lily.

Interpretation: Nina has always felt some sort of threat with Lily around. Even at one instance, where Leroy commented that Lily is not perfect, but seductive, Nina must have started to consider Lily as a potential rival that her mind started to visualize and identify her repressed darker side with several traits of Lily's character, which is portrayed by Mila Kunis.

Soon after this encounter with Lily, Nina goes home and takes a dip in the tub in order to get rid of the stress due to rehearsals. Once again she decides to work upon Leroy's "homework assignment", in an attempt to free herself. She tries to masturbate once again, but fails miserably. Frustrated and defeated, she submerges herself in the water, with her eyes closed. Soon drops of blood begins to create ripples on the water, which appears to disturb Nina's peace. She opens her eyes, only to find her "double" right on top of her, staring down at her. A frightened Nina, shoots out of the water only to find the "double" gone. Nina notices her cuticles bleeding and rushes to the counter to get the nail-clipper. But takes over for a momentarily flash and cuts off her fingertips leaving them soaked in blood. A startled Nina, tries to wash off the blood before Erica makes an attempt to come in.

Interpretation: It seems to be fairly unpredictable as when Nina's "double" makes her sudden appearances, but as the movie approaches its close, it can be noticed that the "double" is getting very much closer to the naive Nina, perhaps waiting for the right moment to merge into one single entity, which is the Swan Queen.

A next notable moment is when Lily offers drugs to Nina, in order to let her "live a little". In a couple of minutes, Nina starts to get high in the effect of the drugs. Soon, she is seen losing herself in the club, making out with a stranger, things that the naive Nina would never do perhaps. This is a moment where we can see a shade of her darker side, blending in with the innocence of Nina. Then comes the scene where Nina and Lily engage in an act of lesbian sex, where at one spot,

Nina finds her "double" in the place of Lily. Nina, under the effect of the drugs, even visualizes Lily's tattoo of lilies, on her back, transforming into a pair of dark wings, as she succumbs to the pleasure of the act. Then she looks up on to Lily, who mutters the words "Sweet Girl", and then immediately transforms as her "double", and smashes a pillow on to Nina's face.

Interpretation: In a later sequence, Lily reveals to Nina that she did not come to her home after the club. And each of the incidents following it was merely Nina's hallucination.

While taking her measurements and even during her individual rehearsal too, Nina spots her "double" staring at her in the mirror. When the lights go off and she decides to inform, she spots a huge figure, which resembled to the demon Rothbart in the Swan Lake. As she moves on to confirm, she finds Leroy having sex with Lily, which later on appears to be her double, smiling back at her, and Leroy turns out to be the demon Rothbart in Nina's mind. In fear, she rushes to the hospital to return the things that she stole from Beth to its rightful owner. But there too, she finds her "double" in place of Beth. After returning home from the rehearsal, Nina fights with her mother eventually hurting her, sees delusionary images on her mother's paintings, and imagine Beth coming out to stab her. Nina also finds that her rashes start to stick out as swan feathers, her feet become webbed, and they get distorted into swan legs, which is a major hallucination of Nina, and also a representation that Nina has almost merged with the Black Swan.

Then arrives the big day for Nina, her final act. Her mother stops her from going, but Nina overpowers her and leaves for the practice. She, being late, had been replaced by Lily for the final performance. But she coaxes Leroy into rethinking his decision, and grabs her role back. Enacting the role of the White Swan was child's play for Nina. However, her real struggle lay in enacting the Black Swan. In order to portray the second character, Nina had to become the second character. After dancing the portions of the White Swan, when she came to the dressing room, she found her biggest rival Lily dressing up as the Black Swan. In a duel that endues, Nina stabs Lily to death with a glass piece from the broken mirror, and hides her body in the washroom. Following which she enacts the role of the Black Swan, to Leroy's surprise, which was much better than expected. And it is when Lily comes to personally appreciate Nina on her act that Nina realizes she had stabbed no one else but herself, a very tricky deception this time. She pulls out the glass piece and gathers herself to perform her final act of perfection on stage.

6.   CONCLUSION

Trust and unreliable narration are at the center of social collaborations: regular correspondence would be unthinkable in the event that we didn't accept that we can believe the individual we are managing. As a general rule, individuals choose whom to trust on the premise of stories, of those stories one thinks about the individual and, most essentially, on the stories he or she lets herself know.

While the narrators need to create solid and dependable accounts to be fruitful, the audience confront the distinctive test of how to figure out whether a story is credible and persuading, or whether the narrator must be translated as 'unreliable'. Usually, this choice concerning the "unreliability" of an individual does not just prompt a withdrawal of trust; it additionally prompts the endeavor to gauge why the narrator recounts such a story, whether he is merely innocent or rather mentally unsettled or even resolved to deception and betrayal. The capacity to identify unreliable narrations is, in this way, an essential social ability that is by all accounts especially critical and also difficult in our way of life at present; right now, both readers and silver screen crowds have a great time in disclosing off those 'not-exactly dependable' narrators which possess large amounts of abstract fictions and in contemporary movies. In the movie, it has been observed that Nina is a psychopath who is compelled by external forces, to be someone who she is not, and to repress her true self. The type of unreliable narrator that Nina appears to be is the "**Madman''** [A narrator who is either only experiencing mental defense mechanisms, such as (post-traumatic) dissociation and self-alienation, or severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia or paranoia]. All through the movie, while Nina hunted down her possible rivals, looking for traits in them that she could use in portraying the Black Swan, she never realized until the last moment that the "perfect" Black Swan lay within her, and she only needed to free herself, identify it, and let it go. In the process of identifying the right traits for the Black Swan, the character of the protagonist has managed to efficiently deceive the audience with the help of Natalie Portman's splendid acting and the direction of the mastermind Darren Aronofsky.

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