
A Comparative Study on the Red Shoes and The Black Swan

Dancing Away

The Red Shoes (1948) and Black Swan (2010) present the struggles of two young ballerinas, Victoria Page and Nina Sayers, as they fully commit their lives to dancing. After the older first ballerinas retire in both films, Vicky and Nina get the leading parts in big productions. Vicky's performance in the ballet The Red Shoes is a great success, but her romantic life threatens her career because her director, Lermontov, believes that a dancer cannot rely on human love. Nina, on the other hand, has to embrace her sexuality to fully play the part of the Swan Queen. Nina becomes torn between her real self and her Black Swan side, just like Vicky is torn between her love life and dancing career. In their desire to become perfect dancers, these women lose control over their roles. Vicky and Nina's lives are overcome and tragically ended by their roles in The Red Shoes and Swan Lake due to their struggle to find balance in their careers and personal lives.

Vicky and Nina are both dancers who are very committed to their profession. Vicky is invited to join the Ballet Lermontov by Lermontov himself, after answering his question, "Why do you dance?", with a similar one – "Why do you live?" Lermontov is impressed by Vicky's answer and believes that she has some potential. However, when Vicky comes to the theater, Lermontov completely ignores her. But this treatment cannot stop Vicky from pursuing her dream. She works really hard to constantly improve her abilities as a dancer. Similarly, Nina wants to achieve perfection in her dancing. Dance is her primary focus in life, and she is fully committed to it. She appears to not have many friends, and instead of going out and having fun like other young people, she stays at home and practices dance moves. Her mother (who gives up her career of a dancer to raise Nina) makes it her personal goal for her daughter to become a successful ballerina, and she also persistently pushes Nina to work hard. Nina's mother's pressure and total control force her to only focus on her dancing career and not have a personal life.

Vicky is not discouraged by Lermontov's cold attitude towards her when she first starts attending classes in his company. She continues to make an effort to impress him and to become noticed. Her performance at the Mercury Theater in London changes the way Lermontov sees her as a dancer. When she spots him in the crowd, at first Vicky appears somewhat intimidated. However, she loses herself in the performance and fully commits herself to the part. This makes Lermontov remember her and let her join the company on their tour. He

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gives her a part in his great production *The Red Shoes* in Monte Carlo, hoping that she will dance just like she did in that little theater in London.

Nina also has to personally impress the director to get the part she wants. At the beginning of the film, the director, Thomas Leroy, comes into a rehearsal and while talking about the new production, *Swan Lake*, taps certain ballerinas on the shoulder. Nina does not get tapped just like Vicky's name is not called when Lermontov seems to be announcing the names of dancers who will go on the tour with the Ballet Lermontov. However, as it turns out for both films, the director actually calls on those dancers that he does not want in the production or on tour, giving a chance to the rest, including Vicky and Nina. Nina goes through the audition for the part of Swan Queen and realizes that she is not going to get the part because her main focus in practicing was the part of the White Swan. So she decides to talk to Thomas personally, comes into his office, and asks for the part of the Swan Queen. At first he refuses to give her the part, and when she is about to leave without fighting for the role, Thomas kisses her. Nina is shocked by his behavior and she bites him on the lip. This reaction deeply influences Thomas because he now sees the sexy evil Black Swan inside of Nina. Although she does not expect it, Nina gets the part of the Swan Queen because she personally impresses the director when she bites him.

Lermontov gives Vicky the main part in *The Red Shoes* because, unlike some others, he believes in her and is very impressed by her performance at The Mercury Theater. She does not have to (literally) fight for the role like Nina, but she did work hard to get it. Nonetheless, Vicky has a problem while preparing for the part – she struggles to become familiar with the music and follow its rhythm. Lermontov has a solution for that. He makes Vicky listen to music from *The Red Shoes* at every meal during the time they are working on the production. Her role in *The Red Shoes* is already slowly taking over her life when she is forced to experience this ballet even outside of rehearsal. Having a meal can be seen as rest time for a dancer, but for Vicky it is not. Even during her seemingly free time she has to work on her part by listening to music from the ballet to be able to fully identify with her character.

Nina knows the part of Swan Queen well and is familiar with the music; however, she has to embrace her sexuality and maturity in order to fully play this role. Nina reminds the viewers of a child inside the body of a grown woman. She seems to be completely innocent, wearing mostly pink and living in a room full of stuffed animals. However, she is told by Thomas that in order to become the Swan Queen, she has to embrace the Black Swan side of her – become sexy and seductive. Thomas gives her an interesting assignment – to touch herself in a sexual way. Nina seems to enjoy sexual pleasure although she is not very familiar with it. Thomas also sexually seduces Nina when he helps her work on her part after dismissing everyone else. He passionately kisses Nina and touches her while they dance. She wants to feel more of what Thomas shows her and become sexy. Nina's personal life and her role become intermingled

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when embracing her sexuality is the key to her part. She slowly loses her mind when she explores her dark side.

For Vicky, however, embracing her love and sexuality stands in the way of being a successful dancer. Lermontov claims that no dancer can be fully committed to their career if they are in love. That is why he gets angry when he finds out about Vicky's relationship with Julian, a young composer working for the Ballet Lermontov. Perhaps Vicky and Julian fall in love during the hours they spend together when Vicky has to become familiar with the music for *The Red Shoes*. The ballet is a huge success, and Lermontov keeps putting on more great productions, giving Vicky the main roles. But his belief that love and romantic relationships are in the way of real dancing makes him fire Julian. Vicky is devastated by Lermontov's decision as she struggles to choose between ballet and her love for Julian. She decides to stay with Julian (at first), marries him and gives up the opportunity to become the amazing dancer that Lermontov wants her to be.

The technical choices and montage sequences of ballet scenes in both films show how the dancers slowly lose themselves or their minds while fully committing to the role. In both *The Red Shoes* and *Black Swan*, the stage is shown from the inside, from the perspective of a dancer. Many close-ups on the faces and shoes of the ballerinas are present. Close-ups on Vicky's face show the tension she is experiencing. At one point in the long dancing sequence in *The Red Shoes*, Vicky sees Lermontov's face when looking at Grisha, and then that image is replaced with Julian, although neither Lermontov nor Julian are on stage. Vicky seems to be losing her mind when she has these visions. Nina is also going crazy when she is performing the part of the Swan Queen. She envisions herself as a half-bird, half-human, and seems to lose her true self in the performance. Both films have scenes of the main characters dancing with monsters with scary masks on. These scenes emphasize the fact that the career of a ballerina can be frightening and overwhelming. Nina does lose her mind while trying to embrace the *Black Swan* side of her.

The dramatic climax in *The Red Shoes* happens when Vicky cannot control the red shoes anymore. She comes to Monte Carlo for a vacation, but she is convinced by Lermontov to perform in *The Red Shoes* once again. Vicky does not tell Julian about this, and is very surprised when he comes into her dressing room on the opening night. Vicky now has to choose between her two great passions – dance and her beloved husband Julian. She struggles to make this choice, and Julian, knowing she will lean towards dance, leaves. Lermontov is happy that Vicky is about to continue dancing, and he tells her to put on the red shoes. By that he means that she should fully embrace her dancing career and commit her life to ballet. In Andersen's fairy tale "The Red Shoes," the main character puts on magical red shoes that make her dance without stopping. She has to cut off her feet to stop dancing, and in Lermontov's version of this story, the heroine dies. Vicky also faces a tragic death when she

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loses control over the red shoes and they force her to throw herself on the train tracks when a train is approaching. Vicky's desire to be a dancer and her masterful perfection of her part in *The Red Shoes* result in that role taking over her life. Just like for the heroine in Andersen's fairy tale, the struggle to find balance between personal life and dance leads Vicky to her tragic death.

Nina loses her mind when she tries to discover the Black Swan within her. She starts seeing women that appear to be darker versions of herself and notices that her reflection in the mirror is acting on its own. The night before the premiere of *Swan Lake*, Nina pulls out black feathers from the skin on her back, but does not try to fight this insanity. Stress and anxiety take over Nina's conscience without her realizing it and make her act irrationally. She is afraid that a fellow dancer, Lily, wants to steal her part in *Swan Lake*, and stabs Lily to death with a piece of broken mirror after the first act of the ballet. Nina does not think about consequences; her role as Swan Queen is the only thing she cares about at this point in her life. She sees herself as the Swan Queen when she dances in the next act, with black feathers turning her arms into wings. After committing murder, she can fully identify with the evil within her. However, it becomes apparent that Nina does not, in fact, kill Lily. Instead, Nina stabs herself and dies after the ballet is over, her last words being, "Perfect, it was perfect." In her desire to achieve perfection, Nina allows her role to overtake her life. She goes insane while preparing for this part, and commits suicide just like Swan Queen does at the end of *Swan Lake*.

The tragic deaths of young and talented dancers in *The Red Shoes* and *Black Swan* represent the hardships of being a ballerina. Many girls dream of becoming ballerinas because of how fascinatingly beautiful and graceful ballet is. However, it also takes a lot of hard work and sometimes causes great suffering. Ballerinas go through many hardships, from bleeding feet to emotional problems that may even lead to suicide. *The Red Shoes* and *Black Swan* show that a ballerina's life is extremely toilsome both emotionally and physically. These films teach the viewers that overworking oneself in achieving perfection and losing balance between one's professional and personal lives leads to tragic consequences.

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