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Reading Character in Slow Motion: Sudden Fiction in the Composition Classroom

If this weren't my first year of college, none of this would be happening to me. Let me see, if I left my lab notes in the lab, someone would have called me. If I left them on the bus, they're probably sitting in some lost and found box along with a hundred unmatched greasy mittens at the bus garage. Who knows where that is. Great. I'll have to call after class. If only I could have lost my English notebook instead.

"22 April. Read handout: Buzzati, *The Falling Girl.*

I only have fifteen minutes before class, but the story is short and if I start now, I might just finish in time.

> "Marta was nineteen. She looked out over the roof of the skyscraper, and seeing the city below shining in the dusk, she was overcome with dizziness. The skyscraper was silver, supreme, and fortunate in that most beautiful and pure evening . . ."

The genre of the short-short story, or "sudden fiction," could have been designed with the contemporary student in mind. Usually between two and six pages long, these stories provide an introduction to fiction and its conventions that is especially effective as an intermediate step from popular cultural forms to more traditionally "literary" pursuits. The brevity of this genre, however, is only part of its charm. Short-short stories tend to be quirky and experimental, and unusually generous to their readers—they seldom take for granted their audience's undivided attention.

In my introductory composition courses, I use this relatively new literary form as the basis for the last assignment of the semester, an introduction to reading and writing about literature. To many beginning writers, however, "writing about literature" is not a phrase that signifies, so I narrow the focus a little further and base the assignment on exploring the how and why of literary character. I use several exercises, which I'll describe below, to help writers think about characterization, and I also provide them with a glossary of terms and concepts they may want to use in their essays: point of

view, character development, "round" and "flat" characters, and so on. But before outlining the writing portion of the assignment, I should pause to mention the reading.

I always begin the assignment by having the class read the first selection in the **Sudden Fiction International Anthology**, Dino Buzzati's *The Falling Girl.* One of the best known Italian writers of his generation, Buzzati had a penchant for the absurd and the fantastic, and shared with his contemporary Italo Calvino a profound literary self-consciousness and an extraordinary sense of humor. In *The Falling Girl*, Buzzati indicts the superficiality of postwar Italian society by chronicling the surreal fall of a young woman down the face of a skyscraper. The story is arresting and bitterly ironic, and students are intrigued by its apparent but not quite transparent allegory—a feature which always sparks questions about the author's attitude toward his characters and his thematic intentions.

> "Of course, the distance that separated her from the bottom, that is, from street level, was immense. It is true that she began falling just a little while ago, but the street always seemed very far away."

This is a very strange story. The girl is falling but having conversations with the people she passes on the way down. First question: I want to know why she is falling; what it means that she chose to jump. Second, what is the point? What is Buzzati trying to tell us about these girl's falling down the side of the skyscraper?

Buzzati's story becomes the common property of the class: we discuss it, write responses to it, dissect it, and outline mock papers on its characterization. All this, so that when the students sit down to write on their own stories, they will start with a mental image of how one comes to terms with—or "thinks critically about"—a work of literature.

In designing the assignment, I try to take full pedagogical advantage of the defining feature of short-short stories. To whit: I place on reserve two anthologies of short-short stories and allow the students to choose a story they would like to write about.[1] When they submit their final essays, they also turn in to me a photocopy of the story they have chosen, which I read before responding to their work. I have found that granting the students this measure of autonomy in choosing their

text generally results in a greater sense of personal investment in their essays and a corresponding improvement in the quality of their writing.

What surprises me is that the more we talk about the story, the more things seem to be going on in it. It makes sense that Buzzati is criticizing the girl, but he also is criticizing the people who watch her fall and even those who want to draw her in. And all the time the day is passing, the sun is going down. Everything is happening at the same time.

The assignment itself consists of three parts: a 1-2 page biographical exercise, an exercise on arguing from the text, and a 3-4 page essay. Each student begins by writing a short biography for the character he or she has chosen to analyze. Students are asked to begin with the character as presented in the story, and then extrapolate to supply a range of unmentioned detail—family, age, earlier experiences, and so on. The goal of the exercise is to facilitate a creative exchange with the story and to help students read their characters in a more "writerly" mode. The second exercise brings our focus back to the text, as students submit a list with as many descriptive phrases and details as possible about their characters, with the caveat that each description must be supported by a quotation from the story. To be able to argue one's points from a text is a valuable skill, and this exercise breaks down this process to its constituent parts. Students don't find it as much fun as creating their character's biography, but its effect on the third part of the assignment is unmistakable.

The essay is intended to be the culmination of our class discussions, exercises, and reading—all this, in three to four double-spaced pages. In addition to these preparations, we devote one full class to brainstorming a paper on Buzzati's story and then discussing different approaches students might take in organizing their ideas. For those who are still struggling to find a format for their essay, I suggest analyzing the character they have chosen as a function of three interrelated contexts: the character's situation within the plot, direct description of the character by the author, and how the character's dialogue or thoughts influences his or her reception by the reader.

The essays this assignment generates are usually among the best of the course. This is due in part, I think, to the responsibility students have for choosing their stories, to the accessibility of the idea of character to the beginning reader and writer, and to certain felicities of the genre. The compactness of the short-short story gives the students a particular confidence in speaking about it, first because it is not difficult to see the story and to see it whole, and second because of the erroneous assumption that a work so short could not be truly sophisticated. While this last notion is dispelled sometime shortly after our first discussion of *The Falling Girl*, the sense remains that this isn't literature written for someone else, that these are stories one might choose to read instead of watching television, almost (dare we say it?) *for pleasure.*

It's hard to believe that my lab notes were in my English folder all along. It's even harder to believe that it didn't occur to me to look through my folder until after I had pawed through all those greasy mittens at the bus garage. At least I have my essay on that short-short story done. I think I put it in my chemistry folder .....

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[1] **Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories,** eds. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1986); ***Sudden Fiction International: Sixty Short-Short Stories,*** eds. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

John C. Rezmerski

A PLACE FOR ANYTHING

Apples and other little things are places where little people live. Words like "maybe" and"never" are places with roads between them, and telephone wires, and they are full ofhouses you can visit. There are places inside your body that make the Grand Canyon andNiagara Falls seem like sand castles and raintrickles. Some places inside your mind youhave never visited, and there are hotels where you and everyone you know can stay for freeand have all-night parties. Deep in the deepest depths of your consciousness, there areplaces unmapped, unnamed, unknown, and those are the places where you are allowed toregister a deed and set up housekeeping.