

# **Girl in Hyacinth Blue Study Guide**

**Girl in Hyacinth Blue by Susan Vreeland**

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# Plot Summary

The Girl in Hyacinth Blue proceeds backward in time, following the history of one Vermeer painting, of a girl in a blue wrap, inside of an open window. The painting has enormous value in the present, but as the novel proceeds back to the time when it was painted, its value rises and falls based on whether its owners know where it came from, and whether they see any value in art.

Except for this painting, which is present in every chapter, The Girl in Hyacinth Blue is really a collection of linked short stories. The stories vary from a coming of age story, to stories of love and loss, of murder and execution, to longing and nostalgia and death. The history goes from the present day (the book was written in 2000) back to the mid-seventeenth-century, when Vermeer made the picture.

From the Holocaust to a Dutch flood, back to the financial crisis of Vermeer's own household, the characters who value the painting find that it gives them something that transcends time and place. They hold onto the painting for its ineffable qualities, and part with it only when necessary. If they take money for it, they do so only because the money will have a profound affect on their lives.

In this composite picture of the culture that touched this one painting, Susan Vreeland has painted a portrait of her own, of the past that comes down with each work.

In the first of eight chapters, a boy's death prompts a school teacher to think of his own death, and to reveal his cherished painting to a colleague who will value it. The teacher who owns the painting knows that his father acquired it from the household of a Jewish family that had been deported for execution, and he cannot reveal it to the world, but he needs his colleague to understand its value.

The second story depicts a Passover holiday among Jews who are anticipating the Holocaust. Their pigeons had brought them news of the seizure of the diamond trade in Amsterdam, and they kill their own pigeons so as to stay out of trouble with the Nazis. The girl who kills the pigeons feels a certain kinship with the girl looking out the window in the painting, and she knows that this holiday has marked the end of something for her, and the beginning of something else, a life of deeper knowledge for her.

The third story centers on the parents of a girl who is in love with and engaged to a boy. The girl's mother wants to give the painting as an engagement gift, but the husband demurs because the painting makes him think about a girl he loved briefly, before his marriage. When the wife is angered by this invocation of earlier love, the husband agrees to give up the painting as a concession to his wife, and a tribute to their marriage.

In the next story, the narrator is a woman in high society, who has an affair with a musician. When the affair breaks up her marriage, she escapes from her husband by selling the painting.



In the fifth story, the painting arrives in the household of a Dutch family whose house and lands have been flooded. The painting was put in their boat with an infant, and a note: Sell the painting, feed the baby. The wife wants to keep both baby and painting, but when she realizes its value—it can give her and her husband what they need to live well—she sells it and uses the money to fund their homestead.

The sixth story tells how the painting ended up in the boat in the previous story. An engineering student has fallen in love with a girl and gotten her pregnant. The girl bears twins, but she kills the girl child because she has a hare lip. When the murder is discovered, the girl is sentenced to execution, and her engineer boyfriend takes the boy child, and the painting from his Aunt Rika's house, and gives the infant away.

The penultimate story follows the painter Vermeer through his day's errands, as he looks for both money for his household and inspiration for his next painting. He lives in a chaotic household, and cannot often get quiet for painting. However, when he sees his daughter Magdalena after an outburst, he gets her to sit still so he can paint the picture that has been the subject of the other stories.

In the final story, Magdalena is a dreamy girl who wants to live the enormous life she sees everywhere around her. She wants to paint, to bring things to life as she sees them. But she marries, and remains buried, as an adult, with the housework that consumes her as a girl. She watches her father's paintings leave the household to pay one debt or another, and later in life, she tries to buy the painting of herself. She cannot afford it at auction, though, and it goes to a wealthy family. She concludes that she would like to tell the history of the world through the most minute things in it, and she marvels at the mysterious fact that people would see her face and be moved by her expression, and she would never know them.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

The death of a student, Dean Merrill, prompts a math teacher, Cornelius Engelbrecht, to reflect on his own mortality and the things that will have to be settled when he dies. He invites an art teacher from the school back to his house. He shows the teacher, Richard, a painting that he claims had been painted by Johannes Vermeer, a famous Dutch painter whose canvases show remarkable skill and hold enormous value in the art world. Richard and Cornelius debate the possibility that the unsigned painting could have been painted by Vermeer, and Richard leaves. He is moved by the painting, but he is uncertain about its legitimacy. Cornelius is deeply familiar with the details of the painting, as well as the circumstances under which it was likely painted and sold—to pay a debt to the baker for two years' worth of bread.

The voice of the narration changes from first person (Richard's perspective) to omniscient third-person, and the reader learns that Cornelius had been moved by the insistence of a preacher at the funeral that "One must take the measure of a man" (p. 12). Cornelius thinks about his father, who was German officer. He had taken the painting during what was called Black Thursday, in 1942, when Jews were rounded up and deported. Cornelius' father had seen it when the Jewish family was being taken, and he made a note to return the next day to claim the painting.

After the family moved to America following the war, the painting was willed to Cornelius Engelbrecht, and now he is guilty about owning it. But he is also in love with the painting, for its history as well as for its technical refinement. He considers burning it, to expunge his guilt about the painting's origins, but the painting is too beautiful, and he cannot.

Cornelius was "compelled by his need to know" (p. 18) so he traveled to Amsterdam one summer, and studied other paintings of Vermeer's. He concluded that the painting was a genuine Vermeer, but he had to be subtle, because if the painting were discovered, it could be seized by Jewish authorities. In his old age, Cornelius' father claimed that he had never known that Jews were being killed, but Cornelius Engelbrecht cannot accept his father's excuse, and he reads that in Eichmann's trial record, "The legal responsibility of those who deliver the victim to death is...no less than of those who kill the victim." (p. 27).

Agonizing over the possibility that the painting might be real—and that he might have to be guilty—Cornelius invited Richard to see it.

In the final section, told from Richard's point of view, Richard says that he suspects the painting's provenance in Nazi Germany, and Cornelius finally tells Richard everything. Richard wants to get away from the painting, and recommends Cornelius burn it.



Richard is unsympathetic to Cornelius' hoarding of the painting, and urges him to come clean about its background.

## Analysis

When the painting first appears, it is a rare treasure, stolen from deported Jews. There is a powerful guilt surrounding it, and shame, for Cornelius Engelbrecht does not want to hate his father, so by keeping the painting hidden, he hides as well his father's crime. But the beauty of the painting—as well as the atrocity associated with its provenance—makes it impossible to hide. He involves Richard for his expertise and appreciation, but Richard cannot accept the moral taint of the painting, and he is repulsed by the story of how it came to be in Cornelius Engelbrecht's house. The reader is therefore presented with two contradictory impulses regarding the painting: to be ignorant of its background, and appreciate it for its beauty but not its worth—or to know the history and feel strongly conflicted about giving up a thing of such rare beauty. Presumably, any reader would feel at least a little conflict in this situation.

## Vocabulary

receding, blandness, cryptic, indictment, patronizing, mundane, distortion, surmise, amassed, technique, validated, indelicacy, provenance, collateral, enfolded, credo, advantageous, ardent, deviant, eradicate, rumination, deportation, carnivorous, bloated, blatantly, agonized



## Chapter 2

### Summary

Hannah Vredenburg takes care of her father's pigeons, which are still used for communication. Pigeons have been banned for Jews, and Hannah and her father are nervous about releasing the pigeons now: they are afraid of repercussions. Hannah's father asks Helen to write a note to his partners in Amsterdam: kill my pigeons. Hannah writes it before her younger brother comes up. Tobias will be upset by the death of the pigeons, which he dotes on.

The message is sent too late: the partner had already released the pigeons, which bear the news that the Germans have seized the diamond trade in Amsterdam. Now the pigeons will all have to be killed.

Reflecting on these troubles, Hannah looks at the painting of the girl looking out the window, which is hung above the mantel. Her father had bought the painting in 1940, and she was moved by it from the first time she saw it, the girl in the painting was so resplendent.

When Tobias realizes that the pigeons will be killed, he is upset, and runs to the pigeon coop. "Let him be with the birds," Hannah's mother says. "Let him grieve. This year he'll understand the Passover story." (p. 44).

When Hannah says that she doesn't want to help her mother prepare for Passover, her mother says that life is work. "Work and a little play and a lot of prayer." (p. 45). Hannah should learn to keep a good household so she can be married. When Hannah leaves to run an errand for her mother, she overhears her parents complaining that she does not do anything, she just thinks about things. Her father asks whether he hasn't loved her enough, echoing the title of the first story.

Hannah says that "wanting anything enough" (p. 48), as her parents want her to, seems crazy, since everyone can see the war and the troubles coming. Hannah thinks about the girl in the painting, and she likes her quietness. She thinks that she is "capable of doing some great wild loving thing" (p. 51), and identifies with her—she must be thinking about the same thing.

On her errand, Hannah sees a Jewish family being herded out of the neighborhood. She returns to the house with eggs, and her parents are concerned about her dire attitude about the refugees: she says that it won't matter very soon what happens to anyone.

The family proceeds to celebrate Passover together, and her father goes for a walk with her brother, while she stays at home with her mother. Her mother tells her that the girl in the painting is looking for her husband, but Hannah says that it doesn't matter what she is looking for, it is only important that she is thinking.



Hannah goes to the pigeon coop, and breaks all the pigeons' necks one by one. At Passover dinner, some refugee families come to join them. Hannah does not take the refugee boys up to the pigeons, because she knows they have all been killed, and this marks her entrance into adulthood: she knows things the children do not.

## Analysis

There is a painful irony in the fact that the Holocaust is being presented on the eve of Passover, when the Jews were supposed to leave a mark beside the door posts, so that their first-born children would not be killed in the plagues that freed the Israelites from slavery. The Nazis rounded the Jews up after Passover, and they were taken to be killed.

At the same time, the story is presented as a girl's coming-of-age tale, as Hannah Vredenburg realizes what it means to be grown-up, to take responsibility for the lives around her, and even, if necessary, for the deaths of those around her. When she kills the pigeons, she leaves the world she shared with her brother and enters the world she shares with her parents. She is still not to be saved from the deportation, but she cannot know this yet, so that tragic irony exists for the reader alone.

## Vocabulary

frantic, lentils, crooned, gable, refugee, significant, vestibule, bewilderment, sideboard, scaife, sputtering, righteous, unraveling, apathetic, Quarter, capable, boulevard, Seder, expectation, frenzied, moisture, horseradish, illuminate, rummaged, shank





## Chapter 3

### Summary

Laurens van Luyken and his wife Digna are walking home behind their daughter Johanna and her fiancé Fritz. Laurens and his wife are not happy about the match, because Johanna will move away from Vreeland to Amsterdam with Fritz, whom they see as an interloper. They discuss what kind of gift they should give the happy couple. When Johanna suggests giving the couple the painting of the girl looking out the window, Laurens objects. He tells Digna that the painting reminds him of Tanneke, a girl he was briefly in love with, long before they were married.

“The way the girl is looking out the window. Waiting for someone. And her hand. Upturned, and so delicate. Inviting a kiss.” (p. 67). Laurens says that the painting reminds him of Tanneke, who lived in Zandvoort. Laurens says that he was like Johanna and Fritz, when he was with Tanneke, which is to say he was euphoric and in love. He says that he had distanced himself from Tanneke for no real reason, and when he went back to her, she had gone away, without leaving any address for him to contact her.

Digna is unhappy to hear this, and distances herself from Laurens. When they get home, Digna takes up her embroidery: she is embroidering one of Erasmus’ sayings: *Ne malorum meminere*—Remember no wrongs.

Laurens recalls his time with Tanneke, and he wants to tell his daughter to pay attention to the moment. “There is nothing so vital as paying attention, and perfecting the humble offices of love.” (p. 78). “A flood of now” (p. 79) washes over Laurens, and he is aware of Digna’s beauty and the richness of their life together. He says that “it might take her time to realize that it was imagination, not memory, that was her enemy, if indeed she had any enemy in this.” (p. 80).

In the end of the story, Digna says that she took her motto’s advice, and decided not to remember any injury there might be in her situation. But Laurens says that they should give away the painting. Digna will have the tact to put something else in its place, he thinks.

### Analysis

The painting is a powerful talisman, for Laurens, of a lost love, or even just of a lost possibility. He holds onto it because it reminds him of himself when he was in love, although he gave it to his wife on their anniversary. The opposition of young love and married love is predicted in the opening pages, as the younger couple precedes the older couple on their walk, but the tension is felt between Laurens and Digna, and then within Laurens himself. When he says that it is imagination, not memory, that is Digna’s enemy, he relinquishes his actual memory, turning Tanneke into a symbol merely. The painting had kept her look alive, in the appearance of the girl looking out the window,



but now he is reconciled to his married life, and he does not want to hurt his wife. When she says that she will not remember any injury, he is content to let the painting go—and he trusts that his wife is generous enough that she will not put Erasmus' motto in the place of the painting.

## Vocabulary

perverse, keenly, interloper, vaguely, competitive, euphoria, conspicuous, contemplation, intoxication, transparency, osier, embroidery, scornful, rendezvous, heather, peaked, pewter-colored, inverted, trite, vacuous, heralding, excruciating, simultaneously, counterpane, appraised



## Chapter 4

### Summary

The unnamed narrator of Chapter 4, *Hyacinth Blues*, is a wealthy socialite who feels that she has been exiled to the Netherlands with her husband Gerald, a minister. She misses Paris and hopes to return there. She has an affair with a musician, a violinist in an orchestra. The musician is clearly not Dutch, and this piques her interest in him.

The only Dutch thing the narrator likes is the painting of the girl looking out the window, which her husband bought as “a placating measure” (p. 85) to make her happy in the Netherlands. She looks down on the locals for their “inbreeding” (p. 84) and their coarseness. Gerald has a lover, the Baroness Agatha von Solms—his marriage is clearly not a love match. The narrator is appalled by the Baroness’ appearance, which is provincial and excessive in a way that the couturiers in Paris would have mocked.

When the narrator finds out where the musician is staying, she invites him to her house for a private concert with a few other musicians. She makes elaborate preparations, and even tries to have hyacinths brought in for the party, although it is too late in the season for hyacinths, and none can be found.

The Monsieur le C— arrives at the party dressed in a coat embroidered to look like a fish, and after the performance, the narrator invites him into a drawing room to show him the Dutch masterpiece she has. She and the Monsieur make love, but they hear stifled laughter, and strike a light. They discover the narrator’s husband Gerald—with the Countess Maurits, not his lover, Baroness Agatha von Solms. Still in disarray, and acting mortally wounded, the narrator runs to the Baroness, to make sure she knows about her lover’s (the narrator’s husbands) betrayal. This gives her leverage to leave Amsterdam to return to Paris. She takes the Vermeer, and sells it for much less than it is worth, because Vermeer was undervalued at the time. But the money will see her back to Paris nonetheless.

### Analysis

In this short chapter, Vreeland puts the painting in a fairly shallow society world of affairs and shenanigans. The unnamed narrator’s life is hardly deep enough for the beauty and value the painting seems to have for other characters, but this vivid ‘romp’ of a chapter draws out the length of time the painting has endured, and shows the society that values art for what it is. Which is to say, it is concerned with living concerns, which are not as long as the timeline of art’s endurance. The narrator’s revenge on her husband—ruining his relationship with his lover while winning her freedom, makes for a lively tale in a book that has so far been meditative and human.

## Vocabulary

ashamed, orchestra, breeches, blotchy, odious, derisive, inbreeding, melancholy, placating, revenue, waiver, deflated, meringue, beseeching, commission, duration, smuggle, andante, prodigy, dispatches, nobility, disenfranchised, executed, rapture, sentimental



# Chapter 5

## Summary

Saskia is a housewife with two small children, living in an area of the Netherlands that has been flooded by heavy rain and breaks in the sea dikes. She is living in the upstairs of a flooded house. Considering that some houses have been washed away, though, she is living fairly comfortably, with the cow for milk and butter and a small brazier for baking. She keeps house while Stijn has been conscripted to work at fixing the dikes. One day her husband hands her up from the boat a baby and the painting of the girl looking out the window, with a note that says, "Sell the painting, feed the baby." This mystery is not solved in the story, and with the flood going on, there is not much opportunity for solving it, but Saskia falls in love with both baby and painting. She wants to keep both, but her husband discourages her. Stijn and Saskia are concerned that they will not be able to plant, or afford to survive in the flooded landscape, and the painting represents money, so Stijn wants to sell it, but Saskia tries to stretch out their supplies so they can avoid selling the painting.

As it turns out, Saskia is not happy with her situation on this farm, and she misses her homeland, which is not very close by. She names the baby Jantje, for little Jan, and prepares to keep him, regardless of her husband's feelings.

Saskia says that she cannot feel bad about the flood, when it has brought her a baby and a thing of beauty (the painting). She is enthralled by the colors and luminosity of the painting, and names it Morningshine. She tells her daughter that she will be like the girl looking out the window one day. Looking at the painting, she tells her husband that the baby must have come from a fine family, because the painting is so nice. He tells her to sell it in the market, but she claims to be sick the next market day, and then her son is sick the following market day, and then there is fog, so she manages to keep the painting and hides it from her husband, hoping that he will forget about it.

Stijn and Saskia learn that a witch was hanged on the day of the flood, the same day the baby appeared with the painting, but Saskia can't make any connection between the baby and painting and the witch. When she tells her husband that Jantje came from a good home, he exclaims about her having named the baby, but he ultimately agrees that they can keep the baby. It is now only a question of whether they can afford to survive without selling the painting.

Stijn sends Saskia to Groningen with the painting, and tells her not to settle for less than eight guilders, but when she shows it to a 'wizened shopkeeper' he offers her twenty-four guilders, and Saskia begins to suspect that she has something of great value. She sells her heirloom scarf, but keeps the painting. She takes it to another shop, where the shopkeeper knows Vermeer, and tells her not to accept less than 80 guilders—the price of a winter's bread and meat—for the canvas. Keeping the painting, Saskia sees an ache in the girl's soul, as she's looking out the window.



When Stijn gets home, he wants to know the story of the painting—why wasn't it sold? She tells him how valuable it is, and torments him a little by telling him that the baby wasn't the son of a farmer, which is an insult to Stijn.

As the days go by, Stijn has a little more time for the farm, and the conscriptees gain traction on the dikes. The supplies dwindle down, though, and soon Saskia is serving potato broth. One day Stijn goes to the barn, and Saskia hears him groan—she had used the seed potatoes, so there will be no crop to plant. She did it in order to keep from selling the painting. After they fight about this, Saskia takes the painting and leaves for Amsterdam. She takes another barge on a diversion to Westerbork, where her parents live, but her mother does not have any sympathy. She used the seed potatoes, which any farm girl should know not to do.

When she arrives in Amsterdam, Saskia takes her time. She knows she is carrying a valuable painting, and she walks out of a couple of shops before she finds a shopkeeper who loves the painting. He offers her seventy-five guilders for it, and she is glad to give it to him. Returning home, she is satisfied that the money will help improve the farm, and she could look forward to raising Jantje. With some of the money from the painting, she also buys wool for woolies for the children, in the same blue the girl was wearing in the painting.

## Analysis

This is the story in which the painting is perhaps most deeply appreciated. Saskia is an unhappy wife in a flooded house too far from her home, but she loves the painting and is willing to give things up to keep it. When she uses up the seed potatoes to keep the painting, though, it turns out that she is going to have to make an offering of her own. She sells the painting, but keeps the blue in her life by buying a skein of blue wool to knit for the children. She can only let the painting go because she has found someone who loves it as much as she does.

This scene represents a moment of growing-up for Saskia: she thought she might take refuge with her parents, who would foster her sentimental side, but her mother sends her to Amsterdam with the painting, without any sympathy. She has to realize that running a farm requires teamwork and sacrifice, and her mother will not allow her to indulge a childish whim by using up the seed potatoes to keep a valuable painting.

This set of exchanges shows the value of the painting in emotional terms, and also the value of money, in the same terms: Saskia has to be willing to give things up, in order to live with her husband and children.

## Vocabulary

vapors, dainty, ashamed, peat, squint, brazier, puckered, apprehensive, orphanage, reconstitute, hoisted, gratitude, virginal, protruded, deluge, jonquils, apparently, mahogany, explanation, witch, obscuring, sedges, covenant, plagued, stationer



# Chapter 6

## Summary

This chapter is presented as a journal belonging to Adriaan Kuypers. He recalls that on the day Aletta Pieters was hung, and he began to recognize “the tenacity of superstition.” (p. 155). He recalls having seen her for the first time when she was in the pillory, with boys taunting her, and her cursing the boys. She invited him near and offered to tell him something, then licked his ear.

The next time Adriaan Kuypers sees Aletta Pieters, and she is crying and deflated, hardly the fiery girl he’d seen earlier. She is looking at the painting of the girl looking out the window and crying. Adriaan finds out that the Aletta has come to live with his Aunt Rika until she is eighteen. His Aunt and Uncle had taken her in to raise her out of charity, although it seems that a large gap of antipathy still seems to separate them.

Adriaan says that Aletta Pieters was not hung because she had haunted her adoptive Uncle and made him fall out of his bed, breaking his head—he says that she was hung for having smothered the baby girl he had with her.

Adriaan says that he has come to his Aunt’s house to study windmill design with a master architect. “I had worn myself out squeezing some personal meaning out of Descartes, Spinoza and Erasmus and wanted instead to experience in action Descartes’ principle that science could master Nature for the benefit of mankind. I wanted the making of practical things...and, I wanted intercourse with flesh and blood, not ink and words.” (p. 160).

The next time Adriaan sees Aletta, she is studying the girl looking out the window in the painting again, and he says that because of her wistful expression, “she was the embodiment of Descartes’ principle, ‘I think therefore I am.’” (p. 161).

Aletta says that she has been told that her mother died when she was born, and her father died at sea. She talks about her superstitions, and he tries to disprove them, but he is attracted to her in spite of her irrational beliefs.

Adriaan goes for a walk on his days off, and wonders how the landscape can be managed better than it has been. He sees Aletta looking for a stork—for good luck—and they tell each other their stories. He takes her to a windmill, and shows her the works, the Archimedean screw that moves the water, and the gears that turn it. He proposed a more efficient screw design, but the architect told him that he had not considered the additional power that such a design would require. As Adriaan and Aletta spend more time together, they are drawn closer and closer, until they find themselves in the church steeple, “under the holy rafters.” (p. 171). They make love, and Aletta becomes pregnant. Adriaan’s Aunt Rika still objects to his fascination with Aletta Pieters. She tells him that she has nothing of the Holy Spirit, but he replies that “There’s nothing but spirit.



With such demons chasing her, it's by God's grace alone that she even has faith enough to take a breath." (p. 174).

Aletta gives birth in the church steeple, with Adriaan as her assistant. She gives birth to twins, but the second, the girl, is born with a hare lip, and Aletta is upset by this: it is a bad omen. She says that the baby would be better off dead than taunted by jeers all her life. She stifles the baby, but she does not bury it very deep, and when it is discovered, Aunt Rika points the searchers in her direction. She is taken into custody, and sentenced to hang for murder.

Adriaan leaves the baby boy in the church steeple, and tries to feed him himself, but cannot give him what he needs. He watches Aletta Pieters' hanging from the church steeple, and puts out a little flap of cloth so perhaps she can see him watching. He says that there is nothing but defiance in her stance, even though her head had been shaved, and the water from the rain was streaming off her so that he could not see where her fingers ended and the water began.

With Aletta's death, the flooding begins, and no one is around to witness her hanging because they are all trying to save their property.

Adriaan cannot take care of the baby, so he prepares to give the baby up, and he gets his Aunt Rika to give him the painting so that he can give the baby some means. Aunt Rika tells Adriaan that she knew about his relationship with Aletta, and she had sent the searchers to the church for Adriaan's own good. Rowing through the flooded landscape, Adriaan deposits the baby and painting in a boat outside a farmhouse where he had been given some milk for free, simply for asking.

## Analysis

Again, the painting is a form of currency and also a item of personal exchange in an emotional economy. The painting is Aletta's favorite, because it reminds her of her mother, who died at birth. The girl looking out the window reminds her of many things, and seems to symbolize the thoughtful otherness she feels. The girl's enigmatic posture and appearance has meant many things to women—and here it symbolizes an ancient belonging. The girl looking out the window in the painting comes from a wealthy family, and Aletta Pieters must have seen this in the painting as well as the wistful look.

Adriaan is drawn to Aletta herself, not the painting, but he does not know what he is doing, and Aletta gets pregnant without the two of them having made any plans to be married or have a family together.

When Aletta gives in to her superstition and stifles the baby, she leaves Adriaan in charge, although he still does not have much sense, experience, or authority. It is Aunt Rika who has all of these, but she does not have any sympathy or affection for Aletta, and after she sends the police to the church where Aletta is hiding, she gives Adriaan the painting to pay for the baby. She wants to rid herself of all reminders of Aletta Pieters' life, so she is happy to give it up, although the painting also seems like a token





of Aunt Rika's guilt, if she even feels any, for sending the girl to her death. At the end of the story, though, the painting is simply money, again, an item that can be exchanged for food and material support.

## Vocabulary

tenacity, superstition, shameless, callow, disenchanting, virulence, pillory, wanton, intercourse, intrigued, principle, Descartes, imploringly, constancy, indistinguishable, seized, mechanism, integrated, Archimedean screw, staves, contempt, tremors, virtue, piety



# Chapter 7

## Summary

The painter Johannes Vermeer comes to Pieter Claesz van Ruijven's house to ask for an advance on his upcoming paintings. Pieter is his patron, and owns a number of Vermeer's works. While waiting for his patron, Vermeer visits with his old paintings, and experiences the visions that led him to paint each of them. He thinks about how much he would like peace and quiet for painting, and how "any abrupt noise could make him take a stroke at the wrong angle: then the light wouldn't fall correctly on the grooves left by the brush's hairs." (p. 200). Pieter arrives, and tells Vermeer to paint. "Just pick one of those daughters of yours, set her down, and paint." (p. 202). Pieter and Vermeer talk about business and how things are going, and Pieter urges Vermeer to sit one of his daughters down and just paint, but Vermeer feels like he needs to have the right inspiration, in order to make a picture. Vermeer does not ask for the advance he had expected to ask for, and he goes to his mother-in-law's house to ask her instead.

Vermeer feels that he is deeply indebted to his mother-in-law for money—but he feels that he has done her a favor by keeping her son Willem out of trouble. Willem is good at getting into trouble, and it costs Vermeer a good deal of trouble himself, to keep the peace. On his way to his mother-in-law's house, Vermeer runs into his fiery daughter Magdalena, who is running to the town walls to admire the view from there. He feels he should go with her, but continues on his errand, aware of his many debts to merchants and the baker and grocer and woolener.

Maria Thins, his mother-in-law, is critical of Vermeer's decisions and hopes he can come up with some steady work for his family's sake. Maria suggests he paint pottery, but Vermeer quails at the thought of such repetitive work. He admires a pitcher of hers and asks to borrow it. Maria Thins cannot tell him about the advance he asked for.

When he gets home, Vermeer finds his household in an uproar. Willem is beating his wife, Catharina, with a stick, and a nail in the stick has badly scratched Catharina's arm. The next day, she loses the baby she was pregnant with. Vermeer arranges to have Willem privately imprisoned, which is much better than sending him to the magistrate, and the public prison, which is squalid. In payment for his trouble, Maria Thins lends Vermeer three hundred guilders. He sets down to paint, and is grinding pigment when there is another uproar, this time caused by his daughter Magdalena. He sees her face as a challenge for him to paint: "To render [her face] with honesty rather than pride or even more love, to go beyond the painting of known sentiments into mystery—that was her challenge to him." (p. 221). He tells her that if she sits still, he will paint her.



## Analysis

This story brings the reader to the moment in time when the painting was painted—which resolves one part of the book’s development. Now the mystery of whether the painting is authentic is answered once and for all. Its origins are not very close to the conditions in which people have enjoyed the painting in the previous scenes (which are all in the painting’s future, from this story’s perspective). Vermeer has paintings inside of him, and his talent is a burden, a set of decisions he has to make. Because he has talent, he also has an obligation to honor it.

While the painting itself brings joy and beauty to people’s lives, the conditions in which it is painted are dreary, as Vermeer never has any quiet, and lacks money to support his family. His brother-in-law’s violence and the loss of his wife’s baby after Willem’s beating strike tragic notes, but these are strangely overshadowed. The novel rushes instead to its climax: the moment when Vermeer recognizes the inspiration to paint his daughter Magdalena. Her expression and the energy in her frame are evocative for him, and he wants to paint her beyond sentiment or affection or love: he wants to paint what he sees in her.

## Vocabulary

ushered, momentary, imaginary, boisterousness, occupied, abrupt, impasto, engrossed, paralyze, devotion, endeavor, flogging, prudently, obligation, invaded, intimacy, delicacy, periphery, provincial, gouging, reproduce, feverish, unwholesome, enthusiasm, encumbered



## Chapter 8

### Summary

When Magdalena finishes her chores, she runs to the sentry tower, where she enjoys the view, and the spaciousness of the landscape. She likes the colors, and dreams about painting them, like her father does.

Magdalena is “filled to bursting” by what she sees, but her emotions have little to do with the seedy quality of the sentry post, which her mother has told her not to visit. (p. 226).

Looking at the view, she reflects on her life, and wishes that she had more freedom, and that she wouldn't be treated so badly by shopkeepers who are angry about the debts her family owes. She wishes her father would take her iceboating more often. If Magdalena painted, she says that she would paint more than women in cramped rooms—she would paint the world beyond the house. When Vermeer asks Magdalena to sit to be painted, she is thrilled, obscurely fulfilled.

After Vermeer's death, the picture is sold to the baker with another painting as payment for two years worth of bread. Magdalena doesn't see the painting again for twenty years, when the baker himself dies, and his paintings are auctioned. She attends the auction and bids, but the final price ends up being almost double what she has. She returns to her household, where she never does paint, but is always swamped with cares and chores. She follows the people who bought the painting, but does not identify herself. “She wondered if rain had ever been painted just that way, or 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).

### Analysis

This is the only story that moves forward in time beyond the material covered in a previous story. Instead of continuing backward, the story moves a previous story forward, as Magdalena keeps looking for the painting that her father made of her. Her longing for the lost moment of vision—which she herself might have shared with her father, had she ever become a painter—reiterates the enigmatic longing in her face in the painting, which is the quality that has made it intriguing throughout its history, as the reader has already seen.

This is also the first story in which the reader really returns to the same characters, as Vermeer and Magdalena are both in this story as well as the last. This brings the novel home to the scene of the painting being made. This is the heart of the book, and even though it isn't as suspenseful as novels can be, it is as close to the mystery of experience and inspiration as the book gets: this is the moment that everyone else has been fascinated with.



The book ends with Magdalena herself, and her lifelong sense that she cannot touch the fullness she sees, feels, and imagines. She tries to recapture the painting, but finds that it is beyond her. (This is the only occasion when someone wants the painting who cannot afford it—everyone else receives it in payment, or inherits it.) This wistful sadness is the final taste of the feeling that has drawn people into the painting, the powerful, attentive vitality that makes people look out of windows, in hope or expectation or meditation.

## Vocabulary

sentry, persistent, draped, pulsing, vantage point, queerly, apothecary, defiance, chartreuse, transparent, lard, diagonally, seared, concentration, momentous, wistfulness, uttering, yearned, eroded, guilder, inconsequential, charcoal, suffering, keenest



# Characters

## Johannes Vermeer

This individual is the painter who made the painting that is the center of *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. He appears in the final two chapters, where he is agonizing over how he will make enough money with his paintings to support his family. He is mesmerized by his daughter's face, and wants to paint it honestly, without sentimentality, to capture the searching look she has.

## Magdalena

This character is an artist's daughter, and the subject of the painting of *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. She is a dreamy child, highly sympathetic with her father, and aware of the richness of life in an uncommon way. Although this character wants to be a painter, she never ends up realizing that dream and instead gets married and remains swamped by housework all her life. She tries to buy the painting her father made of her, but she does not have the money.

## Cornelius Engelbrecht

This character is the teacher who owns *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* painting in the novel's present moment. He is a mathematics teacher, and he has received the painting from his father, who was a Nazi officer who took the painting from a family of Jews. This character wants to see his colleague's recognition of the value of the painting, but he cannot either destroy it or part with it otherwise.

## Richard

This character is the art teacher in the present moment, where a colleague tries to convince him of the Vermeer's legitimacy. He is not convinced—it is too outlandish a story—but he is impressed by the quality of the painting itself.

## Hannah Vredenburg

This character is the protagonist in the second story, who identifies with the girl looking out the window in the painting. This character's mother thinks that she is useless, but this character sees value in thinking. When this character has to kill her father's pigeons because of the Nazis' ban on Jews owning passenger pigeons, she matures and is concerned with adult things more than ever before.



## **Gerald**

This character is the husband of the unnamed narrator in Chapter 4: Hyacinth Blues. He is a minister who has taken his wife from France to Amsterdam, where he himself has taken a lover. His wife is unhappy in Amsterdam and takes a lover of her own, a musician. They are both, clearly, unfulfilled in their marriage with one another.

## **Aletta Pieters**

This character is the 'witch' who is hung at the beginning of the flood that dominates the Morningshine chapter. She is a deeply superstitious girl whose mother was the girl looking out the window. She has been mistreated since her mother died, and she has acquired a set of impenetrable superstitions to make her treatment make sense. Her beliefs, though, only make her stranger to the people around her, and soon lead to persecution in their own right. When she gives birth to twins—already a bad omen—she stifles one because she has a hare lip. This leads to her being hung for murder.

## **Aunt Rika**

This character's nephew, an engineering student, comes to live with her. This character and her husband are wealthy from their investment in the slave trade, and she spends a lot of time and money investing in the cultural property that will disguise, atone for or hide the family's ill-got wealth.

## **Pieter Claesz van Ruijven**

This character is the painter's patron and supporter. He owns a number of the painter's paintings, and allows the painter to come look at them whenever he likes.



# Objects/Places

## Holocaust

This was the eradication of the Jews in Nazi Germany and throughout Europe. It was accompanied by large-scale theft of Jewish property by officers in the German army, who could help themselves to the belongings of the Jews who had been deported and would be executed.

## Amsterdam

This is the capital of the Netherlands, and the urban center of many of the stories. It is the artistic and intellectual hub to which people go when they want culture. People also leave there to move out to the country to start their lives together. This city is part of a dialectic by which women, typically, are either unhappy for their distance from culture, or for their distance from the country and their origins.

## The painting of the girl looking out the window

This painting of Vermeer's is the heart of the book. It moves through time and the action of the book follows the characters' attachment to and relinquishing of the canvas. Because of the look on the girl's face, and the quality of light, and the ordinary objects in the painting, it takes on a deep significance as an art object, as an emblem of the religiousness of daily life, of the importance of thinking and reflection, of the value of art, of the attempt to purge guilt. In each story, to each character, the painting seems to mean a slightly different thing. The essence of the painting, though—the girl's wistful look—is the central influence for each of the stories.

## Dikes

These are barriers that keep the sea water and river water out of the fields in the northern section of the Netherlands. These break and land is flooded in Morningshine, the fifth story.

## Archimedean screw

This is a mechanical device for lifting water from a lower area to a higher, and it is used in windmills to drain ditches and keep the farmland dry.





## The church tower

This is where Aletta Pieters has her affair and then gives birth to her twin babies. This is also where Adriaan Kuypers watches as Aletta Pieters is hung for the murder of the girl child.

## The sentry post

This is where Magdalena loves to go and look out over the landscape and the city of Delft. Her family does not like her going there—it is a seedy area—but she goes every chance she gets. Magdalena wants to be in touch with something beyond herself, and she wants to paint, to get her vision of things down on canvas.

## Peat

This is a layer of dirt and decaying plant matter that exists in the marshy areas bordering the ocean. It is cut and dried and used for fuel, although one character wonders what happens to the peat cutters, who seem to be cutting the earth away from under themselves, leaving only flooded beds and roads, where the land used to be.

## Guilder

This is a unit of Dutch money. Eighty guilders, in the 1600s, when Vermeer painted *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, was the equivalent of a winter's bread and meat for eleven children, but Vermeer spends the sum on an iceboat for entertainment. As time goes on, the painting's value goes up past three hundred guilders.



# Themes

## Daily life, the eternal life of art, and the momentary richness of vision and experience

At the very end of the novel, Magdalena says that she wants to paint the history of the world through something as small as a raindrop. This implies that the novel's—and the painting's—value resides in the attempt to find the meaning of life in the minor details that are often overlooked or taken for granted. Certain individuals see them, and appreciate them, and seem to be able to answer what these moments or details promise—but these characters are in the minority. They make a small brotherhood (sisterhood, really) and they typically have to suffer the loss of either their art or their homeland or their loves, in order to keep the painting—or else they have to suffer the loss of the painting in order to keep something else.

At the same time, that there is an impulse to depict the world—and to know the world—through its minor details. The stories tend toward the broad and deep historical moments, such as the Holocaust and a flood in Holland. Many of the stories involve rites of passage, from one state to another, typically from childhood to adulthood - or at least responsibility - and many stories involve finding compensation for loss in art—either in contemplating it or making it.

## Outsiders as against locals

Art is typically an outsider's activity, as it takes a certain distance from daily life to have inspiration and then to do the work that reflects life back on itself in art. Many of the people who value the painting of the girl looking out the window are outsiders, or else they value outsiders. At the same time, the painting makes people who are outsiders feel like they have a home somewhere, even if it is just in the painting. To take this even a step further, the painting lets people feel that they are at home in the world of actual details—precisely because they share the vision of the artist and the experience the girl who was his subject. The painting seems to be a gateway to genuine, attentive experience.

In this sense, the painting is disruptive within the society where it appears, whether it is encouraging young girls to have excessive hopes, or whether it is being valued for something more than its monetary value. There are typically characters who do not value the experience that seems to be preserved in the painting, and there is generally a conflict between the characters who see that vision and the characters who do not. In almost all cases, the characters who share the vision are treated as—or feel like—exiles among the rest.



## **Meditation as against action**

The enigmatic look of the girl looking out the window evokes strong feelings from a number of characters, typically from the female characters who feel full of experience and longing or love. They are typically young, these women, and they are up against a society that expects them to be wives only and not to have meditative lives of their own. The lifestyle associated with art and the meditative life is presented as an inferior life, full of instabilities and crises, as the reader sees in Vermeer's life, and Magdalena's and Aletta Pieters'. But these characters are the most vividly drawn and most alive characters in the book, because they want something they cannot name, and they are at the same time able to say (with the exception of Aletta) what they are willing to create or receive in exchange for giving up their rich vision. This substitution—of certain feelings for a work of art—is the central experience at the heart of art's value, and the experience of longing satisfied by a picture is repeated throughout the book as the painting works its magic through the ages.

## **The value of a thing as against the thing itself**

The painting at the heart of this book is valued differently by each of the people who encounters it. Some want to trade it in for money immediately—they recognize the artistry of it, and think it would be more valuable to them in cash, which they can use for various purposes. Others see the value of the painting as a work of art, and want to preserve it in order to keep a beautiful thing alive for the future. Some see it as a relic of the past, or a connection to family, like Aletta Pieters, who saw her mother in the girl looking out the window.

Johannes Vermeer himself sees it as a vision, external evidence of a personal vision that balances eternal and temporal truths. Many characters value the thoughtfulness in the girl's face, and value the painting for the feeling they get from the colors and forms. There is no equivalent for the painting itself, although many of the characters are willing to accept things—or money—in exchange for it. This may tell the reader more about the emotional nature of exchange and valuation than about the value of art itself.



# Style

## Point of View

This novel is narrated from multiple points of view, using first- and third-person narration. One of the stories is presented as an excerpt from a character's papers, but the others do not make the pretense of having been documents: they are products of the narrator herself. Even in the first-person narratives, the text itself is not presented as a genuine product, just an account that happens to be on paper, now.

The author does not, however, present her own feelings or perspective on things, only through her characters' words, and her description of events and places. It is clear from the long passages that describe the landscape that the author herself has a deep affection for the Dutch landscape, and the plants and people who live there.

The people who narrate the stories in the novel share certain characteristics: they are often female, and they are often thoughtful. They share this trait with the girl looking out the window, and Magdalena herself is thoughtful and full of vitality that is not being touched by her daily work. This is the perspective described most often, as characters want something additional from their lives, and find a hint of that thing in the painting.

## Setting

The Girl in Hyacinth Blue is set in the Netherlands. The landscape itself is a significant presence in the novel, as many of the stories are affected by the flooding there, or the farm country there.

The novel travels between the farm country and the cities of Amsterdam and Delft, and some of the characters long for places even further away, such as Paris. There is a tension between city and country, but the nostalgia flows both ways. Characters in the country long for the city, and characters in the city long for either other cities, or the country.

## Language and Meaning

The language in The Girl in Hyacinth Blue is often poetic and literary. The vocabulary is sophisticated, although it is not specialized or merely verbose. The words are rich, they evoke a vivid landscape and characters with elaborate feelings. Intellectual life is one of the themes in the novel, and both the novelist and the characters are frequently trying to find words for sublime or mysterious or ineffable things.

The novel does not, however, delve into metaphor or flowery language. The descriptions are straightforward and unembroidered by authorial commentary.

## Structure

The *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* is told in reverse chronology: each of the linked stories takes place earlier in time than the previous story, with the sole exception of the final story, which starts at the same time as the penultimate story, then continues on beyond the ending of that story. (It may be worth pointing out that chronology is respected within each story, so that the stories proceed from beginning chronologically to their end—it is only the progress from one story to the next that goes backward.)

The question that drives this progress is the question of the authenticity of Vermeer's painting of the *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. This is a weak central question, and the book only follows it loosely—there is hardly any mystery about the question, and no one is on a quest to find out. Clues unfold casually, and the main interest of the book is in the anecdotes that center on the painting. What emerges is a portrait of life from the painting's point of view.



## Quotes

If the painting was real, so was the atrocity of his father's looting.

Look at this stupendous achievement. Pay attention on your knees to greatness.

Now that one person in the world sees that it's authentic, it's all worthwhile, don't you think?

Everybody works. That's what life is. Work and a little play and a lot of prayer.

It doesn't matter what she's looking at. Or what she's doing, or not doing. It only matters that she's thinking.

Johanna would leave the town of her birth and ancestry, and go to Amsterdam, nearly half a day's carriage ride over the dike roads.

There is nothing so vital as paying attention, and perfecting the humble offices of love.

The Hague was, every Dutchman declared pridefully, the very capital of reason above passion.

Since Saskia couldn't have [the things in the painting] in reality, she wanted them all the more in the painting.

For the first time in her marriage, she had a lightness, a sense of power in being right. She pressed further. "As I said, Jantje is not the child of some lawless wench, or even the son of a farmer." She heard the bite in the last word, and knew that her husband did too.

I had worn myself out squeezing some personal meaning out of Descartes, Spinoza and Erasmus and wanted instead to experience in action Descartes' principle that science could master Nature for the benefit of mankind. I wanted the making of practical things...and, I wanted intercourse with flesh and blood, not ink and words.

A man has time for only a certain number of paintings in his lifetime. He'd better choose them prudently.

You have a deeper obligation...I don't mean the debt. I mean the obligation of talent.

To render [her face] with honesty rather than pride or even more love, to go beyond the painting of known sentiments into mystery—that was her challenge to him.

I hate to mend. It's not making anything.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

How does the plot of *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* develop? How is *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*'s plot different from a typical novel, with rising action, a climax, and falling action and a denouement?

## Topic 2

Many of the characters in *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* lived in one place before leaving to make a new life that is full of nostalgia for the old life they left behind. Discuss the theme of origins and displacement in *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. What does the novel say about the process of being at home, or being an outsider?

## Topic 3

Many characters worry over the question of whether the Vermeer painting is authentic. What is at issue when characters ask this question, and what is settled when it is answered? What does this tell us about the value of art?

## Topic 4

One of the things many characters like about the painting of the girl in the hyacinth dress is the look on the girl's face, and her pose. Many wonder what caused her expression or what she is thinking about. How does this question work to hold the novel together, and how does the question reveal information about the characters who ask it?

## Topic 5

What does *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* tell us about art—from its creation and uses to its social and economic value?

## Topic 6

What would you say is the most important theme in *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*? What makes it more important than the other themes in the book? What makes it most important to you, personally?



## Topic 7

Compare and contrast the characters who value the painting with the figure of the girl in the painting. How are they similar? How are they different? How do they each reflect the painting and the value of art?

## Topic 8

Discuss the theme of marriage and alternatives to marriage in *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. How does the novel describe the different states of independence and matrimony?

## Topic 9

What is the benefit of the author telling the story backwards, as she has done? Why couldn't this novel have been written chronologically, from beginning to end? What was gained from the backward telling? What was lost?

## Topic 10

Painting is one form of creation in *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. What are other kinds of creation in the novel, and how does Vreeland position them in relation to painting? Is pregnancy superior or inferior to painting? What other kinds of creation or productivity are included?

## Topic 11

Debate the proposition that *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* is not a novel but a collection of stories.