

JEANNE GILCHREST

Sublime Surrender: Bondage, Domination and Submission in the Analytic Field

Psychoanalytic psychotherapy offers the promise of closeness that is both alluring and threatening for both members of the analytic couple. Freud wrote of Eros and Thanatos to describe the mix of conscious and unconscious forces present in the analytic relationship: Eros desires connection, ignites passion, and escorts the analytic couple into a dialog with the unconscious whereas Thanatos exposes each to the dread and despair associated with disconnection, the struggle for power and control, and the wounding associated with destructive impulses.

When it arises in the analytic field, sadomasochism is often thought of as a destructive element. Freud considered sadomasochism as the erotic expression of aggression and others have since extended this definition citing sadomasochism as a defense against loss, helplessness, and loneliness; as a defense against loss of fantasized omnipotence; or a deadlock of rage and grandiosity that reflects the patient's internal object world.

This presentation examines the therapist's encounter with sadomasochistic phenomena that accompanied an erotic transference during the early phase of a treatment. By highlighting the interplay of the patient's intrapsychic and interpersonal worlds and the intersubjective field, the author considers sadomasochism as a form of initiation required to awaken the psyche and create a constructive analytic bond. Such a view develops a therapeutic stance that permits one to cut deeply into psychic truth and cultivates space that allows for the containment of primitive material. In this space, submission becomes surrender—an opening to the tender expression of love and the joy of mutually shared recognition.

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