Scaffolding Essay #2 – A Fetish of Purification

In Aimee Bender’s *An Invisible Sign of My Own*, 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. This characteristic is not unique to Mona. In fact, the fear of loss of control or powerlessness is a central aspect of Sigmund Freud’s theory of the fetish. Freud claims that a fetish arises around the time in childhood when a child realizes 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). 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. Perhaps 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 is a kind 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. It becomes her shortcut, her surefire way to force her body to resist its own innate desires.

Mona’s soap 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 that indicates 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.) Her reflection on this decision can be 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 inner urge to combat her blossoming relationship, her fear of losing the strict control she maintains over herself, overcomes this reason, as shown by the fact that she is able to ‘think very little’ of the boyfriend the rest of the day. 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. 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.

Mona’s reliance on her soap fetish continues to develop over the course of the novel. The next significant appearance takes place during her first physical romantic encounter with Benjamin Smith (who she refers to as ‘the science teacher,’ again displaying a tendency to distance herself linguistically 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. 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). 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 in denying herself what she truly desires. “My friend, soap, that small ball of ruin,” Mona states upon locking herself in the bathroom (Bender 145). The contradictory terms ‘friend’ and ‘ruin’ here highlight Mona’s complex relationship with her fetish. Mona tries to give herself over to the deception of the fetish, the false comfort and safety and ‘friendliness’ it provides. But, although she has not yet developed to a point where she is able to resist her fetish, Mona does begin to acknowledge the potential harm, the ‘ruin’ it causes.

By the novel’s conclusion, Mona has developed much further towards relinquishing her fetish. This development parallels her growing trust in the people around her. Mona does not yet trust herself when it comes to her fetish. Its control over her remains too powerful, as shown in 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 is a palpable figure in her mind, eliciting a visceral physical reaction. It ‘rears’ animalistically, waiting for her, as no inanimate object should do. Mona is unable to combat this fetish alone - but she does begin to trust others, particularly the science teacher. Upon inviting the science teacher over, 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 – and the science teacher repeatedly refuses her pleas. As he refuses, Mona’s trust in him as an ally in resisting her damaging fetish grows. This can be seen in how Mona’s descriptions of soap become less animated and feral: “Lather drains into the sink, thinning,” “In the next room, the soap is a quiet dry stone” (Bender 221-222). 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. Throughout the course of this novel, Mona approaches this 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 begins to surrender her ever-taut control through her trust in her growing relationships, particularly with the science teacher.

Second Scaffolding Response Rubric

Name: Zoe Mertz

10-9 8-6 5-4 3-2 1-0

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| Clearly states and understands  theory. Uses quotations and focuses on specific term(s) | Shows good understanding of theory and presents general ideas. Could be more specific regarding terms. | Offers general claims about theory but tends to be too general. Quotations don’t match discussion. | Vague claims about theory. Little or no focus on terms or use of quotations. | Who’s Hyde, what’s a gift? | 10 |
| Uses theoretical terms to build a specific bridge to the novel. Defines the connection between the concepts and the textual analysis. | Makes a more general bridge to the novel. Theorist’s concepts help focus on passage from novel. Could define more specifically. | Bridge to novel is shaky, either by failing to clarify theory or that the connection to novel isn’t clear. | Bridge to novel is still under construction. Needs more specific terms to help foundation. Relevance to novel is shaky. | Who needs a bridge, I’ll fly instead! | 9 |
| Close-reads specific passage from novel, discussing language of gifts, and offering insightful analysis. | Makes anecdotal rather than textual analysis. Refers to language but with less analysis. | Mostly anecdotal (lacking textual references). Describes what happens rather than analyzes its significance. | Makes general references to language but lacks analysis and close-reading. | No close-reading of language. No analysis of novel or character. Who’s Mona? | 9 |
| Write clearly without serious grammatical issues. | Generally good writing with a few issues (pronouns, etc.) | Awkward syntax, several grammatical issues. | Difficult to read because of syntax, grammar, or other issues. | Writing isn’t my thing. | 10 |

Grade: 38 Comments: Zoe: An excellent discussion here! You’ve done a really good job with Freud and your discussion of the novel is focused, well-supported with textual evidence, and lucidly argued. You can still do a bit more with the language from the novel, and probably with Freud too. Your final paragraph is great, but it needs a bit more framework to help pull together your important point. But your opening paragraph does a great job on Freud and the novel. Nicely done!