Overview: This lesson is intended to be a kind of "plug and play" support for teachers new to close reading in the classroom. It focuses on deliberately small portions of a larger text to show how even small (and seemingly insignificant) word choices can "open up" themes, motifs, and characters in a larger work. (Lesson Duration: 2 hours)

Standards

- **RL.11-12.1**: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

- **RL.11-12.4:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

Objectives
The students will learn to close-read a text for its diction, exploring the ways in which even one word or one name can be used as a lever to "open up" larger-scale issues of characterization and theme in a modern poem.

Materials:
Classroom copies of the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," by T.S. Eliot

Procedure:

Before the Lesson
Students should have received copies of the poem for individual perusal.

Activity 1: What's in a Name?[1]

Purpose: Students practice close reading skills by making inferences about a character based upon his name.

Individual Reflection
Before students begin to read the poem, ask them to answer the following questions individually, jotting down answers on a separate piece of paper or on the poem itself.

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[1] I am forever indebted to Dr. L. Kip Wheeler of Carson-Newman College and to Helen Vendler, author of *Poems, Poets, and Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (2002 edition) for some of the core ideas and questions presented in this lesson.

- What kind of person writes a love song?
- What is the purpose or goal of a love song?
- What kind of name is "J. Alfred Prufrock?
- What impression of this person is suggested by the "J."? The "Alfred"?
- Why not "*John* Alfred," or "*Joseph* A. Prufrock"?
- Does the word "Prufrock" remind you of other English words?
- What impression of this person is suggested by the name "Prufrock"?
- Do you like this character? Dislike him?
- Does he remind you of anyone in a work of literature, film, or history? In what way?

Pair/Small Group Discussion

After students have had sufficient time to digest these questions, have students meet in pairs or small groups to compare and contrast answers. Remind students that they should press their peers for evidence: If a student in the group offers a particular impression of the personality suggested by Prufrock's name (e.g., "He sounds like he's boring"), encourage the student to offer justification for his answer. In short, ask why he thinks so.

A Brief Note About Small-Group Discussion

Even though the whole-class discussion would just seem to rehash the small-group discussion, the small-group discussion is crucial. Especially for more reticent students, the opportunity to "test-drive" their initial impressions with their peers and compare impressions of the text before taking the larger risk of sharing in front of the whole class can be invaluable.

Small-group discussion also helps negate or eliminate those "Mount Rushmore moments" in which the teacher asks a question about the text, and the class looks back at her with apparently uncomprehending blankness. A helpful response here is often, "Okay, talk about this amongst yourselves for the next few minutes, and then we'll reconvene as a class and see what you think." This decision buys students time and allows them to compose fruitful answers – and allows them to understand that in textual interpretation, the onus has to be on them to be active, engaged readers in conversation with the text.

Whole-Class Discussion

The class discussion should continue the insights shared about Prufrock's name. What often emerges from these discussions is a preliminary understanding of Prufrock's character: that he is fussy, older, upper-class, careful, punctilious – not exactly a party animal!

From that point, the earlier discussion about the nature of a love song can be "woven in" to the discussion – what kind of "love song" could we expect from a character such as this?

A Brief Note About Whole-Class Discussion

The role of the teacher in class discussion is primarily to keep students *focused on the words*. In discussion, require students to explain what element or elements within the words led them to their conclusion. Four questions are absolutely essential to ask students during discussion – and to encourage students to ask of themselves and each other.

WHY?
- Why do you think so?
- Why does your line/your word/your evidence prove your point?
- Why did the author use this particular word and not another, similar word?

WHERE?
- Where in the story/play/poem did you find your information?
- Can you literally put your finger on the place in the text that proves your point?

WHAT?
- What do you mean when you say "_____"?
- What does this quote you chose mean? Can you rephrase it?
- What else could the author have said here?
- What "work" is this word doing that a similar one would not do?

For some teachers, this role may represent a change from the usual classroom discussion. **The goal of the teacher is not to lead the students to a predetermined insight, but to communicate the crucial idea that although there may not be one "right answer," there are better and worse ones – and the better ones *are* better because they are supported by the words of the author.**

Activity 2: Abandon All Hope…

Purpose
Students should understand that texts – even ones distant in time and culture from each other – can nevertheless be in "conversation" with each other, and that close-reading the words of both texts to explore their connections can reveal larger-scale issues of characterization and theme.

Background Lecture
Students should notice that "Prufrock" begins not with a passage in English, but with a somewhat-mystifying epigraph in Italian:

> S`io credesse che mia risposta fosse
>
> A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
>
> Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
>
> Ma perciocchè giammai di questo fondo
>
> Non tornò vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
>
> Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.
>
> -- Dante, The Divine Comedy, *Inferno*

Explain that this is an **epigraph** – a short quotation from a famous source or person placed at the beginning of one's work – and that very often, the author includes an epigraph as a way of setting the tone for the work to follow or commenting upon it.

Prereading and Background
Students also need to understand that this quotation is from Canto 27 of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. In the story of the *Inferno*, Dante, a man halfway through his life, wakes up near a dark and ominous wood without knowing quite how he got there. The pathway from which he has strayed leads up a hill, but each time he attempts to scale the hill, his way is barred by a ferocious beast. Seeing no other way to go but down, Dante turns to the dark wood when he is met by a man he knows – or rather, a man whose works he knows: the ancient Roman poet Virgil, long since dead.

Virgil explains to Dante that he is perilously close to the Inferno, the Hell into which his actions will surely lead him, but that he, Virgil, has been sent to show Dante a better path. However, as is often the case, the only way out is through: as Virgil explains, they must go through Hell together. Dante descends into the concentric circles of the Inferno, each circle darker and grimmer than the last as the sins being punished increase in their gravity and damage.

At this point in the story, Dante encounters Guido da Montefeltro, a man being punished for giving false counsel by being encased in a constant flame. Seeing Dante, and believing that he also must be among the dead, Guido makes the following statement, a translation of the passage above:

> *If I thought my answer were given*
>
> *to a person who would return unto the world,*
>
> *this flame would cease to flicker.*
>
> *But since no one has ever returned alive from this abyss,*
>
> *If what I have heard is the truth,*
>
> *Then without fear of dishonor I answer you.*

Individual Reflection
Before students begin small-group discussion, ask them to answer the following questions individually, jotting down answers on a separate piece of paper or on the poem itself.

- How does this quotation change our expectations about "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"?
- How does this quotation change our understanding of Prufrock's identity?
- In the original text, Guido speaks to Dante. In the context of *this* poem, who is speaking to whom?

Pair/Small Group Discussion
After students have had sufficient time to digest these questions, have students meet in pairs or small groups to compare and contrast answers. Remind students that they should press

their peers for evidence – have them substantiate their responses with reasons from the text. "It's just my opinion" doesn't really help.

Whole-Class Discussion
The class discussion should continue the insights shared about the Dante epigraph. Often, students' views of Prufrock will be radically shifted – those who initially felt he was sort of a fuddy-duddy might well now see Prufrock as a dead man, one who speaks to us from beyond the grave. Some students have concluded that by including this epigraph, Eliot (or Prufrock) has turned us into Dante…or perhaps into Virgil. The implications of either choice are fascinating.

Closure
Students should be reminded of their initial impressions of this "love song" or their first ideas of Prufrock and contrast those initial impressions with the deeper insight we got into this man's character by reading the implications of the epigraph. From this point, students may obviously proceed further into the poem, conducting additional close readings of pivotal moments or quotes, occasionally returning to the central issues raised by this discussion: Does the further reading of the poem confirm the idea that Prufrock speaks from a hell he has created? Or is he like Dante, presented with a possible future he is able to bypass or avoid -- though he must go through it?

Assessment
There are a variety of ways in which these activities may be assessed. Simple class participation points for relevant, engaged contributions to the conversation would be one method, or the insights gained during class discussion may be used as prompts for a shorter or longer writing assignment in which students substantiate their insights about the poem with specific reference to the text. One such writing prompt occurs below and should take place after the students have had time to read and analyze the poem as a whole. Please note that if this assignment will be used, the specific word in question should NOT be discussed at any length in class so as to avoid "lecture recap" papers: papers which merely repeat or paraphrase the whole-class insights without genuinely analyzing the material individually.

Prompt: Late in the poem, Prufrock makes the following observation:

> *I have seen the moment of my greatness <u>flicker</u>,*
> *And I have seen the <u>eternal Footman</u> hold my coat, and snicker,*
> *And in short, <u>I was afraid</u>. (84-86)*

What is the significance of the underlined words in relation to the poem as a whole, <u>specifically including</u> the epigraph from Dante that precedes this work? What does this moment allow the reader to understand about Prufrock's essential self and soul?

Questions for brainstorming:

- o Why does Eliot use the word "flicker"? Why not "glow," "shine," "coruscate," etc.?
- o Who or what is the "eternal Footman"? What does this character reveal or suggest about Prufrock's symbolic location or placement at this moment in the poem?
- o The last line is a powerful confession. Why is Prufrock telling us this information? How does it help us understand his current state?