Chapter III

Psychoanalytical Explanation of Erika’s Masochism
—the Meanings and Functions of Perverse Suffering

Throughout the novel *The Piano Teacher* we learn that Erika has engaged in various kinds of self-mutilating behaviors. From a very young age Erika has had the “hobby” of cutting her own body. She always waits for the moment when she can cut herself unobserved; she even slices open her own vagina. “No sooner does the sound of the closing door die down than she takes out her little talisman, the paternal all-purpose razor” (Jelinek 86). Whenever she felt sad and lonely, she made cuts on herself. “Four slits, oozing nonstop. […] A small puddle forms. And the blood keeps running. On and on. It runs and runs and runs and runs” (Jelinek 44). Adolescent Erika was treated like a prisoner and kept in the torture chamber of music. No one ever cared about how she felt, and her feelings were always neglected and denied by her mother. Under her mother’s strict surveillance, Erika is made to live an asexual and puritanical life. She can’t even masturbate because Mother sleeps right next to her: “Mother can check whether or not SHE keeps her hands outside the covers at night” (Jelinek 87). Gradually, Erika has also grown to be oblivious to her own feelings. She has suppressed her sexual needs and repressed her emotional feelings, and eventually turned her body into an unfeeling shell—“Her body is one big refrigerator, where Art is well stored” (Jelinek 21). It is mentioned many times in the text that Erika “feels nothing”; she is frigid to sex: “She felt nothing. She simulated overwhelming pleasure so that the man would finally stop. The man did stop, but then he came another time. Erika felt nothing, she has always felt nothing. She is as unfeeling as a piece of tar paper in the rain” (Jelinek 75). Under her mother’s strict discipline and oppressive
pedagogy, Erika has linked sex with fear. She is incapable of enjoying sexual pleasures, and is unfeeling to sex as well as to self-inflicted bodily injuries:

As usual, there is no pain. SHE, however, cuts the wrong place, separating what the Good Lord and Mother Nature have brought together in unusual unity. It was her own body, but it is dreadfully alien to her. [...]. First SHE’ll have to stop the bleeding. She’s scared. Her nether region and her fear are two allies of hers, they usually appear together. If one of these two friends drops into her head without knocking, then she can rest assured: The other cannot be far behind. Mother can check whether or not SHE keeps her hands outside the covers at night. (Jelinek 87)

Living under her mother’s oppression for such a long time, Erika has lost her sensitivity to pain. She has endured so much agony that she has become desensitized to pain and cruelty. Her repressed anger and resentment has actually saturated her whole being. Only by venting the spitefulness inside her on others or on herself can she feel more at peace. In this chapter, I will use masochism\(^1\)—the desire to harm oneself—to refer to Erika’s masochistic fantasies and her self-destructive behaviors. By studying the causes and psychodynamics of sadomasochism, this chapter discusses what pleasure Erika derives from inflicting pain on herself, and why her non-erotic impulses would be transformed into perverse erotic desires and behaviors. What causes her to develop this “perverse mechanism”? What dynamics propel her to act out her perversions? Freud once wrote, “At the center of every erotic fantasy is a childhood trauma which is contained by the fantasy” (qtd. in Bach 85). In Erika’s

\(^1\) The term masochism originally referred to sexual perversions and fantasies in which sexual satisfaction is obtained through suffering, through being beaten, tortured, raped, enslaved, and humiliated (Horney 260).
relationship to her mother, she has suffered immensely from imprisonment, pain and humiliation. So it’s reasonable to suggest that the factors of her erotic choices lie in the details of the traumas which her family has inflicted on her, but then of course, her disposition should also be taken into account. With the following psychoanalytical explanations of sadomasochism and other sexual deviances, this chapter will argue that Erika has taken her childhood trauma and, not only pulled its fangs, but also changed it to pleasure by eroticizing it. She has taken what’s prohibited by her mother, sex, and turned it into a subversion. Here perversion is used as a way of subversion. The definition of perversion contains the idea that the perverse person is acting antisocially (Stoller, *Pain* 46-47). Calling perversion subversion indicates that erotic desire in general has a subversive element, which means that people, in doing so, fight, overtly and covertly, against the forces that would tame them: first their parents, and then society. In a state of rebellion, Erika secretly engages in things that are forbidden by her mother. The mother-daughter bonds and bondage are held responsible for this; Erika is the victim of her mother’s way of rearing and molding. The trauma her mother had caused in her young psyche resulted in her sadomasochistic perversion. The mother has made the daughter renounce her libido for the sake of fame and money. Erika learned to deny her drives so forcefully that she now experiences a libidinal deadness. However, such suppression only causes Erika’s repressed sexuality to rear its hideous head in the forms of morbid voyeurism and masochistic self-mutilation. It results in Erika’s using of sadomasochistic fantasy (sexualization) as a way to increase her sense of aliveness, a way to defend against the profound libidinal deadness.

To what extent Erika does wish to engage in some sort of sadomasochistic game is not fully clear. The contradictions and open-ending nature of the letter sequence do not allow a single, unified interpretation of the sexual intentions of the
You protagonist. Erika may have collected all the necessary paraphernalia for her masochism to be enacted in the sexual arena, but the narrator’s commentary works against this indication, to impress upon the reader that what the protagonist truly wishes is for her letter to be completely discounted: “Say something loving to me and forget about the letter, she asks inaudibly” (Jelinek 228). The salient point, however, is that Erika is a failed masochist: although Erika’s case exhibits all the characteristics of the classical masochistic fantasy—the written contract and the assurance that the dominant partner can be as merciless as she or he desires, and must not give in to the victim’s pleadings, and the intricate lists of the required paraphernalia and equipment—she fails to “educate” her partner into a willing participant in her fantasies. In addition to her need for sadomasochistic fantasies, Erika is also a masochistic neurotic. So the issue that will be discussed first is the meaning of her neurotic suffering. Then we will discuss the unconscious core of perversion, which explains Erika’s deviance as the result of a miscarried repair of mental injury through “dehumanization”. Dehumanizing is grossly emphasized in the overt scenarios. In her second sexual encounter with Klemmer in her room, Erika takes out a box of paraphernalia and asks Klemmer to torture her in the cruelest possible ways. Dehumanization is vivid in the required enactments of Erika’s letter: she wants to be the groveling, smeared, or bound “stupid slave”, a lifeless “package” and a plank to be sat upon (Jelinek 218-21). The inventory of pain written in her letter includes not only inflicted physical pain but also psychological humiliation. In this chapter we will discuss that Erika’s perverse dehumanization is an effort to undo her childhood traumas, that she has developed a perversion in the form of masochistic fantasies in order to repair her bruised psyche as an abused child. After discussing the meanings and functions of her masochistic dehumanization, the chapter will then focus on the psychodynamics and culture of sadomasochism, including perversion as play in S & M
culture and perversion as pathology. Last but not least, we will discuss the dynamics which lead to erotic pleasure in perversion. Erika’s attainment of sexual pleasure through voyeurism and masochism is explained as a way to master or to surmount the pain of childhood traumas, frustrations, conflicts, and her sense of inferiority. Her perversions grow, by sexual pleasure, out of a need to master the otherwise unbearable distress and a need to convert it to pain-that-is-pleasure.

(I) The Meaning and Functions of Neurotic’s Masochistic Sufferings

In her studies of neurotic personality, Karen Horney found that a great deal of the suffering that occurs in neuroses has nothing to do with a wish to suffer, but is only the unavoidable consequence of existing conflicts. “It occurs just as pains occur after one has broken a leg. In both cases the pains appear regardless of whether the person wants them or not, and he doesn’t gain anything by the suffering they incur” (261). One example for suffering of this type is anxiety engendered by existing conflicts. Patients who have gone through an intense fit of anxiety say that they would rather die than have a recurrence of that experience (46). This type of neurotic sufferings are inflicted on patients rather than caused by tendencies to suffer, and thus do not fall under the category of masochistic drives. However, in Erika’s case it is different; it seems that something within her avidly seizes upon every opportunity to suffer, that she can manage to turn every fortuitous circumstance into something painful, that she is quite unwilling to relinquish suffering. “Erika keeps exerting self-control until she feels no more drive within her. […] She assigns difficult tasks to her body, increasing the difficulties by laying hidden traps wherever she likes” (Jelinek 105). Erika’s behaviors seem to be motivated by masochistic drives. What functions can account for her masochistic suffering? According to Horney, one of the functions is that “suffering is a means of getting what he wants, of carrying out his
Young demands effectively and of putting his demands on a justified basis. Concerning his wishes toward life the neurotic is in a dilemma” (263). This explains why in her letter to Klemmer, Erika requested Klemmer to “hottie her, bind her up as thoroughly as he can—solidly, intensely, artfully, cruelly, tormentingly, cunningly” (Jelinek 215). “I’d like you to turn me into a package that is completely at your mercy” (Jelinek 221).

Although Erika seemingly makes Klemmer her “master”, she dictates what he should do to her. “Erika would like to show weakness, but determine the form of her submission herself. She has written everything down” (Jelinek 206). “Erika Kohut is using her love to make this boy her master. The more power he attains over her, the more he will become Erika’s pliant creature. […] He has to be convinced: This woman has put herself entirely in my hands. And yet he will become Erika’s property” (Jelinek 207). Here Erika is using “suffering” to make Klemmer comply with her masochistic fantasies. Her masochistic wishes are imperative and unconditional, partly because they are prompted by anxiety, partly because they are not checked by any consideration of others. But on the other hand the neurotic’s capacity to assert her demands is greatly impaired, because of her lack of spontaneous

2 Under a life-long repression and permanent supervision, Erika has developed a neurosis toward sex. Under her mother’s surveillance, any sign of femininity and sexual attractiveness is extinguished, since sexuality has been judged to be the worst of all evils. Erika is expected to guarantee her independence from sexual passion—from the dangers of male seduction and enslavement—and to protect her virtue and remain attached to her mother. Therefore, cutting her own genitals is a gesture of denying herself sexual pleasures. Whenever she feels sexual, she has to punish herself severely so that such lustful and therefore reckless feeling is excluded.

3 Erika has anxiety over experiencing her own sexual feelings, so she must punish herself severely to drive out that feeling.
self-assertion, or, because of her basic feeling of helplessness (Horney 263). The result is that she expects others to take care of her wishes. However, this also collides with her conviction that no one grants her anything, and the result is that she feels she has to coerce others to fulfill her wishes. It is here that suffering comes to her assistance. Therefore, suffering and helplessness become her “strategies of obtaining affection, help, and control” (Horney 264). Here then, a second question should be raised: why does the neurotic voluntarily suffer far more than is warranted by the strategical goal? Horney explained that though suffering is painful, abandoning one’s self to such excessive suffering may serve as an opiate against pain (265). This narcotizing effect can often be seen in certain mourning customs that serve to alleviate the pain of loss by acutely intensifying it and inducing complete abandonment to it (267). This self-inflicted suffering serves to alleviate another more realistic, unbearable pain:

Incurring a failure in love, a defeat in competition, having to realize a definite weakness or shortcoming of his own is unbearable for one who has such high-flown notions of his uniqueness. Thus when he dwindles to nothing in his own estimation, the categories of success and failure, superiority and inferiority cease to exist; by exaggerating his pain, by losing himself in a general feeling of misery or unworthiness, the aggravating experience loses some of its reality, the sting of the special pain is lulled, narcotized. (Horney 265)

Now recognizing this narcotic effect of exaggerated pain, we have a further help in finding understandable motivations in masochistic drives. Nevertheless, there still remains a third question of why such suffering can yield “satisfaction”, as it obviously does in masochistic perversions and fantasies and as we suspect it does in the general neurotic tendencies toward suffering (Horney 267).
Horney wrote that many studies show that whatever the kind of suffering which the neurotic allows to overpower him, the satisfaction he seeks seems to be the weakening or “extinction of his individual self”. He ceases then to be the active carrier of actions and becomes “an object, without a will of his own” (Horney 275). Satisfaction is found in this striving to relinquish the self; it is a satisfaction sought or attained by weakness and suffering. This phenomenon can be recognized from the characteristics we have already discussed: in his own feelings the neurotic exaggerates his sufferings, indulges himself in disproportionate pain and weakness, and tenaciously insists on being weak. The tendency to blindly “accept authoritative statements, to lean on someone, always to recoil from a difficulty with a helpless ‘I can’t’ instead of accepting it as a challenge”, is further evidence of the inclination toward weakness (Horney 269). Erika exhibits all of the above signs of weakness: “Erika needs to lean against a hard wall that won’t give. Something pulls at her, tugs at her elbow, weighs down the hem of her skirt: a small lead ball, a tiny concentrated weight. […] She is waiting for that one command!” (Jelinek 102) She gives the impression that underlying her obedience is a conviction that others are responsible for her life and that they are to be blamed if things go wrong. The tendency to enter into a feeling of oblivion and to become a mere object is mentioned many times in the text: “She wants to be simply sucked up by the man until she is no longer present” (Jelinek 206). “She makes up her mind to become an object, a tool; Klemmer will have to make up his mind to use this object” (Jelinek 213). “I’d like you to turn me into a package that is completely at your mercy” (Jelinek 221). In her fantasy, Erika wants to become a “plank” that is unable to stir in Klemmer’s cruel bonds; she wants to be hit, slapped, gagged, and feel her “helplessness” properly (Jelinek 215; 224). These are all characteristic of a neurotic’s masochistic fantasies:

There is scarcely any neurosis in which the tendency to get rid of the self
does not appear in a direct form. […], in masochistic fantasies the
common denominator is a feeling of being putty in the master’s hand, of
being devoid of all will, of all power, of being absolutely subjected to
another’s domination. (Horney 274)

According to Horney, the elements which all masochistic tendencies have in common,
or further, the basic attitude toward life that underlies such tendencies is “a feeling of
intrinsic weakness”:

This feeling appears in the attitude toward the self, toward others, toward
fate in general. Briefly it can be described as a deep feeling of
insignificance or rather of nothingness; a feeling of being like a reed that
can easily be swayed by any wind; a feeling of being in the power of
others, of being at their beck and call, appearing in a tendency toward
over-compliance and in a defensive over-emphasis on control and not
giving in; a feeling of not having a say in one’s own life but of having to
let others bear the responsibility for it and make the decisions; a feeling
toward life in general that one cannot breathe, work, enjoy anything
without others supplying the incentive, the means and the aims; a feeling
of being putty in the master’s hands. (Horney 267)

However, the neurotic’s feeling of intrinsic weakness is not involuntary and innocent;
what is felt as weakness and appears as weakness is the result of “an inclination
toward weakness” (Horney 268). Masochistic striving for “satisfaction” is an
important element in the general tendency toward weakness and passivity. The
obtaining of satisfaction by submersion in misery is an expression of the general
principle of finding satisfaction by losing the self in something greater, by dissolving
the individuality, by getting rid of the self with its doubts, conflicts, pains, limitations
and isolation\(^4\). The sufferings entailed in the tendencies toward weakness are part of the neurotic’s general awareness of misery. Nevertheless these tendencies aim at a satisfaction, even when they do not, or apparently do not, reach it. The submergence in misery not only lulled the pain but was felt as positively pleasurable (Horney 270). The achievement of satisfaction is much more frequent and more obvious in sexual fantasies and perversions of a masochistic character, such as fantasies of being raped, beaten, humiliated, enslaved, or their actual enactment. In fact they are just another manifestation of this same general inclination toward weakness. From this analysis we can then further conclude that when a neurotic masochistically surrenders and sacrifices himself to the other person in a relationship, it does not mean that the masochist loves the other person more than he loves himself. Actually, the masochistic person is entirely incapable of wholly giving himself in love to another person. He can surrender himself to suffering but in this surrender he is wholly passive, and the feeling or the person which is the cause of his suffering he uses only as a means to lose himself for the sake losing himself. There is no active interplay between himself and the other, but only his self-centered absorption in his own ends\(^5\) (Horney 277). While genuine surrender to a person or a cause is a

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\(^4\) As opposed to what Nietzsche calls the Apollonian tendency, which works toward an active molding and mastering of life, Ruth Benedict speaks of Dionysian trends in referring to attempts to induce ecstatic experience. The term ecstasy means literally being outside or beside oneself. Pain also plays a role in producing the Dionysian condition. Physical torture is a common means of stimulating ecstatic experiences. For example, the Flagellantes in the Middle Ages used beatings to produce ecstasy experience (Horney 271).

\(^5\) In Erika’s letter which detailed to Klemmer the masochistic torments, she reveals no concern for Klemmer’s feelings but only her own one-sided, wishful thinking. Her desires include “obedience from herself and commands from Klemmer in order to complete her obedience”. After reading the shockingly torturous details, Klemmer silently mocks her: “Who does she think she is!” He is irritated because Erika is asking him to do something against his own will. Klemmer then jokes, “And what about my reward?” He asks because he doesn’t enjoy other people’s torments. He couldn’t believe Erika can make these requests of him without feeling ashamed of herself: “All she thinks about is herself.” Erika is so self-absorbed in her masochistic requests that she leaves no room for Klemmer’s opinion. She is not considerate of Klemmer’s feelings at all and Klemmer “merely asks for the twentieth time whether she’s serious, or is this just a bad joke” (Jelinek 215; 217; 218; 219; 227).
manifestation of inner strength, masochistic surrender is ultimately a manifestation of weakness.

In neurosis, the tenaciousness of masochistic strivings is then accounted for by the fact that they not only serve as a protection against anxiety but at the same time also provide a potential or real satisfaction. However, such satisfaction of oblivion and abandon is rarely attained. The reason why a definite satisfaction is seldom attained is that the masochistic drives are counteracted by the neurotic’s extreme emphasis on “the uniqueness of his individuality” (Horney 276). The neurotic tends to feel prey to everyone’s will, but at the same time insists that the world should adapt itself to him. He tends to feel enslaved, but at the same time insists that his power over others should be unquestioned. He wants to be helpless and taken care of, but at the same time insists on being not only entirely self-sufficient but, in effect, omnipotent. He tends to feel that he is nothing, but is irritated when he is not taken for a genius. In addition, his contradictory drive toward power and self-aggrandizement is equally imperative and more than normally intense. So there is absolutely no satisfactory solution which could reconcile such extremes, particularly since both strivings are very strong. But then of course he does attempt to achieve the impossible, to be at once everything and nothing; he may, for example, live in a helpless dependence and at the same time exert a tyranny over others by means of his weakness⁶. However hard he tries to reconcile the conflicts, a feeling that he is

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⁶ When younger, Erika enjoyed tyrannizing passengers on the trams by pinching and shoving them, and took great pleasure in getting away with it by using her disguise as an innocent and vulnerable music student. In her job as a teacher she also relishes the power she has over her pupils, but this masks a more deep-seated vulnerability which Erika feels in her own personal relationships. She has a strong sense of being controlled by her mother, of being at the mercy of others, so her acts of self-mutilation are thus more accurately an attempt to be the originator of this control. When she cuts and pinches herself she is at her own mercy and at nobody else’s: “She is entirely at her own mercy, which is still better than being at someone else’s mercy. It’s still in her hands, and a hand has feelings too” (86). Erika needs opportunities for self-assertion, opportunities for feeling herself important and omnipotent. She needs others upon whom she can exercise her power, who would be victims of her perverse mind.
trapped in insoluble conflicts and their resultant sufferings still keeps haunting him. Therefore, the drive toward oblivion is much more imperative in the neurotic than in the normal person because the former wants to get rid not only of the fears, limitations and isolations that are universal in human experience, but also of the conflicting feelings. Nevertheless, the neurotic’s drive toward oblivion and abandon—a drive that serves to get rid of the whole tormenting self, regardless of its values—is self-destructive and would cause the intact part of the personality to react to it with fear (Horney 277). In fact, fear of the disastrous possibilities is usually the only factor in the process that impinges upon awareness. All the neurotic knows about is that he has a fear of becoming insane. Hence the satisfaction is further deterred by the conflict between a drive toward self-relinquishment and a reactive fear. The neurotic is striving for a definite satisfaction but is prevented by his fears from attaining it. In view of the fears that usually debar the neurotic from the specific satisfactions for which he is striving, it is possible to understand the value for him of masochistic fantasies and perversions. “If his drives for self-relinquishment are lived out in fantasies or in sexual practices he can perhaps escape his danger of complete

Likewise, in her relationship with Klemmer, she also envisages herself being able to control him by using her weakness: “Erika Kohut is using her love to make this boy her master. The more power he attains over her, the more he will become Erika’s pliant creature. […] He has to be convinced: This woman has put herself entirely in my hands. And yet he will become Erika’s property” (Jelinek 207).

In her conversation with Klemmer in a private music recital, Erika also hints at her anticipation and fear of her imminent insanity. She likens herself to Schumann, who knew he was going to and eventually did lose his mind: “A sensitive person gets burned, like a delicate moth. And that, says Erika Kohut, is why these two extremely sick composers, Schumann and Shubert (they share the first syllable), are closest to my bruised heart. Not the Schumann whose thoughts have all fled him, but the Schumann just before that! A hair’s breadth before that! He already has an inkling that his mind will flee, he suffers from his inkling, down to his finest veins, he takes leave of his conscious life as he enters the choirs of angels and demons, yet he clutches that conscious life one final time, even though he is no longer fully conscious of himself. He yearningly tries to catch the fading echoes, he mourns the loss of the most precious thing: himself. This is the phase in which one knows how great the loss of oneself is before one is utterly abandoned” (Jelinek 71).
self-obliteration (Horney 279). Thus Erika’s need to include self-destructive fantasies in her life can be understood. The masochistic practices can provide her with a temporary oblivion and abandon, with comparatively little risk of harm to her life.

(II) The Unconscious Core of Perversion—A Miscarried Repair of Mental Injury through “Dehumanization” and “the Construction of Three Core Fantasies”

Since we describe Erika’s deviant sexual adventures as perverse, we must first discuss the unconscious core of perversion. Many psychoanalysts see perversion primarily as a miscarriage of narcissistic development and consequent aggression. Arnold M. Cooper in his article “The Unconscious Core of Perversion” emphasizes that the core trauma in many if not all perversions is the experience of “terrifying passivity in relation to the pre-oedipal mother perceived as dangerously malignant, malicious, and all-powerful, arousing sensations of awe and the uncanny” (23). The development of a perversion is a miscarried repair of this injury, basically through “dehumanization of the body” and “the construction of three core fantasies” designed to undo the intolerable sense of helpless passivity. Dehumanization is the ultimate strategy against the fears of human qualities—it protects against the vulnerability of loving, against the possibility of human unpredictability, and against the sense of powerlessness and passivity in comparison to other humans. In every perversion, there is the interposition of a nonhuman quality in the otherwise human loving relationships; this may be a fetish object, a rigid routine not subject to emotional influence, or a demonstration of the inhumanity of the seemingly human. All attempts to abolish difference—whether of gender, physical size, maturational level, developmental level, power and control, and so on—and have dehumanization, the absence of individuation, as one of their goals and consequences (Cooper 24).

The attempt to dehumanize is carried out through the use of three specific
fantasies. The perversion is always a result of mixtures of the three key unconscious fantasies constructed in the perverse defense against fears of passivity when confronted with maternal malevolence. These fantasies are all efforts to deny the experience of being the helpless, needy baby at the mercy of a frustrating, cruel mother. The first fantasy: “I need not be frightened because my mother is really nonexistent; that is, she is dead or mechanical, and I am in complete control.” The second fantasy: “I need not be frightened because I am beyond being controlled by my malicious mother because I am myself inhuman—that is, dead and unable to feel pain.” And the third fantasy, “I triumph and am in total control because no matter what cruelty my squashing, castrating, monster mother-creature visits upon me, I can extract pleasure from it, and therefore she (it) is doing my bidding” (Cooper 24).

These three fantasies deny that mother has hurt or can hurt the child. In effect the infant says, “(1) She doesn’t exist, (2) I don’t exist, (3) I force her—now a nonhuman ‘it’—to give me pleasure.” Therefore, in Erika’s case we can then understand that in an effort to undo the traumas her mother has caused in her, Erika then developed a perversion based on dehumanization and the combinations of the above fantasies.

(III) On Sadomasochistic Object Relations: to Avoid a Real Dependence upon an Actual Fallible Object, the Sadomasochist Substitutes a Fantasized Dependence upon an Idealized Infallible Object in the Fantasy World

Sheldon Bach wrote in his paper “On Sadomasochistic Object Relations” that most sadomasochistic relationships are characterized by the combination of “early separation problems” with “the unique traumata” from specific developmental phases (76). The sadomasochist is unable to tolerate the painful detachment and his anger is experienced as an unbearably destructive separation from the object. Therefore, for example, in such cases as traumatic parental non-recognition or emotional absence the
child is forced to flee to the sadomasochistic drives in an effort to deny the loss of the object and to buttress a failing sense of self. This is due to the reason that “at the stage of incomplete separation where the sadomasochist is fixated, letting go means losing not only the object but also a part of oneself. So in both masochism and sadism, holding onto the object typically wins out over letting go” (Bach 77). Thus the masochist says: “Do anything you want to me but don’t leave me,” and the “anything you want” feels pleasurable because it means that his partner is still with him. The pain of suffering defends against the greater pain of loss.

It is then in order to avoid this loss that the sadomasochist flees from the real world of dependency to the world of his fantasy, where he can play the false game of the idealized self and object. It is called a false game because, as we have seen, it takes place in that split-off world of perversion that is acknowledged as both real and unreal at the same time. It is also a false game because it requires the suppression of real emotionality, especially anger, and the substitution of a “technical relationship”—that is, one is only dealing with objects in a world of one’s own creation (Bach 80). But whereas a child’s game is in the service of discriminating reality, uses the transitional object as a help in letting go, and is on the developmental line toward dependency and creativity, the sadomasochist’s game is in the service of confounding reality, uses the fetish as a help in holding on, and is on the regressive line toward merger-with-oneself and stereotype. The child’s game involves playing, whereas the pervert’s game involves “play-acting”. In the play-acting world of perversion, “the sadist denies his object needs by overvaluing the importance of his drive discharge, whereas the masochist denies his drive needs by overemphasizing the importance of his object attachments” (Bach 85).

It seems that the sadomasochist interposes an impersonal or technical relationship between his desire and his object, and this alienates him both from
himself and from the object of his desire. So instead of dealing with the separation through actual painful detachment and internalizations, what we find is repeated attempts at reunion with the mother of pain through the false game of the idealized self and object. Unfortunately, as Bach wrote, “in our real psychic economy, if nothing is ever permanently lost, then nothing can ever be truly gained. For the price the sadomasochist pays by denying his loss is to remain forever frozen into a lifeless stereotype, which he is doomed to repeat” (86). Where no loss, mourning, or renunciation is possible, no progression is possible from one set of life conflicts to the next. The fantasized dependency unfolds in a world that the sadomasochist has split off or dissociated, “in an altered state of consciousness characterized by extreme sexual excitement, sharply diminished reflective self-awareness, and a diminished sense that his acts are his own and under voluntary control” (Bach 89). According to Bach, while the sense of voluntary action and reflective self-awareness decreases during the sadomasochistic act, the sense of aliveness increases, so that the participant feels he is being enlivened by his instincts or his id. The fascination of this regressive state is especially attractive to people who feel chronically alienated, anxious, or depressed. In some cases, sadomasochistic sexualization defends against a profound libidinal deadness in the patient traceable to a defective libidinization in the early mother-child matrix. In other cases, we can see how the idealization of the drives is used as a defense against the fear of loss, because to the sadomasochistic the danger of losing his objects momentarily outweighs the fear of his drives (Bach 91). The dangerous drawback of this is that sooner or later he would begin to fear the loss of boundaries between reality and fantasy and becomes anxious and guilty about his sexual and destructive fantasies.

The fact that the sadomasochist is inclined to flee to the fantasy world indicates that he seeks to deny his dependence upon any object in reality, because “the object”
had failed him in the past. One might say that in searching to avoid a real dependence upon an actual fallible object, the sadomasochist substitutes a fantasized dependence on an idealized infallible object. So the masochist’s longed-for surrender to an idealized other or the sadist’s merger with the omnipotent self-object is the ultimate way of avoiding the ambivalence conflict between dependence and independence. As a result, Erika’s escape into masochistic fantasies can be explained by the fact her mother had failed her in the developmental phase of her libidinization. Erika’s mother had proved to be the fallible object that had not only failed but traumatized the child in infancy, so Erika now substitutes a fantasized dependence on an idealized object in her sadomasochistic fantasy. As long as the actual acceptance of separation and mourning do not take place, she will not be able to take up again the developmental line of dependence-independence that had been blocked and replaced by sadomasochistic fantasies.

(IV) Perversions as Play--“The Art of Sadomasochism Is Its Theater”

In light of our understanding of perversion, it’s also important to stress the difference between perversion as play within the S & M culture and perversion as pathology. As play, perversion carries into life some of the spice of the forbidden, the mysterious, and the dangerous in forms allowed by society although not always recognized as perverse. It should be taken for granted that each of us has secrets, and that some secrets may relate to the perverse. The question is never whether but how much. So it should also be understood that “perversion as play” is just one of the alternatives for people to satisfy their personal needs; people who practice these perversions do so with tacit agreement. However, the severe inhibition of these forms of play—the inability to engage in the touchings and suckings and odd kissings of foreplay, or the inability to tolerate perverse play in society—is then another source
where real perversion springs from. As Cooper writes, “Individuals in whom the shame and disgust needed to overcome perverse impulses are so overwhelming that they are forced to regard the body as humanly unacceptable and beyond human play and are thereby paradoxically succumbing to the perverse need to dehumanize” (33). This description can also apply to Erika’s attitude toward sex. Her need for shame and disgust to constrain her sexual instincts within bounds considered chaste is so overwhelming that she then sneaks into the realm of actual perversion. Because her inhibition and intolerance for “sexual perversion as play” is so strong, she has no choice but to make theater of the real world and make herself a suffering masochist.

Here is an example of people using perversion as a kind of play. In his observation of the organized S & M practice, Robert J. Stoller stresses that “the difference between consensual and nonconsensual is the greatest in importance” (Pain 17). In consensual sadomasochistic activities in which people take S & M as their preferred or necessary form of erotic behavior, participants simulate harm and humiliation. The professional ones even organize S & M activities into a theater performance. The theater contains special lighting, dramatic cosmetics and costumes, vocabulary, and instruments of torture and punishment, such as medieval prisons, torture chambers, operating tables, physical examination rooms, and so on. But do they in actuality harm each other in the theater? The answer is yes and no, for even if they do, they do it on consensual agreement, just as in all kinds of other activities like in wrestling, boxing, or body piercing. It is also important to distinguish those who harm from those who, in trying to undo the effects of harm inflicted on them early in life, “play at harm” (Pain 21). The observation that “the art of sadomasochism is its theater” should explain its “simulation” of harm and of high risk (Pain 19). In terms of inflicting pain out of hostility, consensual S & M practitioners don’t even bear any hostility toward their partners, they just act as if they do. In effect, this kind of sexual
activity can be quite reciprocal for those who need them. The reason is that the imitation of humiliation is carefully constructed never to produce true humiliation, and the imitation of trauma, such as when being humiliated is enacted, is not traumatic. According to Stoller, what he observed from consensual S & M erotic activities is the caring, constant, and high attention to one’s partner’s experience (*Pain* 21). From the first preparation of setting the scene, negotiating the “contract” between them (so that within the illusion of danger is the already arranged promise that absolute limits will not be exceeded), to the trust they have built in each other, and the open-minded communication they have when they are making love, all these show that there is less damage done in this kind of relation than in many other “normal” human relations.

So far Stoller’s observations have indicated that the S & M theater is more like a dramatization of a common social relationship based on power and powerlessness, dominance and subordination, rather than “pervert” immoralities. To further explicate this point, I would point out two characteristics in such kind of relationships which also exist in almost every common relationship. First, an excessive attachment exists for both parties, extreme in that neither feels as though the other can be done without; dependence is of a symbiotic character in that both sadist and masochist feel a compulsive need for physical, but most critically for psychic, connection to the other. Second, interaction has a repetitive and ritualistic character in that the sadist is consistently drawn toward a position of control while the masochist is just as constantly in the persona of the more controlled. Their contact is not randomly shaped but repetitively structured, so that neither can assume or unassume their respective roles by an arbitrary or simple exertion of will (Chancer 3). These intimate relationships are neither as uncommon nor as different from sexual instances or many other relations of daily life in which an inelastic ritual of dominance and subordination can also be played out.
(V) The Dynamics of Voyeurism: the Little Boy’s Need to Preserve a Distance from the Mother & Fears of Becoming Feminine/ The Dynamics of Masochism: Mastery of the Traumas of Infancy—Converting Unbearable Distress to Pain-That-Is-Pleasure

When watching sex peep shows, Erika has reduced her appreciation of another to anatomy only, which is in contrast to the opposite human desire for relationship and emotional intimacy. In other words, she has fetishized human bodies so severely that she has reduced her awareness of others’ humanness. For example, in her sexual fantasies, she wants to wear a kind of apron made of solid black plastic or nylon with holes in it so “One Can Glimpse the Sexual Organs” (Jelinek 222). She once saw this kind of garment in a sex shop, “[…] tiny nylon panties with many slits, in front and/or in back. At home, you can put them on your wife and then reach in, and your wife doesn’t have to take them off. There’s a matching tank top with two round holes. The woman sticks her breasts through these holes, and the rest of her torso is covered transparently” (Jelinek 49). In her perception, a woman’s body is reduced to sexual organs only. Such is also the case when Erika watches women displaying their bodies in the peepshows. “Her sharp artificial nails tug at her nipple as if it were rubber, and then let it bounce back. Her nipple seems alien to her body” (Jelinek 55). Here in watching the naked women, Erika seems compulsive:

Erika watches very closely. […] Nothing stirs or moves within her. But she has to watch all the same. […] Whenever she feels like leaving, something above her energetically presses her well-groomed head back to the pane, and she has to keep looking. The turntable on which the beautiful woman is perched keeps revolving. Erika can’t help it. She has to keep looking.

She is off-limits to herself (54).

Her compulsive watching is much like a man’s voyeurism of naked female bodies.
To explain the dynamics that lead to erotic pleasure in perversion, Stoller lists several examples, among them is the example which accounts for men’s practice of voyeurism. The factor is the fantasy system Stoller has called *symbiosis anxiety* or *merging anxiety*, which means that little boys must perform an act of separation from their mothers. This imaginative act establishes within boys a barrier against the earliest stage of wanting to stay as one with their mothers, and therefore of not being sure that they are fully male. In other words, they fear becoming female (*Pain* 41). Much of masculinity in all cultures is made up of manifestations of this conflict: the emphasis on the phallus, the need to humiliate women, and the fetishizing of women. Therefore, males’ voyeurism may result from a need to preserve a distance between their bodies/selves and their mothers. They then choose to close the distance by the less intimate and therefore more fiercely focused technique of looking rather than engaging in physical sex, with its intimacy of flesh on flesh. Another example of the dynamics that lead to sexual pleasure is thus: “I am humiliated; I discover revenge; I humiliate: I have mastered the traumas of infancy.” Take male-oriented pornography for example, it is a daydream in which an element of humiliation is often found.

The above are two examples of mastery, the generic for the process that surmounts the pain of trauma, frustration, conflict, and the sense of inferiority. Therefore, for people who practice S & M, the same dynamics can also be applied to them, that their perversion grows, by sensual pleasure, out of a mastery of otherwise unbearable distress. The one who suffered the most horrible physical distress learned to master agony by converting it to physical pain-that-is-pleasure (*Stoller, Pain* 41-42). According to Stoller, the most visible aspect of this mastery process has been the dynamics of humiliation.

The threat of trauma is not to existence but to self, that developing sense of identity. The problem posed to the child is not only to anaesthetize a humiliation but to transform it into its opposite, an adventure: excitement followed by pleasure.
(VI) The Origins of Sadomasochistic Scripts—the Need to Master the Traumas and Frustrations That Emanate from the “Sadists” of Infancy and Childhood

Stoller has proposed a hypothesis to explain adults’ sexual fantasies of sadomasochism: “The major traumas and frustrations of early life are reproduced in the fantasies and behaviors that make up adult eroticism, but the story now ends happily.” This time, the child victims win. In other words, the adult erotic behavior contains the early trauma. The details of the adult script tell what happened to the child (Pain 25). Stoller had a meeting with eight people who consider themselves sadomasochists. The four who are the most into physical S & M are the ones who had massive physical disease with terrifying medical interventions in childhood. As a result, they had to be confined, severely and for long periods, without the chance to unload their frustration, despair, and rage openly and appropriately, and hence, perversion.

All four described the process by which they had consciously forced themselves to master what at first, in infancy and childhood, was uncontrollable physical agony and terror by taking the pain and working with it in their heads, eventually via daydreams, altered states of consciousness, or genital masturbation, until it was converted into pain-that-is-pleasure: voluptuous pain. They consciously, desperately, successfully taught themselves to eroticize suffering. Their triumph is their perversion, illuminating how childhood physical agony can be the precursor of sadomasochistic delights. The more severe the suffering in childhood, the greater the need for S & M; the more the suffering was physical, the more physical suffering will be manifest in the perversion.

In conclusion, we can say that in trying to undo the effects of harm inflicted on her early in life, Erika now needs to “play at harm.” The story however, ends sadly
because Erika proved to be a "failed" masochist—she failed to "educate" her partner, Klemmer, into a willing participant in her fantasies. When reading the letter, the sadomasochistic contract, Klemmer could hardly believe that Erika is being serious in her demands—"he merely asks for the twentieth time whether she’s serious, or is this just a bad joke?" (Jelinek 227) The problem Klemmer experiences is not simply that he finds the nature of what she desires him to do obscene and disgusting, but more importantly that he is affronted that she should be daring to tell him what to do. Erika comments on her written pleadings, assuring Klemmer that "Erika will be beside herself with bliss if Klemmer just follows every point of the letter. He should blissfully keep slapping her, hard and steadily" (Jelinek 226). Unfortunately, Klemmer’s ear is attuned to the sexual politics of what is happening between them, and her promises and assurances only vex him more, for he can hear the commands in her voice: “It doesn’t have to happen now. Tomorrow is another day, mañana is good enough for me” (Jelinek 228). As a result, Erika’s hope of “salvation through love” is crashed. After being rejected by Klemmer, she is alone once again. Later after a particularly sordid scene of oral sex in the school toilets, she receives insults from Klemmer, who has been unable to achieve an erection and has felt humiliated in his masculine pride. The tears which Erika shed as she pinched her body with clothes-peg were not shed in pain, but in self-hate—because instead of love, Klemmer treated her with derision and disgust. Looking at herself in the mirror Erika too despised herself:

After a while, she stops and then stands in front of the mirror. Her image cuts into her brain with words of scorn and mockery. It is a colorful image. It would be a truly merry image if the causes were not so dismal. Erika is utterly alone. Mother is again sleeping the deep sleep induced by alcohol. If Erika, aided by the mirror, finds an unravaged place on her
body, she grabs a clothespin or needle, while weeping and wailing. She drives the instruments hard, drives them into her body. Her tears flow down and she is all alone. (Jelinek 249)

Erika was caught in the vicious circle again. Instead of love, the response she got is misunderstanding and more realistic humiliation. So misery repeats itself, Erika again inflicts pain on herself out of self-hatred, out of disgust at herself and out of her inability to enter into a loving relationship.