A Fetish of Purification

In his essay on fetishism, Sigmund Freud claims: “…when the fetish is instituted some process occurs which reminds one of the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia,” (Freud 2). In other words, a fetish, or an obsessive connection with or reliance on an object, arises as a coping mechanism against difficult self-realizations a person has tried to suppress. Freud asserts that a fetish arises around the time in childhood when a child recognizes that their parent is not all-powerful, but only human and henceforth vulnerable. A child’s sudden self-awareness of their own lack of power and vulnerability often accompanies this realization. For most people, this is a healthy discovery, one that allows them to mature into a functioning adult. But for some children, this recognition is so traumatic that they refuse their own perception – they *disavow* the claim. These children project their denial and fear surrounding this loss of power onto an object, creating a fetish (Freud 1-2). Fear of loss of control or powerlessness is a central aspect of Sigmund Freud’s theory of the fetish, as well as Aimee Bender’s novel, *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. Freud’s theory of the fetish can be applied to protagonist Mona’s relationship with soap. Throughout the novel, Mona uses the consumption of soap, as a physically potent deterrent against romantic relationships and the emotional vulnerability that accompanies them. Why soap? As Freud suggests, many fetishes originate from childhood trauma regarding the relationship between parent and child. Mona grapples throughout the novel with the mystery of her father’s health: an unknown ailment that incapacitates him beyond her understanding, taking away his power. Mona views soap as a “token of triumph… and a protection against” the threat of her father’s illness (Freud 2). The consumption of soap becomes a means of purification, a way to purge herself of the uncleanliness she associates with growing close to people, and ensure the maintenance of her own health – and control.

Mona’s soap fetish becomes her shortcut, her surefire way to force her body to resist its own innate desires. Her fetish first appears towards the novel’s opening, in association with her first sexual relationship with a man she refers to only as ‘the boyfriend,’ a title indicative of her lack of emotional investment in the relationship. She recounts that after their third time having sex, she returns to her apartment, where the compulsion to eat soap overcomes her. Tying back to Freud’s theory of the origin of the fetish, it is interesting to note that Mona reports this soap to be the same brand her mother buys, thus associating this soap with Mona’s parents and her childhood disavowal of relationships. The following quote depicts Mona’s narration of her fetish that henceforth develops from this disavowal: “Slide! Slip! It careened around my tongue. Gave like chocolate under my teeth. I cut another piece. My mouth crammed with froth. Mmm” (Bender 14). The association with chocolate shows Mona’s attempt to justify her fetish as something delightful. Even Mona’s halfhearted ‘Mmm’ reads as though she is trying to convince herself of the fetish’s satisfactions. Yet readers, picturing the ‘froth’ she describes forming in her mouth, know the revolting truth. A few lines later, Bender gives an even more visceral description: “The smell slammed back through me. In an instant, my stomach heaved up and I crouched down, water sticking in my eyes, and threw up down the drain, all whiteness and foam, soap rushing in waves back through me” (Bender 14). This fragment confirms the damaging nature of Mona’s fetish. As emphasized by actions such as ‘slammed back through me,’ ‘heaved up,’ and ‘rushing in waves,’ soap forces an overpowering physical reaction that not even Mona, queen of quitting, can prevent. Soap becomes a means of physically validating the association Mona draws between relationships and illness, stemming from her perception of her father’s loss of power. By making herself sick, Mona proves to herself in some twisted way that relationships are unhealthy and detrimental, something to avoid. She thus grants her fetish the power to protect her from this vulnerability, permitting her to disavow her own fears surrounding human connection. At the novel’s opening, Mona turns to soap due to her lack of trust in herself, her emotions, and her ability to maintain control in the face of a romantic relationship.

Due to her father’s illness, Mona associates relationships with fear and guilt; soap acts as a means of ritual purification, washing away these negative associations. This is shown in Bender’s description of the aftermath of Mona’s first soap consumption: “…the rest of the day, I thought very little of the boyfriend, and instead wandered the rooms, burping clean burps, evaluating how badly I felt: Should I just relax? Should I get my stomach pumped?” (Bender 14). As the reference to stomach pumping suggests, Mona acknowledges in her rational mind the absurdity of her fetish. She knows peripherally the damage it causes her. However, the fact that she is able to ‘think very little’ of the boyfriend the rest of the day suggests the power of her fetish over her reason. The use of the word ‘clean’ to describe her burps is also telling. Over the course of the novel, the word ‘clean’ repeatedly appears in correlation with Mona’s fetish. In feeling clean, Mona purifies herself, absolving herself of fear for her health and guilt over her sexuality and continuing her disavowal. Later in this section, Mona recounts her breakup with the boyfriend: “We broke up about three weeks later. He kept saying he was sorry. I held my clean fingers to my nose, nodded” (Bender 15). Mona again takes comfort in the ‘cleanliness’ she has created after using soap at the boyfriend’s house (the same brand, Mona notes) as essentially a punishment for her sexuality. Cleanliness becomes Mona’s shield and her safeguard: her protection against her dreaded loss of control.

As the novel unfolds, Mona continues to associate soap and the repulsion it causes her with protection against her own sexuality, though she is forced to grapple with her fetish upon meeting ‘the science teacher,’ Benjamin Smith. Again of note: Mona’s frequent use of ‘the science teacher’ in place of his name displays her attempt to distance herself from potential romantic partners. Unlike her previous relationship with ‘the boyfriend,’ which seemed largely dispassionate and experimental, Mona seems genuinely interesting in pursuing this new relationship even as she is paralyzed by her own conflicting desires and fears. For this relationship to develop, Mona must confront her own reliance on her fetish. Upon first meeting Benjamin, Mona states: “He smiled at me. He smelled like soap” (Bender 26). The reference to soap immediately associates Benjamin with arousal and revulsion alike to both readers and Mona. Fittingly, Mona’s next encounter with Benjamin also revolves around soap, as she watches Benjamin blowing soap bubbles filled with cigarette smoke on the playground at Back-To-School Night: “The air smelled like soap and ash… and so the clean smell reminded me of sex and vomit, but the dark smell of burnt paper and tobacco lit me up inside like gold; it was that familiar combination, illness and desire. I felt right at home” (Bender 105). This segment is filled with dualities. There is juxtaposition in the combination of cigarette ash in all its toxicity, and soap and its purity and healthiness. However, Mona associates the smell of soap with sex and vomit, evoking ‘illness and desire’ alike. These are both negative adjectives in Mona’s mind. The use of the word ‘clean’ again displays Mona’s reliance on her fetish as some sort of twisted means of purification. Conversely, the smell of ash lights Mona ‘up inside like gold,’ a peculiar positive association given the harmful nature of cigarettes. The segment ends with the statement: “I felt right at home.” Mona’s description of this encounter with Benjamin ties back to her fetish and its origins in her childhood. Due to her constant paranoia about health stemming from her father’s illness, Mona is unable to pursue meaningful relationships She is too fearful of the vulnerability they expose, both in herself and her partner. Soap equates the ideas of illness and desire in Mona’s mind, forcing her to latch onto the idea that pursuing a relationship will damage her already fragile sense of control over herself and her health. Through her fetish, Mona sabotages her own happiness. This is proven within the scene in the following quotes: “I felt him waiting for me, and I wrecked it… You broke it on purpose, he said” (Bender 110). The bubble Mona attempts to form for Benjamin could be seen as a metaphor for their growing relationship. In purposefully popping it, Mona chooses her fetish, her own fear and obsession, over possible pleasure obtained through human connection.

Mona’s first physical romantic encounter with Benjamin Smith is a pivotal point in the evolution of her fetish as the first time she appears to comprehend the pleasure her fetish denies her. Mona initially appears invested in the relationship. But as the physicality continues, her old vulnerability surfaces – fear of the loss of control a relationship prompts, as seen in the following quote: “I was blooming out of control, and the melting inside was unbearable, and I took myself away” (Bender 144). Here, Mona directly addresses her obsession with control in the context of relationships. The word ‘unbearable’ in particular highlights Mona’s paranoia, her complete inability to withstand personal vulnerability at this point in her development. So instead, she ‘takes herself away,’ turning to her fetish as a means of regaining control. Upon locking herself in the bathroom, Mona states: “…the smell heightened the thickness of the longing, then took it away; merged with it, then got big enough to surround and defeat it” (Bender 145). Mona sees soap as an entity larger than herself and her desires, as shown here, when the smell of soap ‘merges with,’ then ‘surrounds and defeats’ her longing. In trying to maintain control, Mona actually gives control over to her fetish. She gives in to the sense of protection the soap provides, even as it harms her both physically and mentally. “My friend, soap, that small ball of ruin,” Mona describes (Bender 145). The contradictory terms ‘friend’ and ‘ruin’ here highlight Mona’s complex relationship with her fetish, and even its own contradictory nature. Mona tries to give herself over to the deception of the fetish, the false comfort and safety and ‘friendliness’ it provides, though she simultaneously acknowledges the potential harm, the ‘ruin’ it causes. Unable to admit openly to the embarrassment that is her fetish, Mona lies to Benjamin, stating that she isn’t interested in their romantic escapade before sending him away. Mona states: “I knew if he touched me again I’d do the exact same thing. I’d be back in the bathroom in seconds, making love to that soap, sticking the soap anywhere I could, just to get the human material off,” (Bender 149). Here, Mona confesses awareness of her fetish and its damages. However, the description ‘human material’ sounds clinical, showing a relapse towards her old strategy of distance in any potential relationship. Additionally, this passage again evokes the idea of Mona ‘washing her hands clean,’ with its connotations of desire to be free from guilt. In giving into her fetish, Mona tries to purify herself both literally and figuratively, simultaneously denying herself true pleasure. But as Mona’s trust in the people around her grows, so too does her development towards relinquishing her fetish.

Though Mona remains unable to entirely combat her fetish alone, she does begin to trust others. In particular, Benjamin’s response and eventual resistance to Mona’s fetish helps her to realize its abnormality and harm. This is first shown when Mona emerges from the bathroom during their first tryst: “…and when I came out, completely sick to my stomach, he took me back into his arms. Mona Green Blue Gray, he said. Now your hands are clean,” (Bender 145). The recurrence of the word ‘clean’ in this passage recalls Mona’s strategy of using cleanliness as a shield against desire and its associations of vulnerability and illness. However, Benjamin’s response also counters some of Mona’s pre-established norms regarding relationships. Benjamin’s nickname, ‘Mona Blue Green Gray,’ contradicts Mona’s own emotional detachment in nomenclature, highlighting how she is the cause of distance in their relationship. His reference to her ‘hands being clean’ draws attention to his perception of her as innocent even as her fetish makes her feel guilty for her sexuality – a new perspective. Mona finds that she cannot explain or justify her continued reliance on her fetish to Benjamin, despite the obvious trust and affection he displays towards her. He helps open her eyes to her fetish’s damages, motivating her to try and resist – a massive step in her development as a character. Prior to their final romantic encounter, Mona tells Benjamin that this time, if she tries to go to the bathroom, he must not let her go (Bender 199). Throughout this scene, as Mona begs to submit, to give in to her fetish, Benjamin repeatedly refuses her pleas. As he refuses, Mona’s trust in him as an ally in resisting her damaging fetish grows, as shown here: “…I ask him again because I can, because I am starting to have the smallest, most precious glimmer of trust…” (Bender 221). The description ‘most precious glimmer’ shows the value Mona places on trust, how difficult it is for her to obtain, and how significant it is for her once it’s earned. Mona even tests the strength of her newfound bond, both physically and metaphorically: “I never get to do this, I never pull as hard as I can, I always pull less hard than I can just in case, but here I am straining, feet braced against the bed for leverage, and his hand is strong and wiry and I say: Let Me Go! and he is laughing at me and he says: You keep trying if you want but I will not let you go. I will not let you go,” (Bender 221-222). Benjamin figuratively and literally takes control of Mona, allowing her to relax her iron grip over herself. The phrase ‘I will not let you go’ has particular significance here as a reference to the original promise Benjamin made Mona regarding the bathroom, but also as a reminder of the growing bond between them, the commitment he makes her that finally allows her to trust. When Benjamin opens Mona’s eyes to the absurdity of her fetish, it becomes impossible for her to maintain her reliance and trust in its protection. Benjamin helps Mona to resist her fetish’s compulsions and begin to undo her disavowal.

In childhood, Mona refuses to recognize her father’s illness due to the fear and vulnerability it prompts in her. Her fetish develops as a means of protection against trusting others the way she did her father, in order to avoid recognizing the hurt his weakness caused her. As Mona begins to trust Benjamin, these barriers begin to break down as she accepts that vulnerability in relationships does not always mean hurt. Freud’s fetish develops in the stagnant hole that forms when a person refuses to accept the vulnerability of the world they inhabit. Yet it can be overcome, through the delayed-but-not-impossible process of accepting personal powerlessness. To counteract the disavowal that prompts a fetish, a person must acknowledge and accept the fear from which the fetish originated. In trusting Benjamin, Mona opens herself up to vulnerability and the potential to be hurt. She realizes her fetish’s abnormality and damaging nature. This realization is the first step towards reaching the point of maturity that Freud describes, where she is no longer reliant on her fetish. Though Mona does not fully cross the threshold of relinquishing this fetish entirely, she does begin to surrender her ever-taut control.

Grading Rubric for Putting Theory to Work Revision and Final Essay

Name: Zoë Mertz

20-15 points 14-10 points 9-5 points 4-0 points

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| Introduction & Thesis | Intro. is specific, creates critical frame, using theorist. Thesis is clear, concrete, (focused on text), creates map for argument. | Critical framework is established. Needs more bridge to text. Thesis is evident, but not entirely concrete or clear. | Use of theorist is vague. No work on critical frame. Thesis is vague or missing. | Little or no revision of introduction. Thesis is missing or not sufficiently clear or relevant. | 20 |
| Transitions & Paragraphs | Transition (topic) sentences focus on ideas rather than plot. Paragraphs are organized around single claim & idea. | A few transitions remain about plot. Works on paragraph structure but needs more. | Transitions remain focused on plot rather than ideas. Paragraphs too clumsy. | Transitions not revised and remain descriptions of plot rather than ideas. Paragraphs not well organized. | 20 |
| Analysis of Evidence | Uses and develops textual evidence. Uses textual evidence as part of argument. | Adds more textual evidence without further analysis. Needs more close-reading. | Some addition of textual evidence, but relevance is unclear. Needs further analysis. | No revision of evidence, no analysis of evidence, evidence is irrelevant. | 22 |
| Argument | Argument develops from least to most important points. Develops rather than repeats points. | Keeps basic argument but develops and extends it. Some reorganization. | Organization better but remains in need of more work. | Organization needs complete overhaul. Ends with least important point. | 20 |
| Quality of Writing | Prose is clear, no problems with, punctuation, grammar, pronouns, etc. Proofreads! Word choice. | Some problems with lucidity, grammar, punctuation. Needs to work on sentence structure and clarity. | Problems with clarity, punctuation, grammar, etc. | Serious problems with clarity, punctuation, etc. | 18 |

Grade: 100 Comments: Zoë: You’ll note that I changed my own grading scale to give you extra points for close-reading and to take away points for your writing. It’s not fair, because your writing is fine, but I’ve tried to give you a couple of examples of how to shorten your sentences by eliminating all but the essential information. You write clearly, but you also try to put everything into every sentence. Nevertheless, your argument is convincing, your attention to language is unsurpassed, and your essay a thing of beauty! Nicely done.