# My Kinky Shadow:

## The poetics of the sadomasochistic Other

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## Abstract

Historically the mental health profession has pathologized a range of sexual behaviors, activities, and relationships that are now commonly known as BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism, and masochism) or kink. Cultural attitudes and clinical opinions are changing regarding these practices, such that a Jungian perspective offers valuable clinical insights regarding the archetypal meaning of BDSM and the relationship dynamics that develop in this context. In particular Jung's concept of the syzygy provides a framework to understand the value BDSM finds in the creation of a conscious other. This creative meaning-making aspect of BDSM and kink constitutes a form of poetics offering new possibilities for integrating darker countercultural aspects of the psyche.


Keywords: BDSM, kink, sadomasochism, sexuality, Jungian psychology, syzygy, poetics

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term BDSM appeared in the early 1990's as an abbreviation for bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism-masochism. It has become a catch-all phrase to describe a wide range of behaviors, activities, and relationships that involve some combination of sexuality, eroticism, and roleplaying often including a consensual unequal power dynamic, more accurately referred to as an authority exchange (C. Shahbaz, personal communication, June 15, 2017). The other popular slang term for a wide range of unconventional sexual interests is kink, or kinky in its original adjectival form. Cultural references to these practices abound with iconic images of handcuffs, ropes, riding crops, and leather accoutrements (Barker, Ayantafi, & Gupta, 2007). Such activities and relationships appear across all sexual and affectional orientations, all gender identities, and a broad range of social, racial, and ethnic groups (Shahbaz & Chirinos, 2017).

Roughly a century before the term BDSM entered the vernacular, Richard von Krafft-Ebing (2011) published *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886 as a forensic reference book. Widely regarded as a landmark in psychiatric writing, its author popularized the terms sadism and masochism based on the historical lives and fictional writings of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Widely regarded as a landmark text, the author's inclusion of sadomasochism and other sexual practices that currently fall under the BDSM rubric established them as sexual pathologies, a view perpetuated by Freud (2000), who dubbed sadomasochism "the most common and the most significant of all the perversions" (p. 23). This view went largely unchallenged by mental health practitioners and theorists until recently (Barker et al, 2007).

Despite the historical tendency of the mental health field to marginalize BDSM and kink as perverted and deviant, there appears to be a growing interest and enthusiasm for this form of psycho-sexual exploration among the collective. The runaway success of E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is one striking example, having sold 125 million copies worldwide, and the movie based on the first book having grossed more than 500 million dollars (Stedman, 2015). At the same time, members of the BDSM community have sharply criticized the franchise as misrepresenting the modern fully consensual version of these relationships (Marcus, 2015). The question remains how many people practice BDSM or take an interest in some aspect of it. In 1993, The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior estimated that up to 14% of men and 11% of women in the United States engaged in some form of BDSM behavior. More recently, Joyal and Carpentier's (2016) rigorous study with 1,040 subjects selected from the general population in Canada found that 45.6% of their sample expressed interest in at least one paraphilic behavior as defined by the DSM-5, and 33.9% had engaged in such behaviors at least once. The authors persuasively question why sexual behaviors that are statistically neither atypical nor unusual should still be labeled anomalous and paraphilic.

During the same period that research finds an increase in public acceptance and curiosity toward BDSM and kink, the American Psychiatric Association has also softened its diagnostic stance. The DSM-5 (2013) now makes a clear distinction between paraphilias and the paraphilic disorders. The manual states, "A paraphilia by itself does not necessarily justify or require clinical intervention" (p. 686). It goes on to say, "The majority of individuals who are active in community networks that practice sadistic and masochistic behaviors do not express any dissatisfaction with their sexual interests, and

their behavior would not meet DSM-5 criteria for sexual sadism disorder" (p. 697). Shahbaz and Chirinos (2017) review over twenty years of research, which supports this update by the APA. The authors summarize these findings stating, "BDSM practitioners generally tend to have a higher level of self-esteem; are healthier than the average person; have better than average communication skills, imagination, and self-awareness; and are capable of undergoing insightful reflection during psychotherapy" (p. 25). Despite this research data, and the important move toward a more open and affirming attitude by the mental health field, reports of stigma, therapeutic bias, and inadequate care remain a common complaint by practitioners of BDSM when they seek therapeutic services (Barker et al, 2007; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006; Lawrence, & Love-Crowell, 2008; Shahbaz and Chirinos, 2017).

This disparity between changing social attitudes toward BDSM and an undereducated therapeutic community does not improve when one considers the field of analytical psychology. An online search of journal and research articles on the EBSCO database yields 1,771 matches for the topic of BDSM, yet there are no matches when the words Jung, Jungian, or analytical psychology are added to the query. Apart from important contributions a generation ago from Lyn Cowan (1982) and Thomas Moore (1990) on masochism and sadism respectively, Pamela Power's (2014) insightful essay is one of the few recent examples of Jungians contributing to the psychological discussion of BDSM, even though the extravagant sexual imagination of this area of human experience seems like a natural topic of enquiry for Jungian thought.

More than the attitudinal shift in the collective or the evidence calling for greater awareness and sensitivity among therapists, what arouses curiosity from a Jungian

perspective is the pronounced tendency to pathologize, marginalize, and ignore the kinks that come into the consulting room with patients. This tendency appears to be part of a larger pattern noted by Santana (2017), in which Jungian practitioners avoid issues of sex and sexuality as clinical issues, despite Jung having made significant contributions to understanding human sexuality from a depth perspective. Back in 1960, James Hillman noted

> "The step that Jung took has still to be taken by many even now. Jung saw that instinct has an imaginal aspect, a mythic factor, and that therefore the sexual is also an activity of the imagination, a psychological expression; the sexual is a way the soul speaks" (p. 141).

The tendency of Jungians to neglect the logos of the soul in patients' sexual lives becomes more ironic when BDSM is part of the erotic landscape. If a patient were to share a dream involving imprisonment in a dungeon, or tying a beautiful youth to a tree, a Jungian analyst would likely greet these images with enthusiasm, noticing the dynamic archetypal themes on display. Are the mythopoetic elements of these images any less vital when they appear as part of a couple's consensual sex play?

Consider this passage from Guy Baldwin's (2004) book *SlaveCraft*, which describes the intimate bond that develops between a modern day BDSM slave and his Master, who share an extreme authority exchange:

> "The more He [the Master] demands from me, the deeper down into the Sea of Surrender i drift. If He should push the limits of my current capabilities, my descent stops at that point, and i remain suspended at that depth. But if He continues to push me, i take that as a sign that He wants me to go deeper and i use my internal slave tools to dissolve my resistance

> and continue my descent. If He continues, before long, i shall find myself slowly settling to the very bottom of the Sea of Surrender, a place i have come to call the Great Deep.
>
> . . . my internal experience at such times is one of a limitless, resonant joy enveloping me, sometimes quietly, other times vibrantly. All words, all thoughts, are swept away, and i am so very peaceful inside. And, in the distance, i can sometimes hear the deep, low-pitched, undulating sounds of what a slave buddy of mine calls, The Roaring Void" (pp. 63-64). (Reprinted with permission from the author).

This account resembles what Jungian thinkers refer to as a numinous experience and an encounter with the archetype of the Self. Lionel Corbett's (2007) description of the numinous and its psychological value is surprisingly compatible with the preceding description of deep submission:

> "We feel stunned, astonished, and filled with wonder because we have been addressed by something uncanny, not of our ordinary world, something very difficult to put into words. We may be cowed by the experience because its sheer force overpowers us, making us feel very small. Or we may feel entranced, captivated, and transported. Contact with the numinosum . . . may also produce a profound sense of union or oneness with the world and with other people" (pp. 12-13).

Both of these descriptions are consistent with reports from other practitioners of BDSM, some who have described transcendent transformative experiences through their sessions (Mains, 1984; Beckman, 2008; Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, & Matuszewich, 2009). Jungian psychology could support such experiences as part of a person's individuation process, recognizing as Ellenberger (1970) does, that numinous feelings signal the presence of deeper transformative archetypal energies (p. 706). What is it then

that prevents Jungians from understanding the practice of BDSM and kink within the framework of Jung's model?

The specter of the Other and Jung's formulation of the syzygy offer a possible answer for this question. In multiple aspects BDSM involves an encounter with the archetypal Other. Shahbaz and Chirinos (2017) discuss the dark counter-cultural aspects of BDSM as congruent with Jung's conceptualization of the Shadow. On the interpersonal level, many of the negotiated relationships in BDSM exaggerate the sense of otherness between the partners through the extreme imbalance of authority and control. As an individual reaches deep within the personal psyche to embody that which is archetypally dominant or submissive, one encounters the Other, the complementary polarity, embodied in the partner. It is in fact a conscious consensual engagement with otherness that characterizes BDSM activities, making the phenomenology of differentness explicit, overt, and valued. One example of this intensification of intent and consent around the conscious enactment of otherness is the development of a contract between people entering into a long term or continuous BDSM relationship such as Dom/me and sub, which both people sign (Shahbaz & Chirinos, 2017). Such contracts typically stipulate how partners will handle specific protocols, communication, conflict resolution, decision making, and limitations and boundaries of the relationship. Part of what distinguishes the modern movement is the importance of open communication and dialogue, safety precautions, and the essential respect accorded to each practitioner. This is apparent in the use of terms such as "safe, sane, and consensual" (Stein, 2000), or "risk aware consensual kink," (Switch, 2017) which commonly appear in introductory literature about BDSM. The attention given to creating a dynamic of trust, candor, and

open communication between partners illustrates how the Other is consciously acknowledged and valued.

In contrast to the phenomenology of conscious otherness that characterizes BDSM, the shadow aspect of the Other also appears in the consulting room when clinicians experience discomfort in the presence of a kinky patient. The natural tendency is to resolve such feelings of discomfort by distancing oneself from that which is other and casting a pathologizing eye on the patient's activities. Shahbaz and Chirinos (2017) develop the concept of "othering" originally formulated by Said (1979) in his work with Palestinians, to delineate the social and clinical marginalization of BDSM and kink communities. Krafft-Ebing's (2011) legacy can serve as a professional validation of the clinician's dis-ease, which could also be termed *kinkophobia* (Baldwin, 1993). The power of a diagnostic label can become an apotropaic gesture for the clinician, serving as a barrier against our deeper fascination with our own proclivities for cruelty, ugliness, humiliation, and violence. This clinical situation offers a nuanced illustration of Jung's (1957/1983) famous declaration: "The gods have become diseases" (p. 37, [*CW* 13, para. 54]). That which the clinician views as pathological in a patient's presentation may also be where the gods of the archetypal unconscious have been forced into hiding. Cowan (1982) concurs in acknowledging what is at once both counter-cultural and divine in the deep psychology of masochism:

> "Masochism carries a radical anti-ego message: there are gods in our sickness who relieve us of the tedious and boring demand for good feeling; there are gods who, in the worst moments of torment and humiliation, remind us that we are, emphatically and constitutionally, *not okay*" (p. 31).

Suddenly two possibilities appear simultaneously: to view kink as sick and twisted and at the same time to see its transcendent possibilities for healing and transformation. Let us imagine kink as a living symbol of the deep psyche.

This potential for the psyche to hold together pairs in dialectic tension lies at the heart of Jung's formulation of the syzygy, that divine marriage, which he originally referenced in regard to anima and animus (Jung, 1978/1951 [*CW* 9ii]). Hillman (1985) asserts that the notion of pairing in tandems is more compatible with the polymorphous nature of the psyche than is the classical concept of opposition. In fact, a pair of opposites is only one possible configuration of a tandem:

> "To imagine in pairs and couples is to think mythologically. Mythical thinking connects pairs into tandems rather than separating them into opposites . . . . Opposites lend themselves to very few kinds of description: contradictories, contraries, complementaries, negations—formal and logical. Tandems, however, like brothers or enemies or traders or lovers show endless varieties of styles. Tandems favor intercourse—innumerable positions." (p. 173)

As a concept, the tension of the opposites connotes both an inherent incompatibility and a dynamic antagonism between elements. This is apparent in Jung's (1939/1990) description of the play between conscious and unconscious as a fight: "Conscious and unconscious do not make a whole when one of them is suppressed and injured by the other. If they must contend, let it at least be a fair fight with equal rights on both sides" (p. 288 [*CW* 9i, para 522]). In contrast to the antagonism implicit in the tension of the opposites, a tandem connotes two figures in perpetual relationship with each other, exploring a range of contrasting possibilities.

This suggests that the Other as it constellates in BDSM is always operating in relationship with another figure designated as its dialectical counterpart, rather than its opposite. In BDSM, there is no Dom/me without a sub, no Master without a slave; the Other cannot be rejected or expelled without breaking the syzygy and collapsing the archetypal potential of the scene. Even if a scene involves more than two people, roles are clearly defined, protocols are established, and the authority exchange becomes a collaborative construction of a conscious Other (Shahbaz, 2012). For some, this is the essence of BDSM's psychological value: the consensual exchange of authority and control occurring within an established container facilitates the emergence of a syzygy between Dominant and submissive. In such a configuration, opposition is no longer experienced as a threat or a problem; an unconscious value split between good and bad does not occur. Rather, the conscious Other is indispensable to the pursuit of pleasure and growth.

In psychotherapy, a similar situation constellates between the figures of patient and analyst, as they exist not in opposition so much as in tandem as a syzygy of archetypal potential, a therapeutic pair. There is no analyst without an analysand, and the two pass through a range of contrasting relational attitudes in the protracted course of the therapeutic encounter. In fact, the similarities between BDSM and psychotherapy are more significant than one might easily admit. Guggenbühl-Craig (1971) famously delineated the potent and sometimes sinister forces at work in the helping professions. The practice of obtaining the informed consent of the patient prior to initiating treatment is in part to safeguard against the sadomasochistic potential of the relationship to go

awry, just as the consensual contract in BDSM is a safeguard against the potential for physical abuse and trauma.

The restrictions of a time-limited therapeutic hour, the imposition and humiliation of a fee for the service, which some patients regard as the obligation to pay for a relationship, the imperatives of self disclosure and stripping away defenses, as well as the necessity of enduring probing questions and painful truths about one's own nature all bear the archetypal imprint of a sadomasochistic syzygy between patient and analyst that thrives as an unconscious dynamic. Hence, without recognizing the influence of an archetype of sadomasochism per se, the profession has recognized the value of analysis as part of analytic training, and the imperative of astute supervision and consultation to acknowledge and address the dynamic presence of these darker impulses. BDSM and kink acknowledge and affirm the enduring presence of such deep impulses in the human psyche both to inflict and to endure humiliation and suffering in relationship with others. Kink communities have developed ethical practices to contain, explore, and integrate the darker aspects of our nature, aspects which both Moore (1990) and Cowan (1982) have recognized as necessities of the soul itself. "We need . . . to recognize the soul-need in its downward movement, and the passion and need in its extremity," writes Cowan, "Masochism is a natural product of soul, ready and needing to bring forward its own vision and its own cure" (p. 33). It is this soul-centered approach to understanding the practices of BDSM that affords a unique opportunity for Jungian thinkers to support a greater understanding and appreciation for the unconventional passions of this marginalized community.

The specter of the Other and the tandem of the syzygy both find expression in the conscious consensual practices of BDSM as well as in the less comfortable hidden aspects of the therapeutic relationship. Analytical psychology offers a powerful repertoire of concepts to understand and affirm the value of these darker necessities of the soul. Jung's (1946/1985) strongly held opinion, expressed in The Psychology of the Transference [*CW 16*] was that the therapeutic relationship had to become a real human relationship in order for psychological transformation to occur. The alchemical symbolism of the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, which depicts the progression of a king and queen passing from the polite conventions of a formal relationship to the naked truth of two beings stripped of social artifice served as his preferred metaphor for the therapeutic process of developing an authentic human relationship based on the objective reality of the psyche. In the therapeutic encounter, both people are changed, Jung said. When an analyst neglects or turns away from the sadomasochistic aspects of the therapeutic relationship, the encounter with the naked truth of who the two people truly are in their deeper nature is forestalled or shunned. When an analyst interprets the pleasure and meaning a patient finds in the creative consensual exploration of BDSM as a pathological perversion, the Other is unconsciously split from the inner reality of the practitioner and projected on to the patient as a problem in need of a cure. The syzygy of the therapeutic relationship collapses and the naked truth of who the two people are remains concealed behind the guise of professional correctness. Psychological transformation as Jung imagined it is not able to occur under these conditions. What is called for is a recollecting of pathologized projections by the analyst and an engagement with the mythic and archetypal dimensions of the psyche that give sadomasochism and kink a depth of

meaning as a sexual logos of the soul. This mythopoetic aspect of our sexuality is what Hillman (1960) was referencing when he said, “the step that Jung took has still to be taken by many even now” (p. 141). Jung’s ability to find the gods at work in the instincts of our sexual lives remains an unfulfilled promise of his pioneering work.

The capacity to find the mythopoetic at work in our instinctual lives involves the creative function of the psyche and its expression through play in the broader cultural sense of the word. Johan Huizinga (2014) develops the concept of play as a basis for culture, tying its significance to the development of metaphor and poetic thought, as well as ritual as an expression of the collective mythic imagination. Huizinga’s insights into the essential elements of play provide a useful bridge between “the step that Jung took” (Hillman, 1960, p. 141) and the call for a deeper psychological appreciation of the modern practice of BDSM. It is striking how the author’s phenomenological reduction of play illuminates the ludic aspect of BDSM. He describes play in its essential characteristics: it is voluntary and free; it occurs outside of so-called “ordinary” or “real” life; its locality and duration are secluded and limited; it creates order (“into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (p. 10)); it involves tension; it has rules that are clear and binding; it enjoys an air of secrecy (pp. 8-12). Each of these characteristics finds prominent expression in the activities of BDSM: the emphasis on consent makes it an activity that is voluntary and free; practitioners observe a clear transition into BDSM activities as a domain set apart from so-called “ordinary” life; activities occur in designated secluded locations often referred to as play spaces, in which “scenes” are enacted within a temporal boundary; order exists through the designation of specific roles and the performance of tasks associated with each role;

tension occurs through the exploration of boundaries and limitations, including the transgressive nature of that which is counter-cultural; rules are present as part of negotiated exchanges of power and authority, including limits and safe words, expectations and punishment; the subversive pleasure in the secretive aspect of having a hidden yet profoundly meaningful dimension to one's life can be part of the appeal of BDSM and kink. Some may argue that the time-limited characteristic of play does not always pertain to BDSM. The deeply felt enduring sense of identity as a Dominant or submissive can motivate some practitioners to structure their lives around those identities (Shahbaz & Chirinos, 2017). This can lead to the establishment of a household that supports what is called a 24-7 living arrangement, in which protocols of dominance and submission are permanently in place. However, even within such situations, time spent within the household is set apart from other aspects of a person's life, and the more intense power exchange activities that take place within a dungeon or playroom occur for a time limited period. It is not overly surprising that Huizinga's characteristics of play find robust expression in BDSM and kink, but what is perhaps less obvious is the mythopoetic or meaning-making aspect of play that is also relevant to these activities.

Huizinga (2014) finds the characteristics of play at work in some of our most earnest and sacred activities, including law and politics, warfare, and religious rituals and festivals. Play for Huizinga is something that reaches beyond its popular associations with frivolity and caprice, although play characteristics are undeniably present in our lighter moments of mirth. They are also present in the mythopoetic function of the psyche, that deep impulse to bring order and meaning to the rhythms of nature at work within us and around us through imaginative representation in story and metaphor.

Through play we represent our experience of the numinous. We have already noted the correspondence between BDSM activities and numinous experience. Here we see that correspondence deepen through the function of play in the world of alternative sexualities. It is this ludic aspect of BDSM that introduces the meaning-making function of *poeisis*, the layering of meaning that occurs as a syzygy between the imaginative possibilities of what one is and what one is not. The embodiment of the conscious Other becomes a shadow play.

With BDSM as it's developed over the past quarter century, the psyche appears to have discovered a poetics of sadomasochism, thereby creating a psychological container with the potential for self discovery, personal growth, and transformation via the sexual imagination. Like all forms of *poeisis*, these relationships foster the creation and layering of symbolic meaning. In such an imaginal space, the soul finds value in suffering. Suffering becomes important and necessary, and it is greeted with intentionality and consent. This brings to mind Hillman's (1975) notion of pathologizing as one of the primary innate expressive modes of the soul, in contrast to the historical characterization of sadomasochism as a disease. He writes, "Were we able to discover its psychological necessity, pathologizing would no longer be wrong or right, but merely necessary, involving purposes which we have misperceived and values which must present themselves necessarily in a distorted form" (p. 57). By pathologizing BDSM and kink, the field of psychology turns the numinous pathos of suffering into a pathologized Other, a projection of one's own shadow, that is ostensibly in need of a cure. And this fantasy of cure involves a rejection or sublimation of that which is unwanted and labeled as diseased. Professional perspectives are evolving as social attitudes toward BDSM and

kink change, such that a new paradigm could emerge in which the kinky sadomasochistic Other is no longer an opposite concealed in the analyst's shadow, but rather a dark twin in a dialectical syzygy paired with the conscious personality. It is this presentation of new possibilities that merits further attention. *Poeisis* invites play in the broader hermeneutic sense of the word (Palmer, 1969), and it is the opportunity to play with the potential of the sadistic and masochistic aspects of our own nature that honors a fuller and more deeply engaged relationship with the Other in ourselves and in the world.

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