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Deferral of Desire: A Lacanian Study of Mother-Child Relationships in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*

Amirsina Ahmadifar¹, Sara Khazai^{*2} , Nadya Alkola³ 

Abstract

This study explores how Lacanian psychoanalysis governs and understands the mother-child relationships in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944/2014) and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010). In so doing, the primary purpose of this study has been to establish the links between the central characters' behaviors and the psychoanalytic concept of 'deferral of desire'. The research proposes a novel aspect of 'psychoanalytic meaning' by basing it on the counter-intuitive process of evading the jouissance of actualizing and immersing oneself in one's object of desire. To support the proposition mentioned above, this study has explored the eventual fate of the children in *Black Swan* (Nina), and *The Glass Menagerie* (Tom and Laura), analyzing their respective experiences of (dis)satisfaction after their ultimate success or failure in their attempts to attain their objects of desire. This study has employed the Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts of the objet petit a and register theory to posit that satisfaction lies not in obtaining one's object of desire, but in repeatedly failing to do so, due to the fact that possessing the object of desire shatters the lack which is the necessary condition of maintaining the desirability of the object of desire. The article concludes that while we are

¹ MA, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Email: amirsina.ahmadifar2014@gmail.com

² Corresponding Author: Assistant Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran,
Email: s.khazai@um.ac.ir, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7007-4716>

³ Assistant Lecturer, University of Babylon, Iraq, Email: nadya.alkola@uobabylon.edu.iq,
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0963-5323>

intuitively equipped to think of satisfaction as the effect of the realization of the object of one's desire, psychoanalytically speaking, satisfaction is found in precisely the opposite direction, that is, in a repeated failure to obtain the object of one's desire.

Keywords: Lacanian Psychoanalysis, The Glass Menagerie, Black Swan, Tennessee Williams, Darren Aronofsky, deferral of desire, mother-child relationships

1. Introduction

In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010), mothers play a significant role in forming their children's behaviors. They directly influence their children's process of decision-making and, eventually, make them adopt either a conforming or a non-conforming approach to their mothers' expectations. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom and his older sister, Laura, are subject to their mother's wishes of how they should plan their lives based on the traditional southern values that Amanda holds dear. Abandoned by her husband, a sense of belonging to the past causes Amanda to expect of her children that which could potentially bring back their lost emotional security and economic stability. Hence, she is perturbed about Laura, who is mentally insecure and fragile and takes refuge in her collection of glass animals. Amanda fears that Laura could not have a stable future if she remained unmarried. Similarly, Amanda always reminds Tom of his masculine duties, even though he is frustrated with his job as a worker at a shoe warehouse. Finally, Tom leaves the house and never returns, despite feeling guilty for abandoning his disabled sister.

Likewise, in *Black Swan*, Nina's behavior is influenced and determined by her domineering mother. Like Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, a father figure is absent in Aronofsky's *Black Swan*. Erica, a former ballerina who gave up her career to raise her daughter, controls every aspect of Nina's life to such an extent that it is almost impossible for her to express her true self and perform the role of the *Black Swan* (specifically, her 'shadow' or the dark side of her personality which she so desperately needs). However, things start to change for Nina. With the help of Lily, her alter ego/competitor, she realizes that by not conforming to her mother's demands for perfection, she can dance as the Swan Queen.

The purpose of this paper is to find out how mother-child relationships, decision-making and satisfaction are explained in the two texts by such Lacanian concepts like deferral of desire, *objet petit a*, register theory, fantasy, *jouissance*, realization vs. satisfaction of desire, trauma, and anxiety. This study attempts to postulate that while we are intuitively equipped to think of satisfaction as the effect of the realization of the object of one's desire, however, psychoanalytically speaking, satisfaction is to be

found in precisely the opposite direction; that is, in a repeated failure to obtain the object of one's desire. In other words, the present research attempts to propose a novel aspect of 'psychoanalytic meaning' by basing it on the counter-intuitive process of evading the *jouissance* of actualizing and immersing oneself in one's object of desire.

Mother-child relationships in Williams' and Aronofsky's texts reflect the core foundation upon which characters' interactions are based. While Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* centers her wishes and demands on her nostalgia, Erica is much more of a dominating and over-protective mother. In response to their mothers, the three children (Laura, Tom, and Nina) adopt two varying approaches: while Laura decides to conform to her mother's view, Tom and Nina, resist and oppose their mothers' desires. However, similarities in Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Aronofsky's *Black Swan* are found in the fact that in the absence of father figures, the actions of the characters and their eventual consequences are immensely affected by and based on mother-child relationships.

Ultimately, two main approaches are to be found in the children's reactions to their mothers: they either accept and conform to the existing standards set by their mothers (Laura) or resist and oppose them (Tom and Nina). Surprisingly, as both narratives unfold, those characters who followed their unique way of life and values by making their own decisions and obtaining their object of desire (Tom and Nina) are eventually found to be even more dissatisfied and discontent with the consequences of their choices than those who repeatedly failed to achieve and possess their object of desire (Laura).

2. Literature Review

A myriad of academic research has drawn attention to the mother-child relationships in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Black Swan* from a multitude of perspectives (see, for instance, Bignall, 2013; Bigsby, 1997; Cardullo, 2015; Crandell, 1998; Efthimiou, 2012; Fisher & Jacobs, 2011; Hanson, 2006; King, 1973; Levy, 1993; Marston, 2015; Parker, 1985; Ritzenhoff, 2012; Stephenson, 2016). However, the existing literature on these two works has not addressed the reasons for Tom's and Nina's dissatisfaction, even though they have achieved their object of desire. Likewise, little

or no study has explored why Laura is the only character whose life is not colored by dissatisfaction, even though she cannot realize and obtain what she desires.

2.1. Review of Related Literature on The Glass Menagerie

King (1973) argues that there has been a distortion in understanding the play due to ignoring Tom's soliloquies. King claims that while Amanda is an outstandingly powerful character, the play is Tom's; he opens and closes the play, and, in a sense, he is the only character of the play because we see other characters only as aspects of Tom's memory and consciousness. Drawing on King's evaluation, Parker (1985) explains the ambiguity of Tom and Laura's relationship by relating it to solipsism and the play's dependence on Tom's consciousness. On the other hand, Bigsby (1997) situates the play in its historical context and argues that the social conditions at the time of its release play a crucial role in understanding the characters' behaviors.

Establishing a connection between Romanticism and *The Glass Menagerie*, Cardullo (2015, p. 93) writes that Laura "represent the kind of person for whom the Romantics of the early nineteenth century felt increasing sympathy: the fragile, almost unearthly ego brutalized by life in the industrialized, overpopulated, depersonalized cities of the Western world."

Discussing the significance of self-consciousness and self-image in *The Glass Menagerie*, Levy (1993) observes that the essence of the play lies not merely in its exploration of nostalgia but in how characters' identities rely on their reflected image. Addressing mother-daughter tropes in twentieth-century American drama, however, Hanson (2006) explores the trope of 'mirroring mothers' and their relationship with their daughters. Defining this relationship as how "mother and daughter are expected to mirror one another, having only a joint subjectivity, and no identity as separate entities" (Hanson, 2006, p. 25). Finally, analyzing the thematic pattern of loss in Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Janardanan (2007) observes that each character in Williams' play finds themselves in a situation where they have to deal with a sense of loss at the physical (Laura), psychological (Amanda) and moral (Tom) space.

2.2. Review of Related Literature on Black Swan

Exploring the themes of gender and horror in *Black Swan*, Fisher argues that Nina's only path to self-realization lies not outside but within herself, through making "contact with her repressed sexuality"; however, "once the repressive shackles are released, the result is not erotic fulfillment, but death" (Fisher & Jacobs, 2011, p. 59). Positing *Black Swan* as an instance of queer cinema, Efthimiou (2012) argues that Nina is a representation of Barbara Creed's 'monstrous-feminine'; in particular, Efthimiou (p. 1) writes, "the Black Swan is explored as an expression of the female vampire."

Applying Deleuze's writing on cinema and concepts of 'becoming animal' and 'Porcelain and Volcano' to Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, Bignall (2013) discuss Nina's transformation through three images: the movement-image, the time-image, and the affect-image. Analyzing the relationship between *Black Swan*'s protagonist and the ballet company she works for, Marston (2015) claims that Nina's melancholia stems from "the destructive relationship that exists between neoliberal governmentality and middle-class white women" (p. 708). In an extensive study of Darren Aronofsky's filmography from 1998 to 2014, Skorin-Kapov (2015) explores the significance of the thematic structure of pursuing artistic perfection in *Black Swan*. (For further discussion of Nina's path to perfection, see Ebert (2010), Dargis (2010), Bradshaw (2011), and Honeycutt (2010)).

Presenting a Lacanian reading of *Black Swan* by applying the concept of 'the mirror phase,' Stephenson (2016, p. 80) states that Nina has psychosis due to being tormented by "the desire first to make the [mirror] image flawless" and then to identify with and embody its accompanying perfection. To sum up, as can be observed, while many researchers have addressed the idea of 'mother-child relationships' in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Black Swan* from a multitude of perspectives, there seems to be a gap, nonetheless, in trying to account for the relations mentioned above and their impact on how different characters feel a sense of meaning and satisfaction, or the lack thereof.

3. Method

To address the gap in previous research, the current paper will analyze *The Glass Menagerie* and *Black Swan* through a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective by discussing the concepts of 'realization vs. satisfaction,' 'pleasure vs. *jouissance*' and 'object of desire vs. *objet petit a*', all based on the notion of 'deferral of desire'. Furthermore, this study attempts to utilize Lacan's 'register theory' to identify the commonalities and differences concerning how the concept of 'motherhood' has been portrayed in Williams' and Aronofsky's works.

One of the Lacanian concepts to be used in the following discussion is the *objet petit a*, which is the object-cause of desire; that is, what causes the subject to desire anything in the first place. The *objet petit a* also makes particular objects desirable, acting as an obstacle to attaining those objects. In other words, objects of desire are desirable not in and of themselves but only insofar as there are obstacles and barriers to render the desirability of those objects by positioning them outside the realm of convenient accessibility. Therefore, the Lacanian object (the *objet a*) has a two-fold function: not only does it cause the subject to desire, but it also causes the desirability of particular objects (Homer, 2005).

Consequently, based on this formulation of desire, it is essential to keep the obstacles and barriers in the way of objects of desire intact and non-surmounted if one is to sustain those objects' desirability. However, the prospects of achieving *jouissance* seem valid only if those very same obstacles and barriers are successfully overcome and eliminated. Hence, the mutually exclusive nature of desire and *jouissance* duality becomes clear: on the one hand, to maintain desirability, objects of desire must fail to be obtained; to experience *jouissance*, on the other hand, objects of desire must succeed in being obtained (Lacan, 1966/2001).

As far as the functions of the imaginary order in Lacanian thinking are concerned, while the imaginary during the mirror stage is there to intentionally miss to recognize the subject's fragmentation and cause him/her to identify with the illusory reflective images of unification, its existence is not ceased by the end of that phase; instead, it continues to exist during the symbolic phase where, instead of mirror images, the role of hiding the subject's fragmentation is fulfilled through fantasy (Lacan, 2013/2019).

Lacan distinguished between two variations of *jouissance* which, while identical, show differences in degree: that is, paltry/phallic *jouissance* and Other *jouissance*. Paltry/phallic *jouissance* is the trivial and fleeting sense of pleasure that is experienced due to the subject's achievement of its object of desire. However, precisely due to its disappointing and insufficient nature, the paltry/phallic *jouissance* causes the subject to assume the existence of a form of pleasure that is ever-lasting, perennial, and enduring; a form of enjoyment that, unlike anything, it has previously experienced, is not accompanied by subsequent feelings of dissatisfaction and discontent. After the assumption of its existence, the subject comes to ascribe the possession of that pure form of enjoyment to other subjects, that is, to those who exist outside its identity (be it other individuals or other groups based on identity, such as sex, race, religion, socio-economic class, nation, etc.), hence the name "Other" *jouissance* (Lacan, 1975/1998).

4. Results

Aronofsky's *Black Swan* portrays Nina starting her metamorphic transition (from the innocent White Swan to the seductive Black Swan) from childish behaviors whose qualities mimic those of the Lacanian pre-symbolic mother-child relationship. Gradually, Nina acknowledges the advantage of an asymmetry of power that governs her relationship with her mother. As the events of the movie unfold, Nina is eventually able to separate herself from the alienating effects of her mother's symbolic demands by successfully overcoming the barriers that block her access to her desired object of dancing the Swan Queen.

During the process of her transformation, Nina shows an active engagement in resorting to fantasy, offering herself some momentary and imaginary comfort by masking the symbolic reality of her fragile and vulnerable personality. During the said process, Nina also attributes the experience of Other *jouissance* to Lily and Beth, thus justifying her insufficient enjoyment by assuming it is being stolen from her by those two ballerinas. Near the end of her metamorphosis, Nina finally undergoes the traumatic experience of the real, directly confronting her repressed traits. Finally, and after the end of her metamorphic process of becoming the Swan Queen, Nina

successfully attains her desired object; however, her anticipation of an unmediated and permanent *jouissance* after realizing her desire is immediately upset, as she has to face her literal or symbolic death. Nina's tragic fate at the end of Aronofsky's *Black Swan* proves this study's claim that a failure to attain an object of desire results in less dissatisfaction than the reverse situation had the said object been successfully attained.

In Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, there appears to be no indication of infantile behaviors which imitate the pre-symbolic features of mother-child relationships. However, the asymmetry of power works to Tom and Laura's advantage too because of the absence of a father figure and their entrance to the order of language and discourse which has presented them with numerous objects of desire other than the desire of the mother. In *The Glass Menagerie*, too, the mother figure fulfills the primary function of the *objet petit a*. In Tom's case, Amanda's role as the *objet petit* is realized through her imposition of involuntary responsibility. Tom is eventually depicted to have been successful at acknowledging his deep sense of alienation; he separates himself from those symbolic demands by shirking all the imposed obligations, thus attaining his desired object of pursuing an actively meaningful career, which presents him with the traumatic aspect of the real.

As for Laura, unlike Tom and Nina, her desired object of getting married is fully supported by her mother; however, Amanda still manages to perform the function of the *objet petit a* through her set of obstacles and barriers, which intend to alleviate Laura's extreme severe social anxiety. However, unlike Tom and Nina, Laura fails to eliminate and overcome the said barriers, thus not succeeding in attaining her object of desire and remaining unmarried; she also appears to ascribe Other *jouissance* to those (that is, Jim) who do not possess her aforementioned socially undesirable and disadvantageous personality traits.

5. Discussion

4.1. The Pre-Symbolic Imaginary: The Mother-Child Relationship in *Black Swan*

Before the emergence of the symbolic exchange, the child enjoys the imaginary world of abundance, plenitude and unification, due to its exclusive relationship with its

mother. This dyadic relation of the infant and the mother provides the former with an infinite amount of enjoyment; and for that enjoyment to be ever-present, the infant must always be the desire of the mother. However, there is a prohibition that falls on the child's desire to be the object of its mother's desire; a prohibition of the exclusively dual nature of the mother-child relationship (Rose, 1986).

The Phallus is the intervening factor that ruptures the aforementioned relationship (Homer, 2005). Lacan introduces the concept of the *Name-of-the-Father* for the phallus which clearly has a symbolic and figurative overtone. The primary function of the Name-of-the-Father, for Lacan, is to prohibit the child's desire for the mother (Lacan, 1986/1992). Here, Lacan agrees with Freud's thesis in his *Civilization and its Discontents* that the primordial law and the initiator of superego is that which prohibits incest (Freud, 1930/1961).

Right from the outset of Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, it will progressively become clear that Nina and her mother are in an exclusive relationship whose qualities mimic those of the Lacanian pre-symbolic mother-infant dyad where, according to Lacan, the infant tries its best to be the object of its mother's desire in order to keep its imaginary world of plentitude afloat. As the narrative of *Black Swan* unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that the interactions between Nina and her mother imply a relationship that exhibits the characteristics of exclusivity, immaturity, and incompleteness; a relationship in which one of its members, though 28 years of age, appears to have not evolved into adulthood, still manifesting a variety of childish behaviors. In contrast, the other member seems to be in complete control of all aspects of the former's life, dictating to her the necessity of living up to expected standards. This relationship resembles Lacan's formulation of the pre-symbolic mother-child dyad in the sense that for Nina to be the object of her mother's desire, she must blindly obey the dictates of the latter. Erica wants her daughter to remain an infant; she does not want Nina to grow up for fear of losing her only object of desire in the absence of a male figure (Nina's father, to be specific) to offer her the symbolic phallus.

In the first scene inside the apartment, Nina's unfinished maturation process unfolds itself, where we understand that she is not acting like a 28-year-old adult woman. The opening scenes of the movie show us the infantile world of innocence

she is living in: she is wearing pink clothes; her pillow and her blanket are pink, and her room looks like it has not undergone redecoration since she was a little girl, filled with stuffed animals and pink dolls.

More importantly, we realize that Nina is still living with her mother, which provides another sign of an unsuccessful transformation into adulthood. To further unveil childlike behaviors of Nina, the same recurring presence of the color pink is associated with girlish sweetness and immaturity, Aronofsky shows Nina and her mother while they are having breakfast. Their reaction to Nina's dish, a half-grapefruit and a poached egg, imply yet another hint of her childlike behavior:

Nina: Look how pink! So pretty.

Erica & Nina: Pretty!

(Aronofsky, 2010, 00:04:24-00:04:30).

It is also important to mention that even Nina's name has a significant implication concerning her character and personality: Nina in Spanish means 'little girl'. Moreover, to make it evident that Nina is incapable (or forced to be incapable) of doing the most rudimentary personal duties, it turns out that it is her mother who helps her to dress up and prepare for her ballet rehearsal, telling her "Sure you don't want me to come with you? You sweet girl" (Aronofsky, 2010, 00:04:59-00:05:05). Erica does not allow Nina to do her nightly routines on her own since she is the one who places hydrogen peroxide and gauze on Nina's split toenail, takes out her earrings, places a music box on her bedside, and puts her to sleep.

4.2. *The Absence of Infantile Behaviors in The Glass Menagerie*

While in Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, there is an absence of a father figure similar to Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, the children in the former exhibit no signs of childish behaviors toward their mother. The lack of childish behaviors indicates that Tom and Laura, unlike Nina, do not want to be merely defined as the objects of their mother's desires. Furthermore, for this reason, Amanda's later symbolic dictates are far less harsh and demanding than Erica's. In other words, when the mother loses her tight

grip over the child as a result of her inability to present herself as the child's sole object of desire (or as a result of the child's ability to refuse such a presentation), the authority of her symbolic discourse diminishes in contrast to what would have been the case otherwise. Put differently, as the events of *The Glass Menagerie* unfold, Amanda seems to have failed to become Tom and Laura's only object of desire in comparison to Erica's level of success in doing the same thing, leading the former's later symbolic discourse to be much weaker than that of the latter.

4.3. The Objet Petit A: The Mother as the Cause of and Barrier to Desire

The Name-of-the-Father lays out a set of norms, laws, rules and regulations for the child, thus initiating his/her transition from the world of the imaginary, where *jouissance* abounds, to the world of symbolic exchange, where desire and lack permeate (Homer, 2005). As Lacan himself put it, "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* – enjoy!" (Lacan, 1975/1998, p. 3). In short, the Name-of-the-Father is simultaneously the law and its own transgression which undermines the law. For Lacan, there are always two things beyond the symbolic structures that resist signification: the subject and the object, that is, the *objet petit a* (Homer, 2005). Though seeing the subject as intimately linked with the symbolic, Lacan does not wholly reduce the subject to it.

One can argue that in Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, at the final level of analysis, the mother fulfills all the possible roles of the *objet petit a* as the ultimate insuperable barrier that lies between Nina and her object of desire; that is, as that which blocks Nina's easy access to the path of becoming the Swan Queen. There are many formidable obstacles that Nina has to overcome if she is to succeed in performing *Swan Lake*; however, despite their multiplicity, these obstacles can roughly be put into two closely linked yet distinct categories: first, those obstacles that pertain to Nina's undeveloped sexuality and, second, those that concern her lack of independence. As it becomes evident, Nina's mother is the entity that has both created those same obstacles in the first place and is also determined to prevent her daughter from overcoming them.

Suppose Tom's object of desire is to leave his family in pursuit of a meaningful

career instead of a pointless and dead-end job at the shoe warehouse. In that case, Amanda acts as the *objet petit* or the object-cause of desire insofar as she creates obstacles and barriers in the way of Tom's attainment of his desired object by imposing a multitude of involuntary responsibilities on him. In other words, Amanda wants her son to do the most significant thing that her absent husband used to do; that is, to ensure the financial stability of Amanda and her family.

Similar to Tom, Laura's desire of being able to get married is caused by Amanda's fulfilling the function of an obstacle and a barrier to her daughter's desired object through mandating measures to alleviate Laura's lack of self-esteem, a condition brought about by her physical disability. Put otherwise, Amanda wants to see in her daughter every quality that she used to possess in her past days as a young, well-mannered southern lady, and, according to Amanda, lack of self-esteem does not seem to be one of those qualities. Therefore, she tries to make Laura overcome her disadvantageous qualities, thus placing barriers in her daughter's way of achieving her object of desire.

4.4. The Separation: The Children's Rejection of the Symbolic

As Lacan (1973/1998) illustrates throughout his seminar XI, entitled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, there are two processes which are involved in constituting the subject of the unconscious concerning his/her relation to the Other, namely 'alienation' and 'separation'. Alienation, for Lacan, is essentially the process of the subject's identification with the others; the subject's identification with that which is outside him/her (Homer, 2005). Separation occurs when the subject realizes that the Other, like himself, is also a lacking being. As Lacan (1966/2006) observes, "This function is modified here by a part taken from a lack situated within another lack, through which the subject finds anew in the Other's desire the equivalent of what he is *qua* subject of the unconscious" (p. 715). As Soler (1995) argues, while the child is destined to go through alienation, "separation is not destiny. Separation is something which may or may not be present" (p.49).

In *Black Swan*, Nina's ultimate struggle is aiming for the right balance between

the White Swan and the Black Swan; she needs to find a way to integrate her actualized fragility and technical mastery with her potential for sensuality and effortless artistry. In so doing, she must first recognize her alienation, which has been brought about by identifying herself with and obeying the discourse of her domineering mother. Furthermore, after recognizing the alienating effects of her identification with her mother, she needs to go one step further and move beyond her mother's discourse by separating herself (both literally and figuratively) from her mother to find her unique individuality.

Nina's acknowledgment of her alienation and determination to embark on the process of separation is initiated and sped up through her acquaintance with Lily. She is the exact opposite of Nina in every conceivable way. In other words, Lily's natural ability for effortlessly passionate dancing seems to make her the perfect candidate for the role of the Black Swan, a quality that Nina lacks and yet so desperately needs to have. Through her friendship with Lily, Nina realizes that her domineering mother's key element has barred her access to the required personality traits for dancing the Black Swan.

Nina begins to show gradual, yet incremental, signs of her refusal of and resistance to her mother's dictates; the first of these signs can be observed in their celebration of Nina's getting the role of the Swan Queen, where Nina initially refuses to eat the cake. However, at this point, she does not have enough authority to stand her ground. The same type of resistance is put up by Nina, where after coming home from her formal introductory party, she objects to her mother's attempt to take off her clothes. During one of the rehearsals, Thomas makes it clear that he is not satisfied with Nina's performance of the Black Swan, continually stopping her in disapproval, telling her, "Now stop saying that! That's exactly what I'm talking about! Stop being so fucking weak! Again!" (Aronofsky, 2010, 00:54:17-00:54:28). After this embarrassing incident when Nina gets home, she seems to be getting fiercer in her resistance to her mother.

The next day, Nina finds out that Erica has informed the company that her daughter would not be able to perform on the show. During this scene, Nina's resistance to her mother's commands takes its most potent form. Erica's response that

Nina cannot handle the complications of an independent life makes Nina extremely angry, revealing her newly completed journey towards autonomy and adulthood:

Erica: What happened to my sweet girl, huh?

Nina: She's gone!

Erica: Oh! Nina! Oh, Nina! Oh, no! Please! You're not well!

Nina: Let go of me!

Erica: You can't handle this!

Nina: I can't? I'm the Swan Queen! You're the one who never left the corps.

(Aronofsky, 2010, 01:26:17-01:26:36).

In order to pursue his own unique object of desire, Tom needs to quit his job and leave his family in precisely the same manner that his father did; in other words, for Tom to separate himself from the alienation of Amanda's symbolic demands, he needs to oppose his mother. While Tom reveals his dissatisfaction with his current warehouse job on multiple occasions, there is one particular scene during which his intention of abandoning his mother and sister is unfolded, where he confides in Jim and tells him that he is planning to join the Merchant Seamen Union, showing his determination by paying the membership fees instead of the light bill (Williams, 1944/2014). In short, to realize his object of desire, Tom needs to acknowledge his alienation brought about by his mother's symbolic expectations; and to initiate the Lacanian process of separation, he needs to shirk and abdicate all Amanda's imposed responsibilities.

Unlike Tom and Nina, who successfully overcame the barriers, Laura fails to separate herself from the alienating impacts of her mother's symbolic obstacles, resulting in her inability to attain her desired object of getting married. From scene ii, where it becomes clear that Laura has preferred walking in the park to attending Rubicam's Business College, to scene vi, where Laura's anxiety reaches such a devastating level that she is almost unable to even open the door for Tom and Jim and refuses to have dinner at the table, to scene vii where Jim tells her that she is suffering from an inferiority complex, Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* portrays Laura

to be unsuccessful in overcoming her extreme shyness, severe social anxiety and lack of self-esteem, making her object of desire unrealized.

4.5. *Fantasy: The Post-Symbolic Imaginary*

If psychoanalysis is the science of studying the unconscious desires of its subject, then as Lacan argues, fantasy is the medium through which those desires are laid out and manifested (Lacan, 2013/2019). In other words, fantasy is an imaginary scene which facilitates the fulfillment of the subject's unconscious desires (Homer, 2005). Fantasy enables the subject to realize its desires and to attain the objects that it cannot have in the symbolic reality; in other words, fantasy is a compensation for a failure in the symbolic reality; the subject can succeed in fantasy where (s)he otherwise could not (McGowan, 2015).

Aronofsky has characterized Nina as resorting to fantasizing when confronted with her feelings of insecurity. She can thus momentarily get what she desperately desires to have or what she has already lost. In *Black Swan*, like Lacan's discussion of the imaginary order and fantasy, Nina seems to rely heavily on her dream-like mental hallucinations and fantasies, creating a delusional world where her objects of desire are successfully actualized. Two significant instances of unconscious fantasy stand out above others in *Black Swan*: the first is Nina's imaginary interaction with Lily. Lily and Nina leave a club, taking a cab to Nina's apartment, where they face Erica, who becomes furiously violent and chases Lily and Nina to her room. She is locked out, being told by Nina that; "It's called privacy! I'm not 12 anymore!" (Aronofsky, 2010, 01:06:56-01:08:09). At this moment, Nina repeatedly perceives Lily as her double; that is, as someone whom Nina wants to become: someone who does not have Nina's fragility and innocence; someone who is prepared to dance the Black Swan. However, when Nina goes to the theater the following day, it becomes clear that Lily never went to Nina's apartment.

The next significant occurrence of fantasy happens on the night of the Swan Lake performance. When she enters the dressing room crying, she surprisingly sees Lily putting on makeup. Lily reminds Nina of her humiliating start, telling her that maybe she should dance the Black Swan instead. Nina fantasizes about Lily as her double

again furiously grabs and stabs her with a shard of broken mirror. Immediately after the stabbing, Nina observes that she has not stabbed her imaginary double; instead, she has killed Lily. She hears a knock on the door when preparing to dance the last act as the White Swan. Shockingly enough, when she opens the door, she sees Lily, who has come to congratulate her on her fantastic performance of the Black Swan. By killing her double/Lily symbolically (not symbolically in Lacanian terminology; instead, imaginarily), Nina accomplished two objectives: destroying everything she hated about herself and gaining everything she lacked and desired. Therefore, through the imaginary function of fantasy, Nina not only found a way to come to terms with and compensate for her failures and insufficiencies in the symbolic world, but she also used it as a platform based on which she could find ways to pursue her object of desire, learning how to eliminate and overcome the obstacles that blocked her access to those objects.

4.6. *The Theft of Other Jouissance*

As Mr. Dumby goes on to say in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892/1917); "In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it" (Act III). The Other *jouissance* is that kind of permanent and everlasting pleasure whose existence is assumed by the subject after his/her disappointing experience of paltry *jouissance*; the subject comes to believe that there must be something out there which is beyond the trivial and meager levels of pleasure (s)he usually experiences. However, that infinite level of Other *jouissance* has never existed in the first place and it is only through fantasy that the subject comes to falsely posit its existence; this is why Bruce Fink (2002) argues that if fantasy were to be non-existent, then the subject might actually be content and satisfied with his/her limited, finite and paltry *jouissance*.

The *Black Swan*'s narrative suggests Nina's belief in the existence and experience of Other *jouissance* by two of her co-ballet dancers, Lily and the company's forcibly retired prima ballerina, Beth. This is manifested from the very outset of *Black Swan*. For instance, while she is arriving at the theater, Nina sees a row of posters featuring the company's prima ballerina, Beth; She stares at them with awe and envy.

(Aronofsky, 2010, 00:06:45-00:06:57). When she enters Beth's room, she looks at herself in the mirror with a sense of self-admiration as if she possesses Beth's glory. While Nina visits Beth at the hospital, it becomes evident that Nina has stolen Beth's lipsticks, a pack of cigarettes, diamond earrings, a small cologne bottle, and an emery board. Their conversation reveals that Nina's assumptions about Beth have been false (Aronofsky, 2010, 01:21:33-01:22:25).

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura indicates clear signs of assuming Jim to be living in a symbolic reality in which the realization of one's desires would result in a radically different form of *jouissance*. In Laura's world, the person whom she admires the most, Jim, is also the one who happens to be the subject of Other *jouissance*; a mistaken belief whose falsehood is made evident by Jim to whom Laura attributed the quality of permanent and perennial *jouissance*. During scene vii, Laura informs Jim that he was immensely liked by everyone in high school, especially by female students, including Laura. Jim agrees with Laura's observation, telling her he was spoiled in high school. However, a few moments later, Jim directly addresses what he thinks to be Laura's primary defect in her mental health; he believes that Laura is suffering from an inferiority complex. Jim reveals his entanglement in precisely the same condition, proving Laura's assumption of his experience of Other *jouissance* to be untrue and unjustified (Williams, 1944/2014).

4.7. *Desire vs. Jouissance*

The core conflict which lies at the heart of Aronofsky's *Black Swan* is how Nina deals with various struggles against fulfilling the main requirements of becoming the Swan Queen; a struggle that requires her to perform the White Swan and the Black Swan simultaneously, thus integrating her actualized innocence, fragility and self-conscious technical mastery into her potential for sensual and imprecise, yet effortless, artistic perfection.

In Lacanian terminology, becoming the Swan Queen is Nina's object of desire. As such, it presents her with the following duality: Nina's desire can either be obtained, thus providing her with *jouissance*, or it can fail to be attained and, therefore, continue to sustain its desirability for her. While Lacan himself is silent on the preferability of

any member of the said duality and does not seem to be encouraging one to value either option above the other, Aronofsky's portrayal of the dichotomy mentioned above of desire and *jouissance* seems to suggest otherwise; put differently, one can interpret *Black Swan* as not only breaking its silence on the mutually exclusive binary of desire and *jouissance* but also as advocating for the desirability of one over the other.

As the narrative of *Black Swan* unfolds towards the end, Nina finally can dance the Swan Queen, as she has successfully eliminated all the barriers (the *objet petit a*) her mother had imposed. Nina appears to have overcome two primary difficulties previously barring her access to her objects of desire: first, she has acknowledged her undeveloped sexuality and has taken initial steps to address it; second, she has recognized the devastating impacts of her dependent behaviors and has progressively aimed to move towards an autonomous and independent life. Aronofsky portrays Nina as having successfully achieved her ultimate object of desire by undergoing a life-changing metamorphosis from the White Swan to the Black Swan.

To put it in Lacanian terms, if the *objet petit a* is the object-cause of desire which manifests itself through the obstacles and barriers that lie between the subject and its objects of desire, then eliminating those obstacles and barriers would strip the *objet petit a* of its causal powers, thereby rendering the previous objects of desire undesirable (Lacan, 1973/1998). In other words, as Nina's eventual fate in *Black Swan* suggests, losing the obstacle is always worse than losing the object of desire, precisely since the former (the obstacle, the *objet petit a*) always precedes the latter (the desired object) in the chain of cause and effect, in the sense that the latter is directly brought into existence as a result of the former. At the same time, both have their unique downsides, the dissatisfactions and disappointing consequences of the latter far outweigh those of the former, thus positing that the satisfaction caused by sustaining the desirability of desired objects (through a failure in overcoming the *objet petit a*) is to be preferred over and above the satisfaction caused by realizing the objects of desire (through eliminating the causal functions of the *objet petit a*).

Like Nina in *Black Swan*, Tom has successfully broken away from his family and its accompanying responsibilities by quitting his job, thus attaining his object of

desire. However, Tom's anticipation of experiencing an unmediated and long-lasting *jouissance* after the actualization of his desire is met with disappointment, as the final events of the story turn out to display. During the concluding moments of scene vii, Tom exhibits his introspectively expressed view on abandoning his family. The content of his remarks signifies a deep sense of regret and remorse for the tragic consequences of what he has managed to do by abdicating his responsibilities and being constantly reminded of his disabled sister, who is now left behind. As Tom himself recounts the events which immediately followed his leaving (Williams, 1944/2014).

In the mutually exclusive duality of desire and *jouissance*, Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* portrays Tom as having chosen the latter, preferring the pleasures of realizing his desired object over sustaining its desirability. However, as Tom's aforementioned concluding address to the audience reveals, his preference for *jouissance* over desire seems to have provided him with greater dissatisfaction than what would have been the case otherwise had he decided to opt for maintaining his desire by refusing to attain its respective object. Williams' portrayal of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, similar to Aronofsky's depiction of Nina in *Black Swan*, supports the claim that a failure in eliminating the barriers to objects of desire, compared to success in overcoming them, is always the lesser of two evils.

Unlike Nina and Tom, Laura's struggles against eliminating the obstacles that have barred her access to her object of desire do not culminate in her realization of that object. As the events of *The Glass Menagerie* reveal, Laura does not seem to be capable of overcoming the socially disadvantageous personality traits that have caused her marriage prospects to dissipate radically; Laura's extreme shyness, severe social anxiety, and lack of self-esteem have made it much harder for her to get married. As the play ends, Laura is shown to have eventually failed in realizing her object of desire due to her inability to discard the said barriers.

Therefore, among the three children in *Black Swan* and *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura is the only one who does not experience the accompanying *jouissance* of a successfully actualized object of desire. However, as Williams explicitly describes the concluding events of the play in the stage directions, Laura is not depicted to be

in a state of dissatisfaction after she fails to achieve her desired object; rather, her behavior in response to her failure in getting married indicates anything but discontent:

We see, as though through soundproof glass, that Amanda appears to be making a comforting speech to Laura, who is huddled upon the sofa. Now that we cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty. Laura's hair hides her face until, at the end of the speech, she lifts her head to smile at her mother.

(Williams, 1944/2014, Scene vii, p. 95).

Put differently, in the conflicting binary of desire and *jouissance*, while Tom and Nina go for the latter, Williams portrays Laura to have opted for the former, thereby valuing the sustenance of the desirability of her desired object over and above the *jouissance* of its realization.

5. Conclusion

The current research has argued that, in response to their mothers' wishes, the children in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Black Swan* react in two different ways: they either comply with the aforementioned demands and are not able to realize their object of desire (Laura) or oppose those demands and successfully obtain their object of desire (Tom and Nina). By employing the Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts of the *objet petit a* and *register theory*, the research has posited that *satisfaction* lies not in obtaining one's object of desire, but in repeatedly failing to do so, because gaining the object of desire destroys the lack which is necessary for maintaining the desirability of the object of desire.

All members of the Wingfield family in *The Glass Menagerie* are heavily invested in resorting to fantasy whenever they are dissatisfied with their symbolic reality. Tom's way of coping with his unadventurous job at the warehouse is to go to the movies on a nightly basis. In contrast, Tom's encounter with the lack of sense concerning his unfulfilling job is the deciding factor in causing him to resort to fantasy. For Amanda, that factor is the lack of her past glory days as a Southern belle.

For Laura, her resort to fantasy is manifested through her immersion in her collection of glass animals when she encounters the traumatic aspects of her physical disability. As the eventual fate of Tom and Laura suggests, eliminating the obstacles to objects of desire, which provides the subject with *jouissance*, has more tragic consequences than failing to do so, which provides the subject with sustained desirability of its desired objects.

The present research has tried to suggest a new psychoanalytic map of meaning: of what meaning is and where it is to be found, by predicating it on a repeated failure to obtain what one desires. In other words, this study has attempted to posit that while the irrational decisions and behaviors of human beings are, at first glance, deemed to prevent them from acquiring meaningful satisfaction, upon deeper analysis, however, those seemingly irrational behaviors are, according to this psychoanalytic model, what give meaning to one's life and keep us sane and satisfied enough to continue living. While this study placed its focus on *The Glass Menagerie* and *Black Swan*, the results of utilizing this psychoanalytic framework can be further explored by other researchers and applied to other literary and cinematic works. Since the very fundamental base of almost all psychoanalytic schools (and specially that of Lacan) has been established on an in-depth analysis of the subject's relationship with its mother from the period of early childhood development and onwards, the researcher believes that an application of such psychoanalytic theories to literary and cinematic works whose central theme revolves around the portrayal of mother-child relationship can be of immense utility. In that light, a psychoanalytic (and especially a Lacanian) analysis of Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), based on the 1978 novel of the same name by Hubert Selby Jr., and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001), based on the 1983 novel of the same name by Elfriede Jelinek, whose depictions of mother-child relationships constitute the very core of their respective narratives is highly recommended to other academic researchers in an effort to deepen our understanding of the said relationships in the realm of both cinema and literature.

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About the Authors

Amir Sina Ahmadifar received his B.A. and M.A from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in 2020. His research primarily focuses on psychological criticism with an emphasis on Lacan and disability studies.

Sara Khazai is an assistant professor in the Department of English Literature at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. Her masters at King's College London focused on nineteenth century English and American literature, which led to the publication of Gaskell's *North & South* in Persian translation. Her PhD research focused on stylistics and conversation analysis in Austen, Hardy, Gaskell and Bronte. More recently, she has been focusing on applications of Game Theory to literary texts, including Austen's *Sanditon*, Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* as well as a number of Shakespearean comedies.

Nadya Alkola is an Assistant Lecturer of English Literature at University of Babylon, Iraq. She received her M.A from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in 2022. Her research primarily focuses on interdisciplinary literary criticism.