

A LINEAGE OF LITERARY INFLUENCE ON MODERN BDSM COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

All literary representations of alternative lifestyles have the potential to impact alternative lifestyle communities and practitioners, but this influential power is under-explored with regard to some minority groups. My intention is to study literature's potential to impact BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) practitioners, while carefully dissecting depictions of eroticism that are distinguished by a distinct power imbalance. As a case study, I use Clive Barker's novella *The Hellbound Heart*, while analyzing the powerful effect its film adaptation, *Hellraiser*, has had on both mainstream audiences and BDSM communities. This reading does not attempt to use psychoanalytical criticism to uncover allegedly repressed/sublimated desires of individual authors; rather, this thesis takes a more pragmatic approach that pays attention to ethics and the writer's accountability for positive/negative portrayals of sexual power fantasies. Additionally, it draws a lineage of artistic heritage between modern BDSM communities and various authors in the gothic and transgressive literary movements, particularly Georges Bataille, Edgar Allen Poe, and Matthew Gregory Lewis, who have had a substantial influence on Barker's fiction and subsequently on modern BDSM communities.

INTRODUCTION

Canonized theoretical approaches have historically validated the concerns of particular ideological groups and, in more recent decades, civil rights advocates. Feminist lenses often analyze sexuality in literature, distinguishing passages that reinforce patriarchal power structures from passages that challenge them. Queer Theory identifies and questions the heteronormative assumptions informing a text. In keeping with this trend, critical theory can be used as a vehicle for voicing the perspectives of as yet underrepresented social groups. A goal of this essay is to validate the concerns of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) communities within the context of literary analysis.

BDSM¹ has seen a drastic increase in media representation in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, so far culminating in the explosively popular *Fifty Shades* trilogy by E.L. James, which has sold over 10 million print copies (Deahl 4). Yet, despite its increasing presence in mainstream media, BDSM is still generally viewed as transgressive behavior. James' series, while popular for its titillating content, has been met with accusations of showcasing violence against women ("50 Shades PR"). A representative of the National

¹ Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. The acronym is used in this work primarily to describe sexual activities, but many individuals engage in non-sexual lifestyles that also fall under the umbrella of BDSM. It is generally agreed that BDSM activities must inherently be "safe, sane, and consensual;" anything that fails to meet those standards is not BDSM, but abuse.

Coalition for Sexual Freedom² (NCSF) rebutted these claims in a press release by explaining the difference between BDSM and violence, stressing that "adults who engage in BDSM with other consenting adults, as well as those who just want to fantasize about role play and power dynamics, should not be stigmatized" ("50 Shades PR").

However, critical reception of BDSM in media is not simply split between those who condone the lifestyle and those who condemn it. BDSM activists debate the validity and meaning of particular portrayals. For example, researcher and lifestyle activist Margot Weiss has argued that recent Hollywood depictions of SM, such as those in the 2002 film *Secretary*, are harmful to the sexual minorities they represent, and that "instead of promoting politically progressive forms of acceptance or understanding, these representations offer acceptance via normalization, and understanding via pathologizing" (Weiss 105). Her condemning analysis suggests that many mainstream representations of BDSM are ethically suspect for their potential to negatively impact attitudes toward and treatment of its real-life practitioners. Moreover, she asserts that the dominant culture uses these "normalized" portrayals to constrain BDSM by assimilating it in a tame form.

With the media climate in mind, realistic representations of BDSM relationships are expected-- to some extent-- to be positive and ethical, i.e. "safe, sane, and consensual." If a media portrayal fails to meet those generally agreed-upon standards while celebrating an arguably unhealthy BDSM relationship, it often draws a critical eye from readers and especially educated kink³ activists. Even when a portrayal fits the abovementioned criteria for a healthy dynamic, it can draw fire from individuals and

² NCSF is an organization advocating civil rights for sexual minorities. According to the organization's website, its stated goal is to "fight for sexual freedom and privacy rights for all adults who engage in safe, sane, and consensual behavior."

³ "Kink" is the common term for non-normative sexual activities, especially those involving multiple partners, fetishes, and/or BDSM.

groups who either disagree with those standards or misunderstand the sexuality being depicted. The very terms "safe, sane, and consensual" are subject to interpretation and are sites of contention.

It should also be noted that, in spite of the controversy, many critics consider an ethical assessment of literature moot. It has become popular to critique literary works according to their aesthetic value only, and to leave ethics out of the picture. Oscar Wilde claimed to participate in this critical tradition. In his famous words, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written."⁴ Wilde might not have believed books could be culpable for unethical behavior, but he was in no position to deny that they could affect his everyday life. The depictions of transgressive eroticism in his own novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, were used as evidence to prosecute Wilde for homosexuality (Kaplan 113).

All literary representations of alternative lifestyles, whether we choose to debate their ethics or not, have the potential to impact alternative lifestyle communities and practitioners. My intention is to study literature's potential to impact BDSM practitioners, while carefully dissecting depictions of eroticism that are distinguished by a distinct power imbalance. My case study will be Clive Barker's novella *The Hellbound Heart*, and its film adaptation, *Hellraiser*, which have had a powerful effect on both mainstream audiences and BDSM communities. Barker's work is ideal for this research not only because of its popularity, but because it stands, interestingly, at a crossroads between erotic fantasy and horror fiction, BDSM and violence, complicating assessments of its ethical merit.

⁴ Ironically, and as the critic Richard Posner points out in his essay titled "Against Ethical Criticism," Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had clearly defined moral stances (66).

As this thesis will entail analyzing depictions of sexual encounters, it will inadvertently have moments of feminist criticism. Sex-positive feminism is not incompatible with an approach that seeks to validate the concerns of BDSM practitioners and communities. Psychoanalytical criticism, on the other hand, is not an intended lens of this research. Although homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in the 1970s, the currently accepted psychological canon continues to treat BDSM as a pathology. However, psychoanalysis and literature have historically had such a mutually influential relationship that it would be impossible to ignore the reverberations of their past exchanges. This reading will not attempt to use psychoanalytical criticism to uncover allegedly repressed/sublimated desires of individual authors; rather, this essay will take a more pragmatic approach that pays attention to ethics and the writer's accountability for positive/negative portrayals of kink and sexual power fantasies, while exploring some relevant psychoanalytical and/or philosophical theories as a source of *poetical* truth about BDSM.

Another aim of this research is to contextualize Barker's writing in the broader literary traditions that have helped shape the public understanding of what we now call BDSM. In order to accomplish this goal, I will flesh out the artistic lineage of his work by examining connections between *The Hellbound Heart* and other pieces by artists to whom Barker has attributed influence, and, finally, to an earlier, seminal work in the literary tradition he descends from. Tracing common threads among these literary works will enable a greater understanding of erotic power fantasies in art, one that transcends the constraints of our modern conceptions of sexuality and the term BDSM.

CHAPTER I

KINK AESTHETIC IN *THE HELLBOUND HEART*

Compared to published discourses on ostensibly realistic artworks with BDSM elements, such as *Secretary*, academic political-ethical criticism of Clive Barker's horror novella *The Hellbound Heart* (or its subsequent film adaptation, *Hellraiser*) is lacking. This absence is somewhat counterintuitive, considering that recent additions to the horror genre-- particularly in film-- have increasingly provoked condemning responses for participating in a trend of sexualizing violence, including from Clive Barker himself⁵ (Barker, "Mister B."). I found that examining the kink elements in Barker's work and differentiating his from other horror pieces was key to unlocking the reason that he has largely escaped the brunt of those very criticisms.

Before venturing further into an ethical analysis of his literature and films, it is necessary to establish the role that BDSM plays in *The Hellbound Heart*. The novella does not explicitly portray a BDSM scene⁶; rather, it exemplifies a kink aesthetic (here, the term "aesthetic" is used broadly, not limiting itself to the visual elements of an artwork). To clarify, the narrative implies that some of its characters have proclivities toward BDSM, emphasizes the power dynamics of character relationships, and introduces

⁵ I discuss Barker's opinion of "torture porn" in more detail in the next section.

⁶ The word "scene" can be used to indicate a local community of practitioners or a session of BDSM activity. In this use, it is the latter meaning.

monsters that perceive pain as pleasure. Barker describes people, creatures, and scenarios using poetic parallels to sexual experiences that fall under the umbrella of BDSM.

Julia's affair with Frank, the primary antagonist, is the closest Barker comes to depicting a legitimate (safe, sane, and consensual) scene. The enjoyment Julia derives *in hindsight* from its power structure evidences a sort of implicit D/s (Dominant/submissive)⁷ dynamic: "Their coupling had had in every regard but the matter of her acquiescence, all the aggression and the joylessness of rape ... Now, in remembering it, the bruises were trophies of their passion, her tears proof positive of her feelings for him" (Barker, *Hellbound* 35). Put in these terms, the affair evinces a kink known in some fetish communities as "consensual non-consent," i.e. the (consensual) role-playing of rape.

However, Frank's perception of their affair differs significantly. In his view, "she had resisted no more than was needful for her vanity, then succumbed with such a naked fervor he had almost lost control of himself" (*Hellbound* 58). His memories are the inverse of Julia's, placing emphasis on her submission to his advances as the source of his sexual gratification, rather than her resistance. The apparent disconnect between their perspectives makes the parameters of any ostensible D/s dynamic between them difficult to define. It is sufficient to say that their rendezvous is molded by each player's unspoken desire to perform a state of power or powerlessness.

Power is central to conflicts and character arcs throughout *The Hellbound Heart*. The novella can be organized into an occasionally shifting social hierarchy, under which, as characters are first introduced, Kirsty is the lowest tier. The ex-girlfriend of Rory, she

⁷ Dominant/submissive dynamic, in which (at least one) person performs control over the other(s), who perform(s) submission.

still adores the recently married man and comes at his invitation to assist him and his new wife, Julia, with moving into a house (Barker, *Hellbound* 22). In a more conventional story, this would set the stage for a love triangle or a competition for Rory's affections. However, the three have such a firm power balance that Kirsty's entrance poses no threat to the marriage. This power dynamic is established immediately when Kirsty asks Julia permission to make the husband and wife coffee, the guest performs subservience to Rory and, by proxy, to Julia, matron of the household (Barker, *Hellbound* 23). Julia has no reason to fear usurpation by this docile intruder, especially when Rory is so firmly under his wife's thumb.

At this stage, Rory is the next tier of the hierarchy, above Kirsty, who pines after him, and below Julia, for whom he shows "doglike adulation" (Barker, *Hellbound* 25). Rory, for all intents and purposes, is Julia's cuckold. She repeatedly denies his entreaties for intimacy, affirming to herself that "it was too much of an effort to play the acquiescent wife" (Barker, *Hellbound* 41). Meanwhile, she attempts to rekindle an affair with Frank and brings several strange men into the house without Rory's knowledge. Thus, Julia exerts power over Rory, overshadowing him in the novella's social hierarchy.

However, her relationship with Frank is more ambiguous. In their initial encounter, she submits to his advances. Later, facilitating his supernatural rebirth, Julia nurses him with the blood of their victims: "[S]he had *made* this man, or remade him, used her wit and her cunning to give him substance. The thrill she felt, touching this too vulnerable body, was the thrill of ownership" (Barker, *Hellbound* 97-98). Julia begins playing the role of mother and caretaker, enjoying a reversal of their former power

balance until Frank recovers his strength and eventually consumes her (Barker, *Hellbound* 151).

Their Mother/son⁸ dynamic is particularly notable, not simply because it switches the former dynamic between Frank and Julia, but because it lends the book an incestuous overtone. First, Frank is her lover, then brother-in-law, then metaphorical son, conceived from his own residual DNA and the spilled blood of Rory, his brother (Barker, *Hellbound* 54). Frank's rebirth takes place in "the damp room" that Julia compares to a "dead woman's womb," which symbolizes her own reproductive organs (Barker, *Hellbound* 38). He completes his transformation by murdering Rory and wearing his skin, taking the place of Julia's husband in an act of Oedipal⁹ usurpation. In his chance encounters with Kirsty, reborn Frank beckons her with the sexually charged phrase "come to Daddy," adding yet another layer to the incest cake (Barker, *Hellbound* 120).

The confusion Barker creates by having his characters perform multiple, simultaneous familial roles is an appropriate extension of his kink aesthetic. Cross-generational-incest fantasies have a place in BDSM because of their power imbalance, and as such, there are a number of BDSM practitioners who identify as "Daddy Doms" and "Mommy Domes" who perform familial roles with other adults in a consensual role-play setting. Within a scene, players have one dynamic; outside of it, they might have another. Such performance implies a multi-layered reality where paradoxes are possible. For example, one *might* perform a dominant role in the bedroom and have a very passive personality in daily life. In this sense, one can be both leader and follower.

⁸ "Mother" is capitalized in reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of the Mother representing death and the first abjected Other. It is also fitting because the dominant sexual role is typically denoted with a capital letter in the vernacular of BDSM communities.

⁹ Oedipus is an iconic character in plays by the Greek dramatist Sophocles, in which Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother.

Therefore, paradoxes-- such as those that arise from incest and simultaneous, oppositional power roles-- have a prominent place in a kink aesthetic.

The conflation of pleasure and pain is also important to BDSM and to kink literature, as demonstrated by the Cenobites in Barker's novella. These beings are the members of an esoteric "Order of the Gash," and are covered beyond recognition in grotesque, painful body modifications (Barker, *Hellbound* 9). They assert an expert knowledge in the art of pleasure, inviting Frank to experience that knowledge, to which he agrees and soon regrets: "[H]is real error had been the naive belief that *his* definition of pleasure significantly overlapped with that of the Cenobites," who are sadomasochists (Barker, *Hellbound* 61-62). Frank's pointed ignorance reminds the reader that normative sex and pleasure are not universal. His interactions with the Cenobites queer¹⁰ his sexuality, making him the minority among sadomasochists. This might be read as a subtle jibe at those with normative sexualities who are blind to alternatives.

Another element of the Cenobites' torture is bondage. They imprison undead Frank on another plane of existence that can be breached through the wall of the so-called "damp room," thereby linking his position of captive unlife to that of an unborn baby (Barker, *Hellbound* 62-63). His confinement there by the Cenobites is a form of bondage that he likens to a "mistaken marriage," drawing a parallel to Julia, who feels similarly confined by her own marital bonds and also seeks an escape (Barker, *Hellbound* 63-65). Frank's and Julia's struggles for freedom at the expense of other characters is a primary conflict in *The Hellbound Heart*, putting bondage front and center as a plot device.

¹⁰ Here, the term "queer" is used as in the vernacular of Queer Theory, to place what is normative in the position of what is marginal.

I should reiterate that I do not propose the characters in *The Hellbound Heart* offer an accurate portrayal of a BDSM scene, and neither does Barker. Barker's characters/creatures may perform acts of bondage, discipline, domination, submission, and sadomasochism, but the whole definition of BDSM is greater than the sum of its parts. The Cenobites' tortures result in deaths, are repeatedly paired with the terms "insane" and "insanity" throughout the novella, and occur with little regard for a victim's free will, negating the requisite safe, sane, and consensual traits of a proper BDSM scene (Barker, *Hellbound* 19, 149, 162). Therefore, Barker's novella, while being relevant to BDSM practitioners for poetic reasons, merely displays a kink aesthetic.

CHAPTER II

ETHICS, FETISH COMMUNITIES, AND *HELLRAISER*

Having firmly established the indirect role that BDSM plays in Barker's *The Hellbound Heart*, I can address whether or not the novella or its wildly popular film adaptation, *Hellraiser* (also written and directed by Barker), could have any negative impact on fetish communities and mainstream perceptions of BDSM practitioners. While the book presents a fuller, thicker version of Barker's narrative than its movie outgrowth, the film is far more well-known and has therefore had a stronger impact on mainstream perceptions of kink. They are similar enough in plot that I can discuss both works simultaneously for the purposes of this essay.

Without any explicit mention of the terminology associated with BDSM in either book or film, the kink almost hides in plain sight, inaccessible to any audience member who is not already familiar with BDSM on some level. However, the costumes worn by the Cenobites in *Hellraiser* are easily recognizable as the garb in popular conceptions of sadomasochism: black latex, accessorized with extreme body piercings.

Is there a significant risk, then, of either the book or film causing those with a limited knowledge of BDSM-- those who might recognize the fetishism in Barker's work-- to then erroneously associate it with evil, insanity, and monstrosity? I am convinced otherwise after reading his transcribed comments from a 2007 interview with fans Phil

and Sarah Stokes, when he spoke about an entirely different subject: his disapproval of so-called "torture porn" horror films.

The game element of *Saw* was its saving grace. *Hostel's* actually more troubling to me ... I don't know whether it was this sort of ... *slaughterporn* ... We are in a place where a lot of these narratives are predicated upon the fact that this could happen to you-- there is really no element of the fantastic in this; it's all about fact (Barker, "Mister B.").

Barker draws an important distinction between realistic artworks and those with fantastical elements. Horror films like *Hellraiser*, which contain supernatural creatures and magic, are so distant from reality that they cannot be reasonably taken as informational. Their fantastical elements are constant reminders to the audience that what is on screen is not a depiction of empirical truth, nor should it be treated as such, and this renders mainstream audiences unlikely to assume that *Hellraiser* has any significant insight to offer about how real BDSM scenes operate.

Additionally, the film's camp and low-budget special effects (whether intentional or not) serve as mechanisms for distancing the audience from the story, unlike the immersive realism that characterizes Eli Roth's *Hostel*. Even *Hellraiser's* beginning and end create the illusion of entering and exiting the narrative through the puzzle box on screen, making the audience forcibly aware of their transportation into Barker's fantastical, fictive world. Within this playful framework, the story can safely entwine a BDSM aesthetic, erotic titillation and violent images without inviting ethical scrutiny.

Rather than casting BDSM communities in a negative light, Barker has managed to harmlessly draw from their pool of fantasies in constructing his narrative, which in

turn has inspired new fantasies and role-play scenarios among BDSM practitioners. Barker mentioned this in a 2004 interview conducted by *ChiZine* editor-in-chief Brett Savory when asked about whether BDSM inspired *Hellraiser*:

I also think that one of the points of pleasure has been seeing how the mythology of *Hellraiser* and the imagery of *Hellraiser* has in its turn influenced the BDSM scene. You know, it's been wonderful to see bodies that are covered in tattoos from *Hellraiser* and scenes played out that are a complete homage to the *Hellraiser* movies ... I love it when people find it sexual. So yes, it was influenced by BDSM, and I guess it has come full circle. (Barker, "The Clive Barker Interview")

This reciprocal relationship suggests Barker is an important literary figure in the BDSM subculture, and, given his ethically conscious approach to the artistic exploration of sensuality and violence, he epitomizes the spirit of modern BDSM practices, which are "safe, sane, and consensual." Having established his contributions to and influence on the subculture, it is now possible to trace his own influences, and in so doing uncover a line of literary heritage for BDSM.

CHAPTER III

BATAILLE AND EROTIC TABOOS

The sections that follow will trace BDSM's artistic heritage by delving into older works that have influenced Barker and, by proxy, particular role-play scenarios in BDSM communities. One highly influential figure in Barker's development as a writer is the theorist and author Georges Bataille. He comes from a tradition of French transgressive fiction that was initially spearheaded by the Marquis de Sade in France's tumultuous phase of revolution. Barker has written a short story titled "Son of Celluloid" in complete homage to Bataille, which it may be useful to address in future expansions of this essay. For the time being, it will suffice to cover Bataille's theoretical essay, *Death and Sensuality*, which will inform the critical analysis of subsequent sections.

Despite predating the acronym, Bataille's theories on eroticism provide a somewhat useful lens for understanding BDSM and locating it within broader patterns of human sexuality. He comments on the sense of "dissolution" that erotic activity can create, and likens it to a kind of death, "a violation of the very being of its practitioners" (Bataille 17). This concept rings familiar in light of the previous sections, in which I mentioned the inclination for horror fiction to combine morbid and erotic images. As I previously alluded and will explain more with reference to Poe's work, sexual power fantasies tend to embrace the paradox of procreation as death and fear as attraction.

Additionally, his discourse on taboo and transgression is helpful for explaining the appeal of sadistic fantasies to those who would condemn them.

[T]aboos founded on terror are not only there to be obeyed. There is always another side to the matter. It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier; the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests it with an aura of excitement. ... Nothing can set bounds to licentiousness ... or rather, generally speaking, there is nothing that can conquer violence. (Bataille 48)

In other words, he argues the taboo against violence is precisely what makes it erotic. It should again be stressed that self-identified sadists in BDSM communities are not violent people, only that they recognize the taboo against violence as a personal source of excitement and choose to indulge that drive by performing sadistic fantasies with other consenting adults. To quote the scholar and self-proclaimed masochist Anita Phillips in her book *A Defense of Masochism*:¹¹ "There is ... a theatrical impulse; a scene of sadomasochistic sex bears little resemblance to actual emotional or physical violence in that the gestures and parts of the body employed are different, and most of all, the relationship between those involved is different" (54).

Bataille's discourse on the sacredness of taboo will inform this essay's exploration of the connections between modern BDSM and medieval religious asceticism/mysticism. The parallels between them have already been thoroughly examined by scholars, but my goal is to trace literary heritage from one subculture to the other, not to exhaustively

¹¹ Ironically, Phillips also supports the Deleuzian conclusion that masochists and sadists are inherently incompatible, and that their traditional pairing is a false dichotomy. This does not match the reality of how many people in BDSM communities identify themselves and form relationships. It should also be noted that, in the vernacular of most BDSM communities, "sadism" means "consensual sadism" and is governed by a code of ethics.

reexamine what they have in common. I will, however, cover key points for the reader: In Bataille's view, the strictest religious prohibitions and taboos generate the most extreme transgressions when they are broken. The strong aversion to the taboo is matched by the pleasure at having broken it. And "[a] sense of union with the irresistible powers that bear all things before them is frequently more acute in those religions where the pangs of terror and nausea are felt most deeply" (69). Like many religious practices, BDSM scenes employ a similar, ritualistic breaking of taboos to achieve pleasure and transcendental states.

There are limitations to using Bataille's ideas for shedding light on alternative sexualities, which must be taken into account. His generalizations on death and sensuality might be applied for the purpose of finding a common ground between BDSM and other sexualities, but they risk universalizing BDSM or erasing it as a distinct category instead of acknowledging the extreme differences between the sexual lives of BDSM practitioners and those who engage in normative (i.e. non-BDSM) sex. Furthermore, his theories, being as old as they are, cannot address all the socio-political facets of modern fetish communities, which have rich histories of political conflict, solidarity, and cultural evolution.

Another limitation of Bataille's theories is their apparent connection to anti-feminist Freudian theories of the "passive" female versus the "active" male sexuality. Citing cellular structure as evidence, he states, "In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity" (Bataille 17). Such gender-based generalizations call to mind Marie Bonaparte's claim that women are

inherently masochistic because the ovum is passively penetrated by the "active mobile spermatozoan," thereby causing "infracture of a living creature's tissue" and "destruction: death as much as life" (qtd. in Millet 5027). As it stands, equating human drives with cellular functions poses the risk of slipping into long-since-refuted assumptions about gender roles. BDSM communities, on the other hand, often fly in the face of prescribed gender roles or mock them through burlesquing. Power is not strictly performed by women or men, or even by traditional "masculine" or "feminine" personas. Furthermore, it can be renegotiated and switch hands in the midst of a scene.

Those theories of Bataille's that I have listed as relevant to BDSM will continue resurfacing in other texts by authors who have influenced Barker and in the literary traditions from which Barker descends. Though tempered by feminist theories and supplemented with more up-to-date information about BDSM communities, Bataille is instrumental in developing the lens of this series of critiques. Particularly, his ideas about taboos, transgression, and transcendence will be applicable to Barker, as well as works of gothic and transgressive fiction by Edgar Allen Poe and Matthew Gregory Lewis.

CHAPTER IV

A THEO-SEXUAL READING OF "LIGEIA" AND "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

Poe proved to me early in my imaginative life the power of fictions that are unabashedly committed to the business of taboo. He taught me that if the vision was strong enough it didn't matter if the story occurred yesterday on your own street corner or on some dateless day in an unnamed place. After Poe, the thrust of fantastique fiction would never for me be a matter of conventional folks setting their Christian values against some fretful, haunted darkness, but a celebration, however perverse, of that darkness; a call to enter a territory where no image or act is so damnable it cannot be explored, turned over in the mind's eye, kissed and courted; finally-- why whisper it-- embraced.

- Clive Barker, *The Independent Magazine*, 30 November 1991

The above quotation suggests that Poe's profoundest influence upon Barker is in his casting off of moralistic didacticism for the sake of indulging a desire to "perversely" enjoy morbid and amoral images in the safe "territory" of fantastical narrative. Though a crucial part of Poe's influence, this is not the only point of comparison between him and Barker. A close reading of "Ligeia" and "Fall of the House of Usher" will afford an even greater exploration of the incest motif, as well as a look at connections between theology and BDSM. While comparing the two authors, this analysis will ascertain the relevance of Poe's work to modern BDSM practitioners.

"Ligeia" contains certain elements that parallel and perhaps even inform Barker's kink aesthetic-- in particular, a pronounced (sexual) power dynamic. The title character is the object of the narrator's obsession, his wife and mentor. Their relationship has a distinct imbalance, in which Ligeia's power is aligned with her erotic appeal.

...I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage. With how vast a triumph-- with how vivid a delight-- with how much of all that is ethereal hope-- did I feel, as she bent over me in studies but little sought-- but less known-- that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me, down whose long, gorgeous, and all untrodden path, I might at length pass onward to the goal of a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden! (Poe 163)

This passage on Ligeia's impressive intellect follows a series of vivid descriptions of her attractive physical features, particularly the eyes that "at once so delighted and appalled" him (Poe 163). Nevertheless, it is more overtly sexual than all the prior homages to her corporeal beauty. The narrator is using intellectual guidance as a metaphor for sexual copulation, in which the path to wisdom is a yonic structure that the protagonist desires to be directed through by his more knowledgeable wife. Rather than chalk this abstraction of sex up to a careful self-censorship on the part of the author, this essay will acknowledge the possibility of cerebral erotic sensibilities in which power dynamics are of vital importance. Ligeia has more knowledge, and therefore more power, than the narrator, which is integral to his erotic vision of her.

The dynamic is reinforced throughout the narrative with few exceptions. Even at her most vulnerable, i.e. on the verge of death, Ligeia confirms her "idolatrous" devotion to the narrator in such a way that he declares himself "unworthy," and he, still enthralled, obeys Ligeia's commands from her deathbed (Poe 164-165). On several occasions the narrator juxtaposes his exaltations of Ligeia with self-deprecating comparisons between himself and a child (Poe 163). Furthermore, he compares her visage to an "opium dream" and later declares himself "a bounden slave" to opium in Ligeia's absence (Poe 160). Power and sex appeal are just as intertwined in Poe's work as they are in Barker's.

Another important parallel between *The Hellbound Heart* and "Ligeia" is the supernatural rebirth of a character facilitated by their love interest. In Poe's case, there is some ambiguity as to whether the rebirth actually occurs or is the narrator's hallucination. However, reading Ligeia's resurrection as the narrator's fantasy does not limit my analysis; vision or reality, the event is still triggered by the protagonist's desire to be reunited with his loved one. The corpse only stirs after he lets his thoughts linger on "passionate waking visions of Ligeia" (Poe 171).

What I will also stress is that the character resurrections in both "Ligeia" and *The Hellbound Heart* are located within architectural structures that symbolize the homeowners in some fashion (the same will prove true for "Fall of the House of Usher"). As previously stated, Frank's rebirth in *The Hellbound Heart* takes place in the neglected "damp room," the same location of his demise. Nurturing him with the blood of their murder victims, Julia acts as Mother and the room as her womb, containing Frank in his transition from unlife to life.

However, descriptions of the bare room offer relatively little insight into Julia's thought processes, whereas the abbey of "Ligeia" is overwhelmed in meaningful decor. Exotic tapestries, furnishings, and sarcophagi aggregate in the bridal chamber, what the scholar John C. Gruesser has referred to as an "Orientalized" setting,¹² which exists not only to hint at Ligeia's mysterious eastern/occult knowledge, but also to paint a vivid picture of the narrator's mental state: entrenched in fantastical opium visions and preoccupied with death (Poe 168).

Poe's conflation of bridal and burial chamber is a more complex precursor to Barker's womb/tomb. It is a location of both reproductive functions and death. In "Ligeia," the chamber is where one wife dies becoming surrogate mother to another (Poe 173). If we read this scene as the narrator's hallucination, it is also the spot where his fantasy of Ligeia is conceived and subsequently manifests around him, as if his opium-altered senses perform it of their own volition.

Such settings exemplify the gothic literary tradition of entwining the morbid with the erotic. Here seemingly polar forces-- life and death, attraction and fear, pleasure and pain-- are unapologetically fused, much like in modern BDSM scenes, where one (or more) individual(s) pretend(s) to cede control to the other(s), and in so doing become(s) an extension of the other(s), an extreme version of the "dissolving" self that Bataille theorized is an intrinsic part of erotic encounters (22). This particular dissolution is a transcendental state that might be referred to as a kind of death drive in the midst of the reproductive drive.

¹² According to Gruesser's analysis, Ligeia embodies the "Orientalized" Other. If western discourse has traditionally created a west/east binary favoring the former above the latter, "Ligeia" can be seen to reverse the hierarchy, giving the feminine, "Orientalized" Other power over the western male-- if only in the context of erotic fantasy, where it poses no real threat to the western reader.

Additionally, the external part of the Christian abbey in "Ligeia" is noteworthy for how utterly it contrasts with its bridal chamber. Its exterior is spare, with a "gloomy and dreary grandeur" that the narrator associates with his own sense of "abandonment" and denial (Poe 166). Nothing from this description would indicate the myriad pagan artifacts gathered and necromancy rituals taking place within, where "semi-Gothic" and "semi-Druidical" devices can coexist (Poe 167). The contrast might reflect a disparity between how the narrator conducts himself in reality and in his inner fantasy life. It also calls to mind a poetical (if Christocentric) description of SM by Phillips: "Masochism is one way of bringing together a Christian contempt of the flesh with a pagan delight in it" (36). The analogy, which Phillips backs up with a cross-analysis of BDSM practices and medieval convent/monastery culture, is apt for a theo-sexual reading of "Ligeia." By having the narrator fantasize about his mystical, dominant ex-wife inside the hallowed abbey, Poe's narrative ties erotic indulgence to abandoned brands of Catholic asceticism, a theme mirrored by Barker's stories and others of particular relevance to BDSM.

The theological component of *The Hellbound Heart* is particularly notable for its role in establishing certain power dynamics. Frank seeks the Cenobites' favors by proffering earthly offerings and sacrifices to them (Barker 4). The worshiper/deity dynamic is an extreme power imbalance that quickly escalates into a victim/victimizer relationship. Frank is destroyed by the Cenobites; thereafter, they loom invisibly, reemerging from their puzzle box to take a new victim. Frank's "dissolution" is neither "safe" nor pleasurable, but represents a grotesque, perverse vision of the D/s dynamic.

The theology behind "The Fall of the House of Usher" is more subtle, but plays just as vital a role in the tale. In the narrator's overview of Roderick Usher's library, he

pays particular attention to volumes that contain metaphysical ideas from exotic theological traditions. Tieck, known for glorifying medieval Catholicism, is mentioned; the early geographer Pomponius Mela is referenced, but only for a passage attributed to him about mythical "African satyrs and Ægipans" from Greco-Roman traditions; along with other obscure and esoteric texts (Poe 209). These serve as an important backdrop for Roderick, who has spent a significant stint of his life as a recluse with only his books and twin sister to keep him company. Furthermore, the library shapes the narrator's imagination as he pieces together an understanding of Roderick's condition, and its themes manifest in the plot of the tale.

With concern for religious icons, it should be noted that the moon receives a great deal of attention in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," but the sun is only there peripherally, hidden behind clouds or in the title of one of Roderick's books. Interestingly, the aforementioned book is a utopia called *The City of the Sun*, which proposes an ideal commune where no man possesses a house or a family (though women and children are still relegated to the status of goods), and in which ownership thereof encourages "self-love," a vice in that utopian universe. Aside from its esoteric and occult elements, the selected book bears another relation to "The Fall of the House of Usher": its focus on the house and family line as a source of negativity, a place where "self-love" occurs.

I argue that the utopia's presence in Roderick's library supports the popular reading of the Usher family lineage as a product of incest. The family line "had [not] put forth ... any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent," causing the house and surname to "merge" in the minds of locals, condensing

all family members into one heavily personified mansion (Poe 200-201). The merging of individual identities within the family line indicates the broken incest taboo, confusing roles and breaking down traditional barriers. It also represents the dissolution of self into a larger entity via erotic encounters-- self consumed by Other, or, in this case, self consumed by one bearing the same name, and therefore self consuming self, a cannibalistic consummation of identities. In other words, the Usher family commits "self-love" by inbreeding.

The narrative climaxes after Madeline-- Roderick's twin and, according to some critics, his "double"-- reemerges from her grave after having been buried alive to meet Roderick at the doorstep (Poe 216). She collapses on top of him as they both die, a gesture that symbolizes the simultaneous self-love and self-destruction of the Usher line, and foretells the collapse of the house (Poe 216). The action occurs under the light of a "blood-red moon" while Madeline is dressed in white, bleeding (Poe 216). This calls to mind particular pagan theological traditions in which the moon and menstruation represent female power. Such a reading lends the narrative an important gender power shift, in which the female overcomes the odds and defeats the male figure of patriarchal power (albeit while dying in the process). The broken incest taboo and the ruin of a patriarchal line at the hand of a female are plot points that, in Poe's time and culture, could only have been acceptable in the context of fantastical narrative or framed by some sort of moral condemnation.

Both authors incorporate exotic theologies-- Barker invents his own and Poe borrows the mythologies of various pre-existing religions-- as a means to explore the connection between erotic enjoyment, death, and transcendence. As with Barker in *The*

Hellbound Heart, Poe's mechanism for this exploration in "Ligeia" is character resurrection, while in "Fall of the House of Usher" it is the doubling and collapsing of characters. Poe's playful exploration of self-destruction and taboo acts escapes moral scrutiny in much the same way that Barker's overly sexual horror does-- by ramping up the character actions to unbelievable extremes, blurring fantasy and reality, and introducing supernatural elements. These narratives therefore validate and mediate the transgression of certain societal prohibitions (murder, violence, etc.) within the limited realm of fantasy. Poe and authors like him established and exercised the permissibility of transgressions under this condition, a ritualistic breaking of taboo within fiction. This has echoes in the ethical codes of modern BDSM practices, which are governed by the "safe, sane, and consensual" mantra, but sometimes spring from pointedly transgressive fantasies.

CHAPTER V

LEWIS' PARADOXICAL NARRATIVE

Having examined two of Barker's direct influences from distinct literary movements, I will attempt to continue drawing a lineage of artistic heritage by analyzing an older work of fiction important to *both traditions*. Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* represents an intersection of the gothic and transgressive literary movements. Lewis offers a two-tiered narrative, which on one level is a sensational tale featuring ghosts and demons, and on another is a subversive social commentary. Bataille's theories on taboo and transgression will be pertinent to this essay's analysis, but my primary focus will be on analyzing the narrative's treatment of post-medieval monasticism, with an eye to logical contradictions and character agency.

The Monk is rife with supernatural elements, but unlike in Poe's later gothic fiction, these are vital to the moral didacticism instead of rendering such themes moot. A surface-level reading will relegate Lewis' central plot arc to the status of long-winded parable: Lucifer tempts an (ostensibly) innocent man into sin and damnation via a seductress. The book presents itself, in part, as a tragic retelling of *Genesis* set in a monastic community. However, the allegory is a pretense for Lewis' actual message. *The Monk* is a thinly veiled denigration of the Catholic Church that does not validate biblical narrative so much as scoff at religion.

The book's character inconsistencies make this dual meaning apparent. After taking at face value his friend's anecdotal evidence of being haunted by a ghost and assisted by an immortal man with supernatural powers, Lorenzo chides a nun for her "superstition" and states that "[t]he idea of ghosts is ridiculous in the extreme" (Lewis 306-307). His skepticism leads him to prove that the nun's fears, in this instance, are unfounded (309). Raymond, who undergoes the aforementioned haunting and meets a man he believes to be cursed by God, also accuses his love interest's family of harboring "the grossest superstition," by which he means their Catholic beliefs (Lewis 134). Lewis' two-tiered story is a self-mocking parody. It is a complex example of the paradox that operates within any performance: its identity both *is* and *is not* what it performs. As previously established, this theme is of critical importance to the texts from prior sections and to BDSM.

In keeping with *The Monk's* ideological paradoxes, its portrayals of pointedly taboo actions and excessive punitive measures are indulgent and, at times, intentionally titillating. For example, a major conflict for the novel's antihero, a monk named Ambrosio, concerns his mission to rape the virgin Antonia. After undergoing multiple suspenseful, failed attempts, he accomplishes his mission in the secluded sepulchre (Lewis 317-321). The detailed prose provides significantly more insight into Ambrosio's lustful appetites than his victim's horror-- she is unconscious and/or described in terms of his desire for much of the passage, inviting more empathy (though perhaps not sympathy) for her rapist (Lewis 318-319). The reader is invited to "sin" with the characters, deriving entertainment from their transgressions. It should also be noted that the sepulchre rape occurs in yet another womb/tomb-type scenario, as later seen in Barker's and Poe's

fiction, relating to Bataille's theories on human sexuality and the intertwining of death and procreation.

The Monk's indulgent taboo transgression extends to the brutal murder of the prioress.

The rioters heeded nothing but the gratification of their barbarous vengeance. ... They stifled with howls and execrations her shrill cries for mercy, and dragged her through the streets, spurning her, trampling her, and treating her with every species of cruelty which hate or vindictive fury could invent. ... She sank upon the ground bathed in blood, and in a few minutes terminated her miserable existence. Yet though she no longer felt their insults, the rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more than a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting. (Lewis 302)

Lewis uses these flagrant examples of cathartic vengeance and sexualized violence to blaspheme the Catholic doctrine in addition to criticizing the Church. Just as the prioress is beaten to a pulp before the reader's eyes, the *Genesis* narrative is transformed into what the contemporary reader would call "pulp fiction," a genre-constrained page-turner with pandering, salacious digressions.

Lewis' attack on Catholic clergy and monastic life is noteworthy for my purposes because it stems from a nuanced understanding of contracts and informed consent. His commentary on Catholicism highlights what he perceives to be the coercion and deceit used to recruit monks and nuns, the fallibility of those individuals, and the irreverence paid to the contract one enters when committing to monastic life. Until his fall from

grace, Ambrosio is the most dedicated and highly regarded monk in the narrative (Lewis 46), after which he transforms into a villain. Agnes is coerced into joining a convent by her family and then later forced into an extreme, life-threatening penance by the prioress (Lewis 134, 339). The convent and monastery in this novel are not presented as safe havens for religious ascetics, but as prisons that generate hypocrisy and corruption.

The Monk is not only an intersection of literary traditions, but also a meeting point for sexual indulgence and religious asceticism, which bleed into one another in this narrative when the monastic contract fails and free will is ignored. In Lewis' fictional universe, individuals cannot truly consent to-- and therefore, cannot truly succeed in fulfilling-- a monastic contract as long as they are deceived and coerced into entering it.¹³

The Monk's fantastical layer playfully indulges violent power fantasies, while its didactic layer stresses the importance of educated consent in lifestyle choices. This paradox is a precursor to the conduct of modern BDSM practitioners, who often perform transgressive power fantasies *voluntarily* in sexual role-play scenarios while adhering to an ethical code. The erosion of free will threatens any institution-- be it a religious group or an alternative lifestyle community-- that claims to be anchored in a voluntary sacrifice of personal power. This truth is also what necessitates the mantra of "safe, sane, and consensual" in BDSM communities, which strive to educate their members and eliminate nonconsensual activity from their midst.

¹³ Note that sexual expression and asceticism are not mutually exclusive in every instance, even within the Catholic institution. There is documentation of earlier medieval ascetics finding erotic fulfillment in their extreme cessation of power to a deity. For an example, see the medieval mystic Mechtild von Magdenburg's religious poetry.

CHAPTER VI

CROSS-ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Lewis' literature incorporates the fantastical along with images of the supernatural from biblical narrative. His intention was to denigrate Catholicism with subversive political commentary, but a side-effect of his efforts is that he synthesizes horror, theology, eroticism, asceticism, death, birth, power, and victimization. His juxtaposition of violent fantasies and the Christian mythos, in particular, might have had a lasting influence on the gothic literary movement. We see this theme trickle down to Poe's nineteenth-century stories, in which the abandoned abbey houses murder, erotic fantasies, and necromancy. Due to his spirituality and subscription to Catholicism for a number of years, Bataille would not likely have aligned himself with Lewis, despite their common stake in transgressive fiction. However, as I have established, Bataille's theories provide a more-than-applicable lens for analyzing Lewis and Poe alike.

With these connections in mind, the themes of all three pre-twenty-first-century authors collide in Barker's *The Hellbound Heart*. His novella's theology is fabricated, but its foundation in pleasure, pain, and power politics recalls the inverted Catholicism of Lewis' novel, while nodding to the painful penance rituals of medieval monastic life. Furthermore, Barker adopts Poe's non-didactic use of the fantastical and Bataille's erotic taboo transgression. All of these elements, as I have discussed, are critical to BDSM.

Together, these literary traditions, along with modern BDSM fantasies/practices, inform *The Hellbound Heart*.

Barker's novella and its subsequent movie adaptation have been inspiring new power fantasies among BDSM communities-- fantasies infused with older literary traditions and new cultural icons. Barker's work marks an important transfusion of art into BDSM practices, and vice versa. He chooses to draw from literary traditions that are relevant to BDSM, while presenting them with a kink aesthetic. The authors who influence him are therefore an important cultural lineage for BDSM communities.

In this thesis, I have identified Barker as a kink-positive author whose work poses no significant risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes of or prejudices toward BDSM practitioners. His literary predecessors whom I have analyzed are not so easily labeled; they predate the acronym, and the historical context surrounding them must be taken into account. However, it is clear that sexual power fantasies play a role in even the most antiquated of those texts, and the literary patterns are worth identifying for the purpose of expanding our understanding of what traditions inform modern BDSM practices. It can at least be said that every text I have analyzed mitigates its erotic taboo transgressions by bracketing them off inside the "ritual" of narrating pointedly impossible fantasies.

My goal in drawing these connections was to establish a literary lens that validates the concerns and history of BDSM. However, this work explores just one avenue of literary history. Other branches are needed to create a fuller picture, including works that link the BDSM subculture to other traditions than Catholicism as portrayed in gothic and transgressive fiction. For example, Pat Califia, a major figure in BDSM advocacy, has written an essay discussing the popularity and importance of certain neo-

pagan practices in leather communities¹⁴ of the 1970s, which suggests that many members of the subculture would not link their identities to medieval Christian asceticism. The BDSM subculture is diverse, and Barker's literature does not speak for every member.

Practitioners who engage in BDSM as a "24/7 lifestyle" might have a yet another perspective on their subculture's literary representation, particularly because BDSM means a comfortable protocol in daily life for these individuals, and not strictly a "scene" performed for sexual gratification. It may also be useful to look specifically at the perspectives of polyamorous individuals, many of whom have ties to or are within BDSM communities. The NCSF¹⁵ focuses on advocating for both polyamory and kink, which invites a solidarity between the two groups. Future expansions of this thesis may further address the abovementioned limitations and incorporate other relevant texts.

I hope that this exploration of BDSM's relationship with literature can encourage more research in order to build upon such a critical lens. Feminist Theory and Queer Theory have historically invalidated or left unaddressed many concerns of the BDSM subculture. Suffice it to say, BDSM communities would benefit from establishing a lens of their own in mainstream criticism. Such a critical approach could continue exploring the exchange between art and BDSM scenes, thereby finding new branches of artistic heritage for the subculture. The lens could also focus on themes within a text that have particular significance to practitioners, such as consensual power cessation or acquisition, performance of power, contracts, meaningful paradoxes, ritualized taboo transgression, and transcendental states, among others.

¹⁴ "Leather communities" was the term used for groups who practiced BDSM before the acronym was coined. Pat Califia's essay can be found in her book *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*.

¹⁵ National Coalition for Sexual Freedom

If advocacy for BDSM communities is to be an aim of this recognized lens, then it should dissect literary portrayals of kink in order to understand whether those individual depictions are likely to generate a negative impression of BDSM and hinder the civil rights of its practitioners, or conducive to engendering a positive mainstream opinion of the lifestyle-- potentially furthering attempts to achieve legal and social equality for members of BDSM communities.

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