

# Poem analysis: suicide note by janice mirikitani



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The poem, “ Suicide Note,” by Janice Mirikitani, is about a young Asian-American female college student who commits suicide by jumping out of her dormitory window. The last words, thoughts and feelings were recorded in the suicide note she leaves behind. This note, written in the form of a poem, allows the reader to see what induces an individual to take his/her own life. The poem describes the line of thinking of a despaired college girl, who relentlessly feels that she is not good enough. The poem is presented by the author in the form of a suicide note written by the poor girl to her parents. This was a heartbreaking incident that should never have happened in the first place. So, what is it that pushed this girl student over the edge? Whose fault is it? Where to place the blame? Such questions are answered below.

This suicidal girl has a perfectionist streak in her, which compels her to be highly critical of herself. She also seems to have set unreasonable standards for herself. The reoccurring line in this poem, “ not good enough, not pretty enough, not smart enough”, is to emphasize this aspect of her psyche. The poem also mentions how the girl failed to get high grades in exams. This also suggests that her parents were more concerned about the grades she acquires and not truly unconditional in their love for their daughter.

As she stands on the ledge of her building in preparation for death, she remembers how her present condition is similar to that of a sparrow waiting to take flight with wings that are in good shape for flying. She feels that her every shortcoming is like “ ice above her river”. Snowfall has begun and she is now unsure as to what to do. It then occurs to her how disappointed her parents would be when they come to know of her failure. That comes out as apologies for her imperfections. These perceived imperfections are due to

distortions in her mental outlook, caused by parental conditioning, and in reality are not imperfections at all.

The girl is not able to accept her imperfections and thinks she cannot deal with life. Instead of hoping that her problems would eventually alleviate, she gives up hope and opts for the easier way out. She acts as if she were just a bird that is overwhelmed by a gusty storm. Contrastingly, she feels that men do not have such problems and are stronger to weather any kind of storm, which of course is not true. The truth, which is unknown to the girl, is that men have as much self-doubt at times as women do. The following sentences capture that illusion of hers:

“ I would swagger through lifemuscle and bold and assured, drawing praises to me like currents in the bed of wind, virile with confidence.”

Everyone feels less than perfect at times, but such feelings are usually dealt with in a constructive way. But the poor girl feels like a failure no matter what she did. Her parents were so critical of her that she automatically sees a dark cloud beside every silver lining. As human beings we all need approval and appreciation from our elders and peers. But the popular consumerist culture that we live in imposes upon us images of extraordinarily built men models and absurdly thin female models, who are projected as specimens worthy of emulation. Such messages can have a devastating effect on the unwary, like the suicidal girl.

The phrases “ not good enough”, “ not smart enough”, “ not pretty enough”, which are repeated throughout the poem, render a powerful effect on the reader. These phrases are repeated over and over again, to impress upon

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the reader the gravity of the girl's abuse by her parents, who seemed to have little appreciation for their daughter's small but significant accomplishments. No one had ever brought it to her attention that she was doing a good job, or that she looked pretty, or that she was smart. After all, she was smart and capable, but only a fraction shy of a perfect grade sheet.

Further, she apologizes to her parents. She feels sorry for disappointing her parents. She thinks this could have been avoided if she would have been less lazy, which is not true. Irrespective of her efforts to please her parents she always felt she fell short and was not good enough in the eyes of her parents. This leads her to imagine how perfect life would have been had she been born a boy, with broader shoulders that can weather any challenge. Would that have given her more parental attention? Would it have made her parents satisfied? Or, would it have lessened their expectations of her?

The depths of her despair can be seen in these lines:

“ Each failure, a glacier. Each disapproval, a footprint. Each disappointment, ice above my river.”

The poem could be summarized thus: The poem describes the emotions and true feelings of a young girl student who thinks that suicide is the only way left for her to please her parents and others and escape the pressures of student life. The note has an apologetic quality to it, which is her way of acknowledging her imperfection and not fulfilling her parent's expectation of a perfect 4.0 grade. Whatever effort she puts in, she can never satisfy her parents for their expectation are unreasonably high. Her parents' words repeat in her mind – “ not good enough not pretty enough not smart

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enough.” At that moment she genuinely wishes she were born a son, which would have equipped her better in dealing with the challenges of her life. The words “ Each disappointment, ice above my river” indicate that she is fully sapped of enthusiasm after those ‘ perceived’ failings. She feels that she will never find success in school, and she is never able to please her parents. Therefore, she jumps to the conclusion that suicide is the only way she will be rid of all this torment.