

## Practising close reading

You are now going to practise close reading with a poem studied on the **Explorations in Literature** course, T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Tasks 1–3 below suggest how you can prepare for the close reading that you will do in Task 4.

1. First, locate a copy of the poem, either in print or online. Most print editions by a reputable publisher will suffice for our purposes here, but if you want to get ahead the course subject guide recommends the following edition:

T.S. Eliot *Prufrock and Other Observations* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001) [ISBN 9780571207206].

Alternatively, you can use the online version at the following site:

[www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/20220](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/20220)

2. Read the poem passively first, for pleasure, not worrying about what it all means.
3. Then read the poem comprehensively. Look up any words you do not know. Try and find a translation for the opening epigraph – you should easily be able to find this online. Note any images that are peculiar or strange ('sawdust restaurants' might be one image you identify here). Don't worry about what they might mean at this stage – just be aware of which images are puzzling, or defy easy comprehension. There's a good chance that your close-reading activity will illuminate your understanding of them.
4. Now it is time to carry out some close reading. When you are studying the course yourself, you will need to make some decisions about what you are going to pay close attention to. As this is a practice exercise, though, here is one suggestion (further suggestions are contained in course materials available upon registration):
  - (a) The title: titles in literature almost always shed some light on the meaning of the text. Why do you think Eliot chose 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' as a title for his poem? Can you find any connections between the title and the content? Conversely, can you find any tensions or discrepancies between the title and the content?

Jot down your thoughts below (tip: think about each word of the title here, as well as the meaning of the phrase as a whole)

## Feedback

At first it seems that the title of the poem bears little connection to its content – this is hardly the passionate love song that we are led to expect! In some ways, you might say that this is a very effective means by which Eliot forces us to experience the disappointment felt by his protagonist as he fails to form any substantial relationships with others. It also seems more of a dramatic monologue, of the kind you might see in a Shakespeare play, rather than a ‘song’ in the traditional sense. Indeed, Eliot suggests as much when he makes Prufrock say ‘I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two’.

On the other hand, there is a strong musical feel to the poem. However, the seductive hypnotic rhythm and heavy use of full and partial rhyme draws the reader in, only to lead them to images of disconnection, severances that are enacted in the free verse structure of the poem where lines and stanzas of variable lengths forge short-lived connections through repeated phrases. In the persistent repetitions and frequent use of parallelisms,<sup>1</sup> the poem cuts itself off from the richness and variety of language, favouring a limited pool of words and phrases evocative of Prufrock’s limited sensibility.

You may have given some thought to the treatment of ‘love’ in the poem – it may interest you to know that the poem was originally titled ‘Prufrock Among the Women’. His separation from women is articulated through a refrain set apart from the main body of the poem, mirroring Prufrock’s exclusion (‘In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo’). The reference to women moving in a group is no accident; not only do they prefigure the group of mermaids Prufrock later encounters (who he expects will also exclude him), they contrast with the men of the poem who are referred to in the singular (Michelangelo, ‘the eternal Footman’, Lazarus, Hamlet, an attendant lord). Unlike the women flowing freely through the room, men are ‘lonely’ and uncomfortable in interiors, seen ‘leaning out of windows’. The female-dominated room (which some have said it is a metaphor for the womb or female sex organs) is a site of danger and fierce scrutiny, a room Prufrock would prefer not to enter, hoping to ‘descend the stair’ of sexual foreplay that leads there. It’s not surprising that his female companion turns away from him in the bedroom, settling a pillow down to sleep or moving from the bed to the window as Prufrock fails to understand or satisfy her.

Some critics intriguingly suggest that Eliot uses the title ironically; that is, that the poem is about Prufrock’s inability to ‘love’, or feel deep connection, with his own self. Such ironic readings are certainly made plausible by the content that follows – the poem reveals little about who the protagonist J. Alfred Prufrock is or to whom his supposed ‘love song’ is addressed, just as we can never be sure what, exactly, is the ‘overwhelming question’ that vexes him. We know the protagonist’s surname (itself uncommon and strange) and middle name, yet we are only offered the initial of his first name. Indeed ‘J’ may be read as a distorted ‘I’, suggestive of the many estranged ‘I’s haunting the poem unable to settle on a satisfactory sense of self.

<sup>1</sup> *Parallelism: a sentence or phrase that repeats or parallels the grammatical structure (but not the content) of another sentence or phrase within the text e.g. ‘And I have known the eyes already...And I have known the arms already.’*

Thinking about next steps? Save any work you do here in case it is useful to you when the course begins – your tutor, for instance, might invite you to discuss your experience of the taster activity.