

# The Alchemy of Sex

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I am going to explore the similarities between alchemy and heterosexual sex because I am trying to understand how energy, which is the agent of transformation in the physical world, operates in Psyche. I believe that the physical and psychic worlds are essentially the same, based on a common set of archetypes such as motion, distance and order. Therefore, our knowledge of each can inform our knowledge of the other if we are careful not to get caught in the specifics of instantiation.

Sex is a big source of psychic energy. There are few, if any, parts of life that can generate the intense bursts of energy that sexual relations can. This implies that sexual relations can be extremely transformative, a conjecture that I believe is confirmed by human experience. This means they are not just chemical, but alchemical because "inner alchemy is concerned with inner experiences aimed at transforming the personality or facilitating the experience of divine truths" (Raff XIX.)

I think the alchemical model with its emphasis on energy, conjunction and transformation is robust enough to hold the dynamics of sexuality. This is already suggested by alchemy's use of sexual symbols to describe its own processes. This paper looks at that link from the perspective of sex, using alchemical symbols to describe its processes.

The Hebrew language also shows the link between sex and alchemy because the Hebrew word for sexual relations is the same word as to know. Knowing is an alchemical process because you can only really know the prima materia. Learning to know someone is a long process of transformation of your idea of that person.

Both sex and alchemy are journeys with no chance of ever arriving. This is a good thing because it is the journey that transforms us. If we were to achieve absolute intimacy or ecstasy we'd want to preserve it so we would stop changing sexually. If we ever saw the pure prima materia we would want to hold onto it.

Although it's the journey that is filled with the energy, we need glimpses of the destination along the way, for these glimpses let energy pour into our endeavors. We can never become completely

unified with someone else, but we can experience unification. Learning about union is essential for union itself because learning, like knowing, is itself transformational.

The energy of sexual intimacy possesses many of the characteristics of the philosopher's stone, which is "...the ultimate goal of alchemy. It could transmute material into gold as well as heal. It could also open its possessor to the Divine mysteries" (Raff XX.)

Sex can add a golden glow to even the most leaden countenance. It creates a well sealed container which is similar to an alchemical vessel and functions as a liminal space that brings us to life and healing. It can also create life, certainly one of the most divine mysteries, when a Kabbalistic-like balancing of giving and receiving manifests the philosopher's stone as a fetus.

"Jung conceived of the self as the union of opposites and the center of the psyche. The philosopher's stone was the union of opposites and often portrayed as center" (Raff 3.) The opposites involved in sexual relations are usually considered to be the male and the female. Because we meet the unconscious in projection, the other partner in a heterosexual relationship carries our unconscious as well as the opposite sex, so sexual relations are also a union of the conscious and the unconscious. Our unconscious sexual drives lead us to sexual relations in the first place (the first coniunctio.)

Just as there is death after the first coniunctio of alchemy, there is also death after the first sexual coniunctio. The part of the relationship which had been focused on getting to sexual relations dies and each partner wonders "what have I just done?" The sexual impulse has been brought into conscious experience and needs to be lived in a new way.

As a result of work on the sex life, sexual intimacy can gain the position of the dominant spiritual force within a relationship similar to the way that "as a result of the work of individuation, the self gains the position of the dominant spiritual force within the psyche" (Raff 10.)

The self "results from the unification of the conscious and the unconscious. It should not be confused with the conscious ego. The description of the self cannot be separated from that of the process

of individuation" (Ellenberger 710.) Sexual intimacy also results from the unification of the conscious and the unconscious and should not be confused with ego gratification and sense pleasure.

A good sex life takes patience, another alchemical virtue. Each sexual encounter is another churning of the divine nectar. Some sexual encounters have more impact than others because some have more projections and/or consciousness than others. The projections are prima materia bubbling up.

Both sex and psychic development can be distracted by fantasy. "Even when the ego acknowledges the possibility of taking the unconscious into account, it often substitutes fantasy for a real encounter with the unconscious, for fantasy will simply help to maintain the ego position" (Raff 17.) This also describes sexual fantasy, in which we are not open to the imaginative possibilities that could come from the unconscious, but have already decided what kind of experience we want. Our ego is holding to its position and seeking reassurance instead of being open to the transformative change that a real encounter can bring.

Trust is essential to both sexual intimacy and individuation. "Until the self becomes strong enough, the ego cannot relax and trust. Rather, it must work and struggle to learn to recognize the self, and to find ways of vesting it with the energy and power it requires" (Raff 13.) Until the bonds that create sexual intimacy become strong enough, we can't relax and trust the sexual connection. Instead, we need to learn to realize the places we have achieved true intimacy and vest them with energy and power so they can grow and spread.

Solutio is an important part of the journey to sexual intimacy. We need to become permeable and "The Dionysian experience is that part of the individuation process in which fixed and rigid ego structures are dissolved ...this aspect of the Dionysian experience partakes of the nature of the alchemical solutio." (Sanford 109)

"Water is the womb, so solutio is a return to the womb for rebirth."(Gottlieb) The moistness of the sexual organs allows a return to the womb for rebirth.

Calcinatio, in which intense sexual heat volatilizes the elements, is also part of the alchemy of sex. Coagulation occurs when we enter into a monogamous relationship. "Jung said coagulation is when psychic content becomes earthbound, localized and attached to an ego" (Gottlieb.) When our unconscious sexual impulses become attached to another person instead of floating from one object to another, they become real.

The male orgasm is a form of sublimation in which the ejaculate is the "white bird flying out of the material (, is) more masculine than feminine (,) frees the god trapped in the matter (and) begins from the earthly experience, not from above" (Gottlieb.) The "danger of Sublimatio is an unwillingness to grow up" (Gottlieb.) Fixation on ejaculation can also lead to an unwillingness to grow up.

Developing sexual intimacy is a process of active imagination. During active imagination "the ego, while fully awake, experiences unconscious contents or products having given up all critical thinking" (Raff 19.) During sex we also give up critical thinking and experience unconscious contents. The orgasm itself is also an experience of active imagination, because "in orgasm, we relinquish for a moment the reins of control and order" (Steinberg xviii.)

"There are seven stages to the process of active imagination... The first stage of active imagination consists of preparing the mind to enter the imaginal space. The ego must enter a state of expectant quiet" (Raff 32.) Sexual intimacy requires imagination to guide each person's conscious toward the creation of the relationship because we are encountering the other, which can not be known, but only imagined. We must quiet our ego so we can truly listen to the other person's body and our unconscious contents.

"The second stage of active imagination is the period of evocation or intention" (Raff 33.) Once we have experienced the other person we have to choose whether we want to return to our regular lives or become open to merging with them. Only conscious intention can open us up to something as new as deep intimacy.

"The third phase of active imagination begins when the unconscious comes alive in some way. This is the phase of unconscious activation. One may experience an affect, a bodily sensation, a voice, a strange thought or the appearance of an inner figure" (Raff 34.) This describes and frames the actual physical component of sexual intimacy.

"In the fourth phase of active imagination, which is called interaction, the ego responds to the unconscious... The fifth phase of active imagination, the reflection phase, occurs simultaneously with the interactive phase. The ego thinks carefully about the experiences it has had. The ego shouldn't just give in to the unconscious, but should consider what it experiences" (Raff 34.)

After we have sexual relations with a person for the first time, we consider the enormity of what has happened. A lot of material has come up from the unconscious (our own and that of the other person) which the ego needs to respond to. We are aware of the complexities and challenges as well as the deepening potential of sexual intimacy. Our "gut" may tell us to give in or it may tell us to flee, but we shouldn't just act reflexively. We need to consider those feelings in conjunction with what we know from conscious observation and reflection.

"The sixth phase of active imagination, called resolution, occurs when the original intent or question is resolved in a deep way" (Raff 35.) This is similar to making a commitment. Our original intent, which led us to be open to intimacy, now sees a possible resolution. Both parties either make a deep commitment to each other and the relationship or say good bye.

"The seventh stage of active imagination is integration. The ego integrates the insight it has gained into its outer life. It is about learning to practice the wisdom" (Raff 36.) The insights the ego gains through sexual intimacy can be applied to much more than that relationship because they are insights about opening up, caring and appreciating differences.

The alchemists wrote about four virtues necessary for the work. Patience is as important in developing sexual intimacy as in alchemy because no significant transformation happens quickly. We need courage to face the unknown places intimacy takes us as much as the alchemists needed courage to deal with the new elements they encountered. We need persistence to persevere with intimacy even

though it perplexes us and is full of frustration just as the alchemists needed persistence to bounce back from all their dead ends. And finally, we need reverence and the knowledge that we can't force deep sexual intimacy just as we can't force the self to manifest.

We can look at the emblems in *Jung and the Alchemical Imagination* as describing sexual relations. The two fish are checking each other out in emblem one (Raff 88.)

Emblem two (Raff 98) represents an early sexual encounter in which the conscious conquers the dragon, the fear of the shadow side of sexuality. The ego manages the fear, terror and chaos of sexuality so the two people can face the reality of what is in the unconscious.

In emblem three (Raff 108,) the knight is replaced by the unicorn and the dragon by the deer. Having faced the terror of sex, we enter an apparently tamer period where both the unconscious and conscious flirt with the idea of getting together. But they can't because they are still so different, sharing only certain desires.

In emblem four (Raff 112,) they are both lions. The only way you can really mate in an intimate way is by seeing enough of yourselves in the other being so you aren't complete strangers anymore.

In emblem five (Raff 114,) they are strangers again. Making love kills them because they realize that the coniunctio of a real, permanent union is a possibility. Their old self is dead, or will have to die, if this goes on. They go back to being strangers as they retreat into themselves to decide if they want to go to intimacy.

In emblem six (Raff 120,) the dragon reappears as the uroborus. After the initial rush of sexual relations, the magic of being together might disappear, just as the self does in this emblem. You can't force the magic to reappear; but can just wait patiently for it to return. The magic wants to come back and the fear of that magic, of marriage and commitment, becomes the focus. The dark side may manifest as a crudeness entering the sexual relationship.

Emblem seven (Raff 124) contains the two birds, no longer animals. The sexual relations and the process of reflection afterward have brought the two people into relationship. Each person is both birds and has made a commitment that it is both bound to and trying to escape from.

In emblem eight (Raff 128,) the two birds devour each other after coming together (or separately.) They got into the alchemical vessel together and couldn't stand the heat. Unlike the first time, when they changed to strangers to kill each other, here they stay in relationship as they kill each other. This time more of the relationship survives the death. This is similar to the way we remember the manifest self even when it goes away. We remember the joys of deep sexual intimacy even when we can't regain it, but the memory of the possibility keeps us going.

In emblem nine (Raff 132,) there is only the king. There used to be two, now there is one. Real sexual union has taken place. They are probably in a monogamous relationship. The throne also looks like a four poster bed. Sexuality has mastered its chaotic nature, although it is still there. Eros comes from chaos.

In emblem ten (Raff 138,) the alchemist places the salamander in the fire. The sexual relationship goes out into the world to face temptation and doubt. It's permanent, but not stagnant as it is subject to those fires. This process happens far away from the ego and is largely in the unconscious realm, so don't expect reason.

In emblem eleven (Raff 142,) there are three human figures. The power of sexuality has been acknowledged and is right there with them. The king, representing union, also represents the sexual relationship. The sexual relationship engages the ally, who represents an experience of the divine through sexual relations in a way that is similar to Tantric Yoga.

Alchemy provides a good model for thinking about sexuality, and thus all forms of intimacy. It is a way of understanding what we are going through and what is holding us back. The language of sexuality also shows how we have misfocused on the carnal to the detriment of the spiritual. Instead of saying "they have great chemistry," a more soulful observation would be "they have great alchemy."

## Works Cited

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