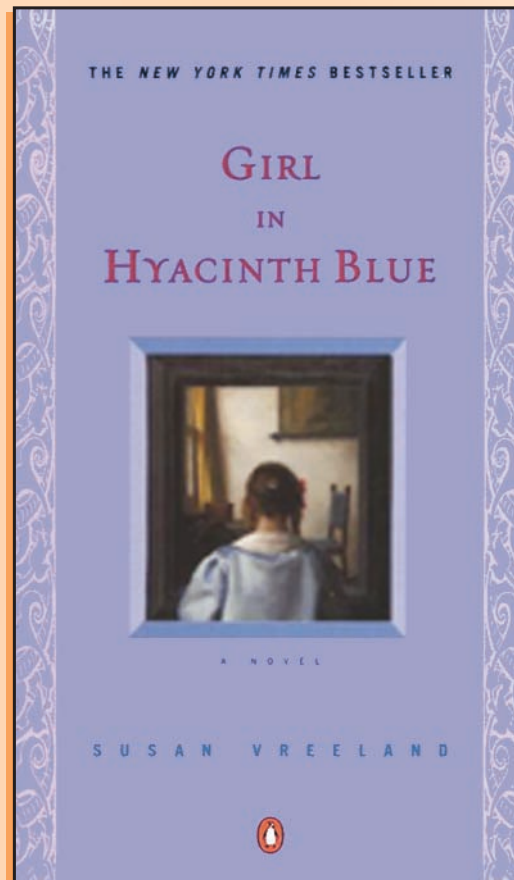




A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION OF  
SUSAN VREELAND'S  
**GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE**



**APPLICATIONS**

1. English classes, contemporary literature classes, Advanced Placement, short story units, creative writing.
2. Social studies classes studying World War II and The Holocaust. The first two stories. "Love Enough" displays the moral issues and guilt incurred by those involved in Holocaust atrocities. "A Night Different from All Other Nights" can be used as a companion to Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. Two girls roughly the same age, in the same Jewish neighborhood of Amsterdam, suffering the growing awareness of the same impending peril; one family going into hiding, one trying to live as usual. Whereas Anne was verbal and expressive, Hannah was inward and suffered the pain of the unexpressed.
3. Correlative reading for American literature classes studying *The Crucible*. Treatment of witches in Salem compared to Aletta in "From the Personal Papers of Adriaan Kuypers."
4. Art history classes
5. Drama/theater arts classes

**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

1. What does *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* suggest about the value (personal and monetary) and purpose of art?
  2. Analyze what function the painting serves for each character. (See "Getting Deeper into the Text")
  3. This painting seems to have a different effect on each of the owners. Name the effects, and speculate why the painting brings out different qualities in different people? Who loved the painting the most? Defend your choice.
  4. Speculate about what actually happened to the painting. In defending your speculation, appraise Cornelius' moral character. Is he capable of destroying the painting or relinquishing it? Is he a failed human being or is he capable of redemption? Defend your evaluation. Does it matter that the final outcome is not shown on scene?
  5. In the end, does it matter whether or not the painting is a Vermeer? To whom does it matter? Analyze what that suggests about those characters.
  6. In what way does the girl in the painting reflect Hannah and Magdalena's natures? In what way are Hannah and Magdalena similar? In what way are Hannah and Anne Frank similar? Distinguish their differences.
  7. The deportation center for Jews rounded up from Amsterdam was Westerbork. From there, they boarded trains to Auschwitz. Seeing the Jewish family herded down the street, Hannah says to herself, "To Westerbork. That place." Why do you think the author chose Westerbork as the village where Saskia grew up?
  8. What does the book have to say about the joys and difficulties of being an artist? On page 204, Vermeer speaks of "the cost" of his painting to his household. To what does he refer? Is it worth it?
  9. What is gained by presenting the stories in reverse chronology? What is lost with this structure?
  10. Identify different kinds of love presented in the book. Consider love for things as well as for people. List actions that expressed love. Think of minor characters too. Who had the highest concept of love?
  11. Discuss the range and significance of the last line. Evaluate its appropriateness.
  12. Where does the novel touch on the tragic? The triumphant?
  13. Is there a piece of art that affects you in a special way? Describe it, and explain its effect on you.
  14. How does art serve us? Why do we need it? How should one look at a painting?
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## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Because the structure of the book consists of eight stories, a class can be divided into eight groups, each assigned to a different story. Each group can discuss the following questions in relation to their story and present their findings to the class.

1. Consider what the story title suggests about the story's theme or the nature of the main character.
2. Formulate a list of details in the painting which are revealed in this story. Synthesize the details you found with those found in other groups in order to create a full image of the painting.
3. What insights about the painting are revealed by a character in this story? How do these insights serve to illuminate or reveal the main character or any appropriate subordinate character?
4. How does the painting function in this story, and for whom does it fulfill that function? Explain what it reveals about that character.
5. Predict what might happen and/or what might be said by a character or characters after your story ends.
6. Locate references to any of the following items: milk; window; blue; potatoes; pigeons; high buildings in flat land. Synthesize your information with information from other groups, and arrive at a conclusion as to the multiple purposes each one of these elements serves.
7. Locate references to the time of the setting. What does the story reveal about the cultural values, conditions and attitudes of the time period in the Netherlands that it represents?
8. In the school library or on the Internet, discover two additional historical details that the author could have woven into the story.
9. Identify a favorite passage, read it to the class, and explain why it appealed to you.

Because all questions may not apply to all stories, each group may be permitted to eliminate one question.

## GETTING DEEPER INTO THE TEXT

The painting functions in different ways for each character, as does any piece of art. Any of these can be used as the basis for class projects.

1. Loss of innocence about his father (Cornelius)
  2. Moral dilemma of theft and ownership (Cornelius and Otto Engelbrecht)
  3. Evidence of Holocaust and forced eviction of Jews
  4. Inspiration toward a loving, courageous, selfless act of resistance (Hannah)
  5. Remembrance of a lost love (Laurens)
  6. A father's pain of releasing daughter to her new husband (Laurens)
  7. Marital peace offering by philandering husband (Gerard)
  8. Ache of being barren (Claudine)
  9. Lure for seduction (Claudine)
  10. Means of support for an abandoned baby (Stijn)
  11. Source of conflict between husband and wife about what's important in life (Saskia and Stijn)
  12. Evidence of spirits and witches (Aletta)
  13. Material gain from participation in the slave trade (Rika)
  14. Payment of debt (Vermeer)
  15. A means to gain attention and love from her father (Magdalena)
  16. Remembrance of things past (Magdalena)
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## VERMEER, THE SPHINX OF DELFT

If a work of art is an expression of the artist's temperament, Johannes Vermeer might be considered a deeply contemplative man. And if his work were said to have a theme, it might be termed the power of woman to hallow home and the sacredness of the quiet or private moment. Yet with eleven children and creditors at the door, his home was hardly peaceful, and he probably had little time for contemplation.

Born in 1632 to a weaver and occasional dealer in art, Vermeer spent his entire life in Delft, eventually gaining in reputation to become one of the heads of the Guild of St. Luke before he died in debt at 43 in 1675. Only some 36 paintings can definitely be ascribed to him, his oeuvre missing any apprentice works, studies, and sketches. No doubt some major canvases have become lost through the centuries.

Although his early paintings were biblical, genre scenes satisfying the bourgeois buyer wanting a mirror of their drawing room society, and townscapes, and his later compositions were allegorical, he is most known for quiet domestic scenes catching a moment in great stillness, usual with a female figure central to the composition. Enigma is his hallmark quality. There is often an ambiguity of situation, a mystery of what the painted figure is actually thinking, a moment of unexplained interaction, which makes Vermeer ripe material for the fiction writer.

While the characters and plot of the first six stories and the last story are completely fictional, the events in "Still Life" were taken from research into Vermeer's life. The subject of the painting being his daughter is, of course, fiction since the painting is imagined. In the historic auction of 1696, Vermeer's paintings averaged 72 guilders each, more than the 60 guilders for a quarter pound of ultramarine pigment made from lapis, the same price as gold. His top 17th century price after his death was 400 guilders, while Rembrandt's were 500-1500. His average annual income from painting was 200 guilders, while a Delft pottery artisan earned 850 yearly.

## SOURCE MATERIAL

Bailey, Anthony, *Vermeer: View of Delft*. Henry Holt, 2001.

Bell, Judith, "The Mystery of Vermeer," *Art and Antiques*, November 1995.

McEntyre, Marilyn Chandler, *In Quiet Light: Poems on Vermeer's Women*, William Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2000.

National Gallery, *Johannes Vermeer*. (catalog of 1995-96 exhibition) Washington: National Gallery of Art; The Hague: *Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis*, 1995.

Wheelock, Arthur, (Curator of Northern European Painting at the National Gallery), *Jan Vermeer*. Abrams, 1988.

Wheelock, Arthur, *Vermeer: The Complete Works*. Abrams, 1997.

Vermeer's complete paintings on line: [www.ccsf.caltech.edu/~roy/vermeer/](http://www.ccsf.caltech.edu/~roy/vermeer/)

## CULMINATING PROJECTS AND COMPOSITION TOPICS

1. Analyze the moral choices were made in the novel. What were they based on? Given the situations and the characters, were they good choices? The best that could have been made? [Cornelius' treatment of his father; Cornelius' decision of what to do with the painting; Saskia's use of the seed potatoes; Aletta's killing one baby; Adriaan's giving up the other baby; Vermeer continuing to paint rather than taking a wage-earning job; Magdalena taking money from her husband's strongbox to buy the painting.]
2. Write a character analysis of Cornelius, supporting your hypothesis of what he eventually did with the painting. In your essay, discuss his rejection of other courses of action having to do with the painting. [burn it; give it to Richard to have it appraised; send it to a Jewish organization which traces art stolen by the Nazis; continue to live with it secretly; send it anonymously to an art museum; send it anonymously to the Isabelle Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston to replace a Vermeer stolen in 1990 and never recovered, <[www.artresources.com/departments/hot.sheet/missing.ihtml?n=1](http://www.artresources.com/departments/hot.sheet/missing.ihtml?n=1)>.]
3. Study every story to find out the bits of information added to describe the imagined painting. Find those elements in Vermeer's real paintings. Create the imaginary painting, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, in pencil, paper mosaic, pastels, or paint.
4. Compare and contrast Hannah Vredenburg and Anne Frank. Consider their situations, natures, actions, and words. Reconstruct "A Night Different from All Other Nights" using Anne Frank's character rather than Hannah's.

5. Read James Joyce's story, "The Dead" from *The Dubliners*, and compare it in terms of theme, characterization and style to "Adagia." Consider the wisdom or recklessness of Gretta's revelation to her husband of her lost love in "The Dead," and Lauren's similar revelation in "Adagia." Compare the responses of the two spouses and analyze the messages about the fragility of love relationships that both authors present.
6. Examine repeated motifs, phrases, themes, details used in several stories. How are they used to stitch the individual stories spanning four hundred years into a novel? [milk; window; blue; potatoes; pigeons; high buildings in flat land]
7. Give three examples of human cruelty found in the stories. How does each one play upon the others, and how does art play a role in each one, if at all? [Holocaust, witch hunts, materialism gained from slave trade]
8. Select a story and do one of the following:
  - a. Write a scene taking place after the close of the story.
  - b. Rewrite an existing scene, or write a new scene outside the story from a different character's point of view. [Suggestions: Adriaan's aunt; Digna the wife in "Adagia;" Gerard, the husband in "Hyacinth Blues;" Catharina, Vermeer's wife; Otto Engelbrecht on his deathbed; Stijn, Saskia's husband in "Morningshine"]
9. Create a hypothetical conversation between two characters from two different stories reflecting each of their concerns and attitudes, and their likely reactions to the concerns and attitudes of the other character.
10. Select a gap in time during which we don't know what happened to the painting. Write a story which reveals who owns the painting, how it was obtained, how it influenced your new characters.
11. Present a dramatic monologue taken from one of the stories. [Suggestions: the two girls, Hannah and Magdalena; Cornelius' musing in the middle section of "Love Enough;" Claudine in "Hyacinth Blues," especially strong in character through voice]
12. Do some historic and cultural research and write a paper or prepare a class presentation on one of these topics:
  - a. Vermeer's art as a personal expression of 17th century Dutch culture. Analyze the ways he was different than and similar to his contemporaries.
  - b. The growth of the Dutch landscape, the use and engineering of dikes and windmills, and the ever-present threat of the "Waterwolf," floods.
  - c. The role of religion in various time periods in Dutch history and culture.
  - d. A comparison of Vermeer's art and Rembrandt's. Evaluate each one's influence on the other.
  - e. The moral issues surrounding art stolen by the Third Reich during The Holocaust. Relate the efforts by descendants of Jewish people who perished to locate and claim their families' confiscated art. Appraise the validity of some claims, and either criticize or justify the actions of the claimants, and of museums holding such art in their collections.
14. Select an actual painting by Vermeer, and write a scene or an entire story around what is being pictured.
15. Select a phrase or sentence from any story in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, and analyze how it applies to the whole book.

### SUGGESTED LINES

"love enough" p. 2

"...capable of doing some great, wild loving thing. Yes, oh yes." p. 51

"In the end, it's only the moments that we have." p. 71

"It's only after years that one even notices the excruciating complexities." p. 72

"Remember no wrongs." p. 75

"...there was nothing so vital as paying attention, and perfect ing the humble offices of love." p. 78

"How love builds itself unconsciously, out of the momentous ordinary." p. 80

"Look long enough, out or in, and you'll be glad you are who you are." p. 81

"Knowing what love isn't might be just as valuable though infinitely less satisfying as knowing what it is." p. 107

"There's got to be some beauty too." p. 145

"I had fancied love a casual adjunct and not the central turning shaft making all parts move." p. 194

"...sacred with the tenderness of just living" p. 223

"a respite in stillness from the unacknowledged acts of women to hallow home" p. 223

"...soul enough to speak" p. 226

"All of it is ordinary to everyone but me." p. 234

"If two people love the same thing, then they must love each other, at least a little." p. 235

"Would that have been enough—to tell a truth in art?" p. 238

"...nice things almost happen" p. 240

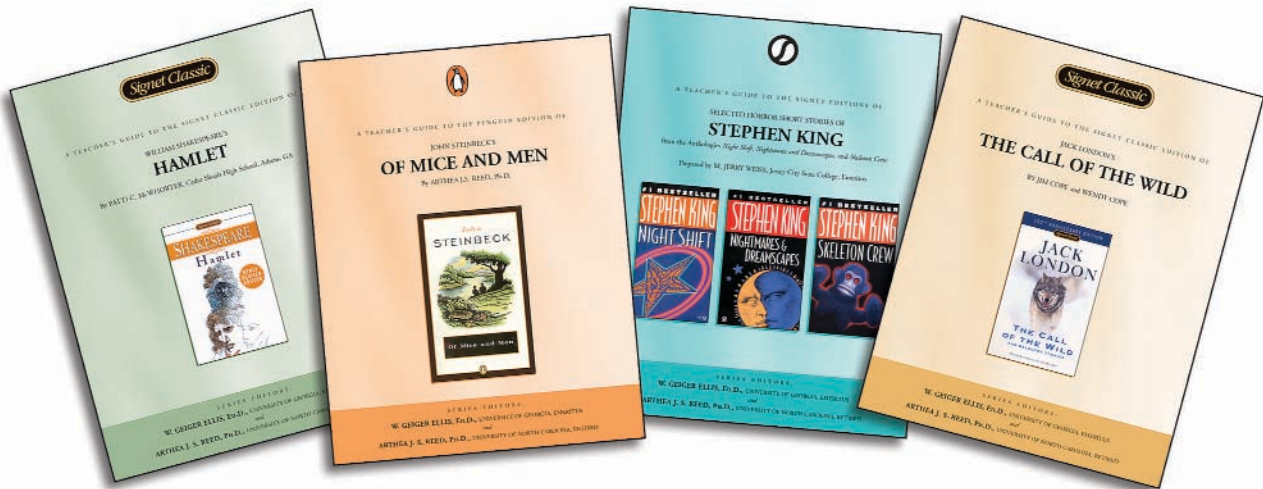
"...if the life of something as inconsequential as a water drop could be arrested and given to the world in a painting, or if the world would care." p. 242

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