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 vulnerability and lack of power 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*. In this story, protagonist Mona is afraid to grow up. She’s afraid to trust those around her enough to form meaningful relationships. Most of all, she is scared of losing control. Freud’s theory of the fetish can be applied to Mona’s relationship with soap in *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. Throughout the novel, Mona uses soap, particularly 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. The following quote depicts Mona’s narration of her decision: “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, display it 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: “I used the straight bitten end of the soap to clean myself, but before I put it back on its shelf, I took one mildly interested nibble. 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. By making herself sick, Mona proves to herself in some twisted way that relationships are unhealthy and detrimental, something to avoid. She thus allows her fetish the power to protect her from this vulnerability, allowing her to disavow her own fears surrounding human connection. Continuing through the scene, it seems that Mona is peripherally aware of her fetish’s hazards, as seen in the following quote: “…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 decision. 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 – the inner urge to combat her blossoming relationship and her fear of losing the strict control she maintains over herself – over her reason. The use of the word ‘clean’ to describe her burps, the aftermath of this fetish, is also telling. 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). After again using soap at the boyfriend’s house (the same brand, Mona notes) as essentially a punishment for her sexuality, Mona takes comfort in the ‘cleanliness’ she has created. This word ‘clean’ recurs later in the novel as well, as Mona’s confrontations with her fetish continue. At the novel’s opening, Mona lacks trust in herself, her emotions, and her ability to maintain control in the face of a romantic relationship. Soap becomes her fetish: her protection against this 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 also 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; the liquid soap was the same brand I had once eaten in bar form, 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, as suggested later in the fragment. 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 way to combat illness. 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 battle to overcome her fetish rages on.

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 turns to her fetish as a means of regaining control. Upon locking herself in the bathroom, Mona states: “I watched my face, watched as 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. Despite this inner realization, Mona still has not reached the point where she is willing to admit to or address her fetish, as shown when she emerges from the bathroom: “…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). Mona cannot explain or justify her continued reliance on her fetish to Benjamin, despite the obvious trust and affection he displays towards her. 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’ in particular draws attention to his perception of her as innocent even as her fetish makes her feel guilty for her sexuality. The recurrence of the word ‘clean’ in this passage also recalls Mona’s strategy of using cleanliness as a shield against desire and its associations of vulnerability and illness. Unable to admit 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. She submits to her fetish and the false security it provides. 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. But as Mona’s trust in the people around her grows, so too does her development towards relinquishing her fetish.

Mona does not yet fully trust herself at the novel’s conclusion when it comes to her fetish. There is still a distance between her rational mind, where she realizes the damaging nature of her fetish, and her emotional reliance on the fetish’s protection, developed over years of disavowal. Though Mona is unable to combat this fetish alone, she does begin to trust others, particularly Benjamin. Upon inviting Benjamin over at the novel’s end, Mona tells him that this time, if she tries to go to the bathroom, he must not let her go (Bender 199). Mona values this growing relationship enough to try and resist her fetish with his help – a massive step in her development as a character. As the scene progresses, Mona repeatedly states her need to ‘go to the bathroom’ and give into her fetish. Its control over her remains powerful, as shown in the quote: “I can feel the soap waiting for me in the bathroom, sitting there in its porcelain soap dish calling my name, Come on in Mona Gray, yoohoo Mona, get this over with. Come on in and visit. Come ruin everything” (Bender 219). Her fetish taunts her, even as she tries to resist, even as she acknowledges what ‘ruin’ it will cause her. It is an animate, palpable figure in her mind, as shown by the quote: “…the soap rears up in the soap dish, lathering, foaming, eager, ready” (Bender 220). Mona’s fetish makes soap a powerful object. It ‘rears’ animalistically, waiting for her, as no inanimate object should do. However, Mona is no longer alone in her resistance. As she 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. Ensuing descriptions of the soap throughout the segment also show Mona’s newfound trust in Benjamin: “Lather drains into the sink, thinning,” “In the next room, the soap is a quiet dry stone” (Bender 221-222). Mona’s descriptions of soap become less animated and feral as the passage continues, as Benjamin proves himself as a trustworthy ally, protection against the false protection her fetish provides. 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). 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 and relinquish control. In resisting her fetish’s compulsions with Benjamin’s help, Mona takes the first steps towards undoing her process of 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. This is the first step towards reaching the point of maturity that Freud describes, where she is no longer reliant on her fetish. Though she does not fully cross the threshold of relinquishing this fetish entirely, she does begin to surrender her ever-taut control.

Quotes:

“And for a second, I thought it was my father again,” (Bender 104). *Associations between Bender and father within context of fetish*

~~“The smoke and soap trembled together,” (Bender 105)~~ *~~Toxicity of fetish – cleanliness of soap associated with damaging smoke from cigarettes~~*

~~“…but a bundle of laughter loosened in my stomach, twine releasing, logs falling into the fire,” (Bender 106).~~ *~~Mona later describes interactions with Benjamin as feeling like burning~~*~~.~~

“I kept the smell of the soap close; I was afraid of him moving forward, of the smoke caving around us, of his man hands,” (Bender 110).

~~“I feel sick, I blurted. It’s the soap. I have to go, I said,” (Bender 110)~~ *~~Another example of soap as excuse~~*~~.~~

~~“It was as if a ghost had entered the classroom, invisible but focused, arms warm, snaking around my waist, lips like wind on the neck. My body waking up, in math class, the wrong place to be woken up. And sickened. And awakened. And nauseous. And distracted,” (Bender 127).~~ *~~Soap is haunting her. Also shows association between soap fetish and sexual arousal and physical repulsion/disavowal~~*~~.~~

~~“She brought it closer to my face and I felt like I might choke, or take off my clothes, or both at the same time…” (Bender 131).~~

~~“But regardless, she said, there is something so awful, something so gross about watching someone who loves you struggle to believe what you both know, deep down, is partially a lie” (Bender 148).~~

~~“No. Today I have decided to be your bathroom monitor and today I say no. The soap lather crawls over the edge of the porcelain and spills into the sink, somersaults of white,” (Bender 220).~~

FATHER TRACK STAR SEGMENT – *Association between parental unit and sexual maturation in Freud’s theory*

JOANNA STUART??