The Problems of J. Alfred Prufrock

Heartbreaks are unfortunately commonplace in life. They are painful and everyone wants to avoid as best as they can. In T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the protagonist (Prufrock) visits a woman whom he loves but he is not sure if she reciprocates his feelings for her. Throughout the whole poem he makes up excuses for himself and talks himself out of ever confronting this girl because he incapable of asserting his emotions and desires to her for multiple reasons. By the end of the poem, Prufrock's paralyzing self-consciousness and fears of rejection and consequence override his desire to be with this woman and he ends up them same way that he began, alone.

Prufrock's paralyzing self-consciousness is one of the biggest reasons as to why he ultimately fails to attract the woman he so desperately seeks. From the beginning of the poem, it should be obvious to the reader that this is not going to end well for Prufrock. Just by the look and the sound of his full name, "J. Alfred Prufrock," the initial response should be to envision a socially awkward character. This social awkwardness is primarily formed by his extreme self-consciousness. He imagines women exchanging comments not about his wealth and successfulness but rather on the "bald spot in the middle of [his] hair" and "how his arms and legs are thin" (40,44). Another example of Prufrock's self-consciousness is when he says, "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons" because he is so concerned with what others think of him that he must make sure that everything is perfect, even the smallest and most ridiculous details (51). Prufrock's lack of self-confidence leads him to say that he "[does] not think that [mermaids] will sing to him" (125). He is obviously not talking about mermaids singing here but instead about women conversing. He does not find himself worthy enough to be a topic of conversation among the woman he feels an attraction to. This paralyzing self-consciousness is so bad that it
actually "paralyzes” Prufrock to the extent that he is unable to make a move on the woman he is constantly referring to.

Prufrock's fear of rejection causes him to never actually follow through with asking the woman his "overwhelming" question." Right from the beginning T.S. Eliot alludes to the biblical passage from Ecclesiastes entitled "Man Cannot Hit on the Right Time To Act" by having Prufrock repeatedly say "there will be time" (26). This passage is typically read at funerals because it is comforting and reassuring. This reference could be referring to the fact that Prufrock's masculinity is dead because he does not demonstrate the typical confidant and assertive male qualities and therefore making this attempt at a relationship bound to fail.

Prufrock repeats this phrase to himself multiple times to reassure himself that there will be time in the future to ask the woman his question. However, by doing so, Prufrock is only putting it off and procrastinating because he is afraid of how the woman might react after he confronts his feelings towards her. Towards the end of the poem, as Prufrock is recollecting, he says, "Would it all have been worthwhile / After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets / After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor" (101-103). Here Prufrock questions if his many efforts to court and catch this woman's attention would be worth it if in the end she rejects him. This further goes to prove that Prufrock has a fear of getting rejection and that is why it is subconsciously impossible for him to put himself at risk.

The final reason that can be attributed to Prufrock's failure with the woman is his subconscious fear of consequences. This reason may not be as obvious as the first two but when Prufrock says, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" he worries about what the greater consequence of a relationship would mean so that he could possibly find an excuse to put it off (45-46). In the line right after this, Prufrock goes on to say that "In a minute there is time for decisions and
revisions which a minute will reverse," which indicates that his fear of having to deal with the possible consequences of his actions is so great that he finds it necessary to revise them to the point where they will be minimal or nonexistent (47-48). But possibly the most intriguing part of the poem is when he references Shakespeare by saying, "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was I meant to be; / Am an attendant lord...start a scene or two...an easy tool...almost, at times, the Fool" (111-119). This stanza serves as perhaps the strongest evidence to this argument because here Prufrock is flat out saying that he is fine with being a minor character or even a fool because he does not want attention to be drawn to him. The repercussions of a fool's mistake are minimal because he is expected to make mistakes. Prufrock simply cannot handle responsibility because "in short, [he is] afraid," afraid of failing and having to deal with the consequences (86).

In conclusion, Prufrock's attempt with the woman was bound to fail from the beginning of the poem because his paralyzing self-consciousness and fears of rejection and consequence simply made it impossible for him to make any progress. All these different reasons were Prufrock's subconscious trying to let him know that he actually does not want a relationship with this woman because subconsciously he doesn’t want it to work. Although the poem ends on a somber note, T.S. Eliot wants the reader to empathize with Prufrock and understand that everything in life happens for a reason by learning from the mistakes he makes. The truth is, everyone experiences failure in their lifetime regardless if it is with relationships or not.

- Michael Domagala