

The Scream

DIANA J. WIELER



Focus Your Learning

Reading this short story will help you:

- read for detail
- create a dramatic monologue
- use a thesaurus to extend your vocabulary
- practise using new vocabulary

Eliza had never been in a drama class. Now that she was here, she was certain it was a mistake. Absolutely certain. There were no desks and no blackboards, no papers or books. The big room was empty, except for a platform at one end, raised eight inches above the shiny hardwood floor. At the other end of the room there were mirrors, a whole wall full, so that you had to see yourself, every time you glanced up.

This isn't going to work! Eliza thought, flattening herself against the wall, her binder clutched over her chest. At thirteen, Eliza wasn't on friendly terms with mirrors. She was too tall and too skinny; her elbows and shoulders stuck out like sharp corners. She was on



medication for eczema, but it wasn't helping. No matter what creams or lotions she spread on, her skin was forever white, dry and scaly.

"Lizard skin." Eliza jumped, but no one was even looking at her. Most of the boys and girls were clustered in tight groups in the centre of the room. She knew some of them from last year, grade six.

"This is going to be a blast—no homework or books. Just do plays and stuff. What a cinch!" That was Todd Zudder. Eliza remembered he had pushed her once, in the stairwell at their old school. She had fallen down five stairs.

"So I bumped into her," Todd had shrugged in the principal's office. "I'm clumsy. What can I say?" Eliza was still frightened of stairwells, and Todd Zudder.

"Maybe we can get marks for plays we've already been in," said Melissa Downing. Eliza knew Melissa had already been Baby Bear in *The Three Bears*, the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, and the Snowflake Queen in the grade six Christmas pageant.

How am I going to get out of this? Eliza wondered, her heart thumping. She'd never been in any plays, she'd never even taken baton lessons. How could she cope in this empty room that didn't have any desks? What if they all had to sit on the floor and no one would sit near her?

"Lizard skin." Eliza flinched but pretended she didn't hear. She had practice at pretending like that.

Bang! The chatter stopped abruptly and everyone looked up.

"Thank you," said the teacher, who had slammed the door. "My name is Mrs. Draginda. Don't forget it because I'm not going to write it down. First of all, take off your shoes and set them against the wall."

There were groans and cries of, "Whew! What a stink!" Eliza set down her binder and untied her sneakers with trembling fingers. Did her socks match, did they have any holes? Oh, why hadn't she thought about her socks this morning?

"You will take your shoes off every time you come into this room," Mrs. Draginda said, limping up onto the platform. "I want you to be able to feel the floor under your feet."

One of her legs is shorter than the other, Eliza thought suddenly. It seemed to be what everyone was thinking. Mrs. Draginda looked out at the group with piercing blue eyes.

“I’ll tell you two things right now,” she said. “I had polio when I was young, so you don’t have to ask. And I hate grade sevens. Grade sevens are silly and loud and inhibited.” The room started to grumble but Mrs. Draginda cut them off.

“That’s right, inhibited. Here’s your chance to prove me wrong. Everyone, begin walking in a circle—now!”

It was a command. Eliza leapt up and joined the circle of whispering children. No one had ever met anyone like Mrs. Draginda. They didn’t understand her. After all, teachers never came out and said they hated grade sevens. Teachers weren’t supposed to hate anybody.

This is going to be awful, Eliza thought numbly, marching around with the rest of them. No desks, no shoes, and a teacher who hated her, right from the start!

“Now, take proud steps. Walk like kings and queens,” Mrs. Draginda called. Eliza didn’t know how queens walked, but she was pretty sure they didn’t leap, the way Melissa Downing was. Melissa was prancing and lunging, a cross between a Snowflake Queen and a swordfighter.

“Don’t dance—walk! When I want ballerinas, I’ll ask for them.”

Melissa stopped leaping, her mouth set in a tight line. Mrs. Draginda had them walk like kings, then crawl like insects. She had them reach up, as high as they could, then collapse to the floor. Eliza wasn’t very good at reaching, but she knew how to fall. She knew the feeling of her arms and legs losing power, she knew what it was like to melt helplessly to the floor in a heap. She did that sometimes when she got home from school, when the door to her room was closed and no one would hear her cry.

Todd Zudder thought collapsing was funny.

“Argh! I’m shot, I’m shot!” he groaned, falling straight forward like a mannequin. Some of the kids laughed.

“Save the theatrics,” Mrs. Draginda snapped, “or you’ll be doing them out in the hallway—without an audience.” The giggles died away.



Eliza was thinking about Mrs. Draginda's limp. At first she'd felt sorry for the teacher, but she didn't now.

No one would make fun of her—they wouldn't dare, Eliza thought. She remembered the icy blue eyes, how they could freeze you where you stood. It'd be a good thing to have eyes like that.

"All right, everyone back in a circle," Mrs. Draginda said, limping into the middle of the room. "We're going to scream."

The class fell silent. Eliza wondered if she'd heard right. What were they going to do?

Mrs. Draginda was in the centre of the circle, her arms folded over her chest. She didn't look pleased.

"I told you grade sevens were inhibited," she sighed. "Everyone face inwards. When I point at you, I want you to scream, as loud and hard as you can. No waiting, no pauses, just give me a good primal scream."

She pointed at Todd Zudder. For a moment he was silent, startled, then he broke into a Tarzan yell.

"Out!" Mrs. Draginda jerked her thumb towards the door. "I'll see you after class."

"Hey, wait. I was just ..."

"Out!" the teacher demanded again, turning her back to him. She pointed at another girl. Todd stomped out and the girl screamed. It was a high, breathy wail, like a starlet in a science fiction movie.

"Next!" Mrs. Draginda cried, cutting her off. One after another the students screamed, each sound flowing into the next as the teacher pointed around the circle.

Eliza was panicking. She had never screamed, not out loud. She couldn't even remember shouting. She had yelled inside her own head a hundred times, but that was different. Now everybody would be watching her, hearing her. The pounding in her ears was so loud it hurt.

"You," Mrs. Draginda said. Eliza closed her eyes. The sound came from the pit of her stomach and tore up through her throat, vibrating in her chest. She could feel something ripping inside her, like a piece

of paper being torn in half. It felt good. She pushed in her stomach muscles and the sound went on and on and on until ...

Silence. Eliza opened her eyes, gasping. Oh no! Everyone was staring at her. Even Mrs. Draginda seemed frozen to the spot, a statue with parted lips. Then she came to life.

“Now that was a scream!” the teacher said. “That’s what I want the rest of you to work towards. When I ask you for more, think of that scream.”

The teacher stopped talking, but her eyes held Eliza’s for a long moment. For the first time, they didn’t look cold. The girl felt a warm glow in her stomach, the same place the scream had started.

The class was over too soon. As Eliza pulled on her shoes and picked up her books, she could feel the others watching her. They were whispering; Eliza caught fragments like, “Did you ever?” and “Who would’ve thought...” She knew they weren’t talking about her skin or her bony elbows. Eliza stepped out into the hallway, brushing lightly past the surprised face of Todd Zudder.

Activities

1. What is it about Mrs. Draginda and her class that allows Eliza to scream as she does? Work with a partner to list as many clues as you can find in the text.
2. Create a personal monologue in which Eliza describes her experience in the class. Be sure to explain how she feels after the scream. Try to make the monologue as dramatic as possible. Be prepared to present it to some of your classmates or tape it for others to hear.
3. Use a thesaurus or other source to collect as many adjectives as possible to describe the atmosphere in the classroom both before and after Eliza screams. Then write at least two paragraphs comparing the atmosphere at the start and end of the class.