

BDSM as Archetypal Shadow

The archetypal shadow is a concept that was conceived of, by a man named Carl Jung. He is often referred to as the father of modern psychotherapy, whose concepts were at first rejected due to their mystic undertones, but have now in the last 20 years been seen as foundational to the continuing understanding of the human journey.

C.G. Jung successfully created a comprehensive map for the inner world and the journey of self-individuation. For the purposes of this essay we will explain and utilize the concept of archetypal shadow, just one of the many elements that C.G. Jung recognized as being part of our inner Universe.

The word archetype refers to an energy that gathers around itself a cluster of words and ideas. For example, mother as an archetype, is an energy around which ideas and words such as nurturing, caring, love, safety and acceptance, are gathered. No matter where you go in the world, if you say the word mother, it is likely that these words and ideas, or similar, will be conjured up. That is what makes mother an archetypal symbol. She is known and recognized through out the world by an inherent sense of her existence that we each seem to be born with. She is universal.

The word shadow refers to another specific universal archetype. This one is usually identified by such characters as monsters, underworld creatures and even the Devil Himself. The archetype of the shadow is an energy that gathers around itself a cluster of words and ideas that usually conjure up fear, anxiety, repulsion and the grotesque. It is usually the embodiment of something that we have been taught to believe is nasty about ourselves and therefore unacceptable to the conscious mind and it's own self-image. The shadow is the symbol of all that we have come to believe is reprehensible within us, whether it actually is so, or not.

Often times you will hear someone make the comment that the Devil made them do it. Usually this occurs after they have done something that would normally be considered uncharacteristic for them. In actuality, what they have experienced is an unexpected visit from there own archetypal shadow.

The things that we have been taught to believe are unacceptable about ourselves, get designated to the dungeon of our unconscious where they are chained and imprisoned in hopes that in being so contained, they will not raise their ugly heads to manifest themselves and distort our socially acceptable self-image. It is important to remember that just because they are so designated, this does not necessarily mean that they are inherently evil in and of themselves. They are the things about ourselves that we have been taught to fear and see as evil.

Not only can an individual have a shadow lurking in their unconscious but so can entire family groups, ethnic groups, subcultures, political groups, societies and civilizations.

Every individual and group of individuals has it's scapegoat or nemesis.

For example in the dark ages, the shadow was embodied in the symbol of the witch who was designated the archetypal shadow of the time. In the Christian church, the Devil or Satan has been given the same position. All that any group of people rejects about itself, is repressed in it's unconscious, where it becomes the terrifying enemy that threatens the existence of the group from within by virtue of projection, from without.

So it is with the individual. For example in a woman, the shadow can be the embodiment of her anger and righteous indignation, that are so often seen as unbecoming a lady in this patriarchal society. Unfortunately for a woman, anger and righteous indignation are also the feelings from which empowerment and healthy self-preservation are derived. When demoted to the position of shadow, these feelings become the enemy within, where they rule from the unconscious through fear, neurosis and self-destructive behavior. These lead to alienation and self-loathing.

In a man, the shadow can be the embodiment of his sensitivity and humility, which are often viewed as weaknesses among men in this patriarchal society. Unfortunately for a man, sensitivity and humility are also the qualities required for him to establish and maintain intimacy and connectedness with another human being. When designated to the dungeons of the unconscious as shadow prisoners, these feelings become insecurity and false pride that rule the conscious mind through fear, neurosis and aggressive behavior. These lead to isolation and depression.

Whether personal as in the individual or social as in a group of individuals, the shadow is a very unhappy cluster of characteristics, that have been rejected and repressed to a dark place where they sit festering with anger about their imprisonment, seeking only one thing...to be free to surface in to consciousness and take their rightful and necessary place in the order of either the personal or collective psyche.

All this having been said, I would like to now bring forth the hypothesis that BDSM is the archetypal shadow of mainstream sexuality. It is the embodiment of all that mainstream sexuality finds repulsive in itself due to religious and other mores. It is the embodiment of all that, which mainstream sexuality has designated to the dungeons of it's unconscious in an attempt to comply with what it has been coerced into believing is healthy sexual behaviour. In effect, BDSM is the Devil of mainstream sexuality.

BDSM is the expression of all that is primal, animal, instinctual and dark about human sexuality. Indeed it is evidence that although we are highly evolved as a species, we nonetheless remain animal in our nature. Our prime directive despite our intellectual development is to survive and to mate, to mate like animals. BDSM reminds mainstream sexuality that in addition to being loving and civil creatures we are also animals that lust for power and the sensual, are fascinated not only by life but also by death, experience our fullness of existence not only in the experience of pleasure but also in pain and seek to be totally consumed by the erotic without restriction or guilt. We are creatures that seek the total expression of our creature likeness.

These characteristics certainly do not conform with the current good guy badge of sexuality that the mainstream likes to where. The mainstream does not want to be reminded of these parts of itself, that years of oppression have taught them to fear. And yet nonetheless, they cannot totally contain their own shadow as witnessed in current pop culture which has become the playground where mainstream sexuality can behave "unacceptably" but then qualify that behaviour by saying, "The Devil made me do it."

Then of course the finger can be pointed at BDSM as the true perversion and deviance, and all remains right in a mainstream world in denial of at least 50 percent of it's natural sexual proclivity.

BDSM is the ritualized experience of all that mainstream sexuality considers to be threatening reprehensible behavior within itself. BDSM is ritualized experience of this behaviour for the purpose of releasing this shadow from it's prison, setting it free to take it's appropriate place in our consciousness. Without this release, the shadow remains repressed. When repressed, the shadow becomes the master or mistress that binds us from within. It is the monster that chases us in our dreams.

And so we witness a society desperately trying to uphold and maintain a pristine and "holy" form of sexuality, while in it's midst the proof of it's own disgruntled shadow uncharacteristically raises it's head, as neurotic expressions of sexual deviance. The rapist and the pedophile are good examples of an enraged primal shadow in the process of acting out. This is the mainstreams own sexual monster crossing the dream boundary in an attempt to make itself known. It's screams for attention go unheard and it's true nature and grief go unrecognized. It remains imprisoned with only it's neurotic behaviour to express itself.

And of course mainstream sexuality can always point it's finger and say that at least in part, BDSM is the Devil that is to blame for this sexual insurgence.

If only they could understand that the ritualized experience of the dark side of human sexuality, releases the shadow that then empowers us. By integrating all of it's primal qualities knowingly back into our conscious personalities, we harness it's energy and utilize it to our own benefit. The shadow is then no longer the demon enemy to be feared but a strong and wise ally.

The shadow no longer controls us through unconscious fear, but we now channel it by the exercising of our own free will. We in affect put the Devil on a leash.

If indeed BDSM is the shadow of mainstream sexuality, living in the dungeons of it's unconscious and if indeed we are the embodiment of that which is necessary to make mainstream sexuality whole by the process of integration, then perhaps it is time for us to look at the mainstream in a new light. Perhaps it is not an enemy that seeks to oppress us, but rather an unconscious ego that is sleeping and waiting for the monster in it's dream to reveal with love and compassion the ancient primal secrets that it embodies.

But let us first begin by making peace with our own shadows each in his or her own way. I remember when the shadow of My own dominant self revealed Himself to Me through a poem in the symbol of a Wolf. He made love to Me and We integrated and I found My power. We each of us confront our own shadow in personal paths of ritual, dream and symbol. Perhaps if we are faithful to pursue our own integration through the conscious and comprehensive practice of BDSM, the collective shadow of mainstream sexuality will rise and be integrated of it's own accord.

If there is a next step in social sexual evolution, I believe that this process of shadow integration is at least a part of it and a very important part at that.

So let's celebrate the Devil of BDSM and all the little demons that practice it. It may well be, that through our courage, persistence and determination, a society is helped to to be made whole by remembering it's primal roots.