The Pit, the Tunnel, and the Light of J. Alfred Prufrock

“Righteous peril; she left with grace
Leaving me to stutter, never walking a pace
Unsure and unaware of the world outside the mirror
I am my smile, never seen
I am my voice always taciturn
But my eyes burn with a lucid moonlight
Making my base so much clearer

Poetry is about expressing emotions in a slightly exaggerated way as to create a commonplace aura that the reader can read and possibly learn from. In T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot is able to do this very well in his creation of a depressed ‘everyman.’ The theme, or thesis, or even motif, if you will, based upon Prufrocks’ obvious issues with procrastination and insecurity – which is also seen in Janice Mirikitani’s “Suicide Note” – is that Prufrock seems to suffer a mental disorder involving depression and a more
manic attitude – which is common in patients with bi-polar disorder – and is a man that has given up.

It becomes obvious in the first few lines that Prufrock is slow to initialize any effort. The primordial allusion to his having ‘called it quits’ is procrastination. Procrastination is sometimes seen as a lack of organization (Klingsieck) and the reader sees this in Prufrock’s inability to form a stable thought. In the first three lines, he relates an evening out on the town to a “patient etherized upon a table” (Eliot 3). The fact that he is mentioning a lack of perception or consciousness says that Prufrock is hesitant to apply effort in the situation. There is a force holding him back. He describes this force by using a relative comparison: “Streets follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent” (8-9). Through this comparison, the reader may easily be filled with an image of themselves on the first day of school, with their hesitancy to leave their comfort zone, and feeling anxious to leave.

A few times throughout “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot implements a view on how he thinks his romantic interest is or was interpreting his driveless attempt to woo a woman. “Women come and go talking of Michaelangelo” (13-14) provides insight as to why Prufrock might be procrastinating. He envisions women as going back to their old lives, without him, to envision and strive for more. Prufrock is giving himself no further incentive to make a more prolific attempt. Furthermore, Prufrock finds himself at an impasse when Eliot writes, “Time for you and time for me, and time yet for a hundred indecisions” (31-32). This passage explains that Prufrock is so preoccupied with his impression that he is unable to think of what to say to benefit his situation.

Secondly, Prufrock is infested with insecurities. Lines thirty-one and thirty-two have a second interpretation that proves this. He is afraid that anything he that has to say is ineffectual
or insufficient to stimulate conversation, or amount to likeability. He doesn’t respect or care for himself enough to be confident in a one on one scenario. It becomes apparent that he cares, overwhelmingly, for the opinions of others when Prufrock commences to state there are “eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (56). He is afraid to be himself for fear the “eyes” could not accept him. Eliot refers to this and other insecurities as “butt-ends” (60), which alludes to cigarette smoking. This is a known bad habit that peoples, every day, try to rid themselves of. This is about the turning point that indicates Prufrock has given up. “And should I then presume? And how should I begin?” (68-69). Prufrock is far too focused on the end goal than what is necessary to get him there. He sets himself up for failure, and allows himself to plummet due to insecurities. He has now essentially given up.

The last substantial effect that has led Prufrock to commit to the state he is in is the undertone in the poem that Prufrock is depressed, or otherwise suffering from an unbalanced state. He creates an illusion of “a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (73-74) that proves his lack of will by shouting that he doesn’t feel that he has a say in what will happen to him. He further complies to this idea: “I am no Prophet- and here’s no great matter” (83). Prufrock sees nothing good in his life and finds nothing worth fighting for. In the build-up of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot includes a line perfect in emanating a sense of insanity and quite more at that: “I know the voices that die in a dying fall” (52). The fact that Eliot includes this line implies that Prufrock sees himself as depressed and keeps depression on his mind, which most likely allows these depressed thoughts to fester and grow stronger, and more pungent.

Prufrock not only gets depressed but also gets himself excited at the prospect of doing something interesting, which is more manic and shows a want for love, or at least
companionship, to help him enlist a driving force. A manic attitude is common in the symptoms of bipolar disorder. Other symptoms include the negative perception of “goals, standards, and concerns” (Goossens), which affects a person’s well-being. “Is it perfume from a dress that makes me so digress” (65–66). This verse says that women have always been an example of something that could possibly help to free his mind. He also shows a want to release himself from his dark emotions. Eliot even goes so far as to include an allusion from the Bible; Prufrock wishes he would be able to say, “I am Lazarus, come from the dead” (94) or, in Laymen’s terms, he seeks to be free, but is not willing to help himself. He is, quite simply, waiting for a miracle.

In the end, Eliot starts to again create an ideal environment that Prufrock only dreams of obtaining and then finishes with this note: “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (131). This only concludes that Prufrock is willing to dream, but depression keeps him from making it a reality, and, therefore, allows him to be stuck in the incessant cycle of his mental illness.

Insecurity is a banal issue among people who look at life through a scope, making inconsistencies or imperfections seem much larger and more complex than they generally are. This can be witnessed in the similar poem “Suicide Note” by Janice Mirikitani, where the main character has not only given up on herself but on life as well. She repeats her insecurities in various places like, “not good enough… not pretty enough… not smart enough” (Mirikitani 3) to show that they are not only issues she struggles with but complications that are a constant in the party of her brain. Insecurity, along with a very likely mental illness like depression or bipolar disorder, has affected Prufrock in quite the same way. These problems stick around in his head and eventually wear him down until he can only see himself as a failure. But again, poetry is a method of helping people, and now Prufrock, or his living counterpart, can possibly see the error in his ways. The girl in the story “Suicide Note” serves as a warning to those who have surpassed
the threshold, like Prufrock, and have given up, believing that their life is beyond thriving and is filled with nothing but heartbreak.
Works Cited


