

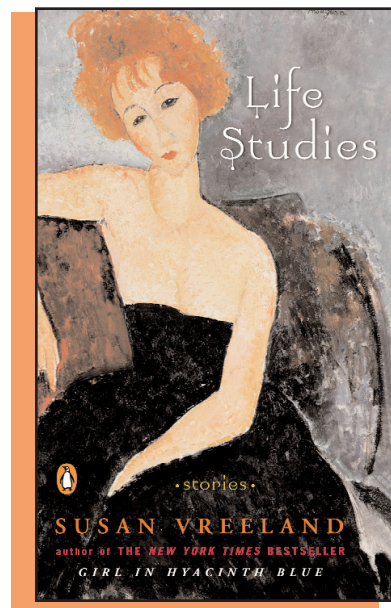


# A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO LIFE STUDIES

BY SUSAN VREELAND

PREPARED BY SUSAN VREELAND

THIS GUIDE IS BEST USED IN COMBINATION WITH [WWW.SVREELAND.COM](http://WWW.SVREELAND.COM)



## Stories with young characters particularly suitable for students:

### **The Yellow Jacket**

Just before reporting for duty in the French army, an adolescent poses for a portrait by van Gogh, and receives a new image of himself. A coming-of-age story involving disillusion with a best friend.

### **Of These Stones**

Influenced by bullies, a small boy throws figs at Cézanne and his painting, then learns deep lessons as he serves his punishment in Cézanne's garden. Deals with sibling dominance and mistreatment, as well as parental narrowness and religious hypocrisy.

### **In the Absence of Memory**

Haunted by taunts from schoolmates, the orphaned daughter of painter Amadeo Modigliani seeks to discover what kind of people her parents actually were. Examines loneliness, a search for identity, and issues of resentment and forgiveness.

### **Crayon, 1955**

An elementary school girl snooping in her neighbor's house discovers a broader world which enables her to learn something about life while her grandfather is dying. Considers the questions of truth and falsity between parent and child.

### **Five Hundred Words, with Sincerity and Honesty**

A lonely foster child in a Catholic school cleverly designs an outrageous plan of disobedience in order to be reunited with her mother. Involves the dynamics and results of exclusion among students, differences in social class, and a smarter-than-average protagonist who doesn't "fit in."

### **Their Lady Tristeza**

A student's drawing of a Matisse nude in a classroom miraculously evolves into an image of the Virgin Mary which can't be erased and serves different needs for various students. Shows the positive effects students can have to teach a teacher about human need and the misconceptions of "high" and "low" cultures.

## Follow-up questions:

There are nearly seventy questions story-by-story in the discussion questions section covering all the stories in the book, including those stories just named. In addition, here are some questions designed for class discussion on these particular stories, followed by writing suggestions which can be used for any story in the collection, and a fiction writing lesson based on "Crayon, 1955."

### **The Yellow Jacket**

1. Why does Armand hit his friend and why does doing so bother him?
2. What is the relationship like between Armand and Gustave? Between Armand and his father? Between Armand and van Gogh?
3. Consider for a moment what it might feel like for a teenager to be painted by a famous artist—particularly one so odd and misunderstood. Speculate on the effect of being painted by van Gogh.
4. How might Armand's thoughts on Gustave and Jacqueline change after he comes back from Tunisia?

### **Of These Stones**

1. Which is the strongest influence on Anatole: peer pressure or family pressure? In what ways is this a story about loyalty?
2. Why does Marc behave the way he does toward Anatole? What would make a child develop the cruelty that Marc exhibits? Is this realistic? Consider the time and place.
3. Speculate as to what kind of a future Anatole will have at home and in school. How is he changed, or how might his attitudes

be changed by the encounters with Cézanne and Madame Cézanne? Will he be more equipped to handle situations in his family, or will he continue to be victimized by them?

4. Madame Cézanne acts differently than Anatole's expectations. How does this affect him?

5. Paul Cézanne wrote, "The labor which brings about progress in one's own calling is sufficient compensation for a lack of comprehension on the part of fools." Do you think, in spite of this, it was difficult for Cézanne to deal with criticism? What resources did he turn to in order to bolster himself against criticism?

### **In the Absence of Memory**

1. Examine the relationship between Giovanna and Colette. What motivated each of them in their actions?

2. Who understood Giovanna's anguish and needs?

3. Whom do you feel for the most: Giovanna? Margherita? Nonna?

4. What is the irony between Genevieve and the concierge in the cemetery? What is suggested by it?

5. What do you think it must be like to have a famous but disreputable father? What kind of burden does that place on a young person?

### **Crayon, 1955**

1. In what way was Jenny engaging in archeology? How does Jenny's experience with her grandfather affect her actions in Miss Haskin's house?

2. What passed between Jenny and Gramp in the last days of his life? How was it a rich experience, as Miss Haskin said?

3. At one point, Jenny lies to her mother about what she was doing in Miss Haskin's house. What understanding of her mother necessitated this lie? How aware is Jenny of the difference between the two houses and the two types of lives?

4. Why did Jenny tear up the paper she had typed on?

### **Five Hundred Words, with Sincerity and Honesty**

1. What is motivating Josie? Was there another course of action that Josie might have taken to satisfy her longings?

2. Why do the other girls treat her badly—or is that only her imagination?

3. Does it take courage to write this letter, or is it the writing of a smart aleck? What is at stake?

4. What do Giovanna (from "In the Absence of Memory") and Josie have in common?

5. "Five Hundred Words, With Sincerity and Honesty" and "Their Lady Tristeza" both take place in high schools, but very different high schools. Which one seems truer to you? Would you prefer to have a teacher like Sister Wilhelmina or Miss Talmadge? Which set of students would provide a healthier atmosphere?

### **Their Lady Tristeza**

1. Rosie, Anita, and Eddie each have different interpretations of the drawing. Why?

2. What's your interpretation of the drawing? Why does it keep coming back? What about the tear?

3. Why is it significant to Eddie that Miss Talmadge only pays rent month to month?

4. Does Miss Talmadge change her mind about the town? Why or why not?

5. Why does the author bring in this new element of the blue of the sea right at the end of the story?

## **Stories suitable for high school students, even though they don't involve young characters:**

### **Mimi with a Watering Can**

A bored and depressed man awakes to a greater zest for life because he sees his daughter as a famous painter sees her.

### **Cradle Song**

A poor nursemaid is forced to sacrifice her own child so that a wealthy mother can create. Deals with social class differences.

### **A Flower for Ginette**

The long collaboration between a gardener and a painter is threatened by the gardener's love for his wife and for beauty.

### **Adventures of Bernardo and Salvatore**

Two country villagers in Italy in the 17th century go to Rome to see the great art of the world, hoping it will cure one of them and provide a religious experience for both of them. A humorous fable about friendship.

### **The Things He Didn't Know**

A construction worker goes to a museum with his girlfriend, an art historian, and learns more about himself than about art.

### **Uncommon Clay**

A daughter copes with issues of truth and imagination when caring for her mother, an Alzheimer's patient. Shows how art can be a vehicle to express pent-up emotions.

### **Gifts**

An elderly man on his way to visit his wife in the penitentiary for a crime in which he shares responsibility, encounters a mute girl on the bus—whose drawing of him he hopes his wife will accept as a gift.

## Personal reflection writing topics:

1. Which was your favorite story, and why? How does it connect to you personally?
2. Which character do you understand the most? What do you know about him or her? Consider: longings, fears, self-image, worries, admirable characteristics, limitations, and growth.
3. Which character is most like you? What similarities do you share?

## Creative writing topics:

1. Write a continuation of the narrative of one of the stories. You can choose a time immediately after the story ends, or far advanced from the end of the story.
2. Construct a scene that you imagine taking place between two actual scenes in the story.
3. Write a letter or a narrative diary entry from the point of view of one of the characters.
4. Write some dialogue between two characters that did not occur in the story. Make sure it touches on a central issue of the story.

## Analytical essay:

1. Choose a word or phrase from the list below and show how two stories develop it.  
(Teachers: You will probably have to allow free range over the collection. Alternatively, you could narrow the story choices and call for one story in the composition. The idea here is to encourage students to do their own matching the topic to the story.)

longing  
ethical action  
search for identity  
self development  
injustice  
sacrifice

responsibility  
love  
loyalty  
compassion  
judgment

2. Choose one of the following quotes and relate it to one of the stories or characters.

“Art is love.” —Holman Hunt

“Talent is only one side, perhaps the easier side, of self-development. The other side is self-knowledge.” —John W. Gardner, *Self-Renewal*, 1963

“The present task of art is to make the feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor, which is now shared only by the best members of society, the customary feeling, even the instinct, of all human beings.” —Tolstoy, *What is Art?*

“What is art/But life on a larger scale.” —Elizabeth Barrett Browning

“Every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures.” —Henry Ward Beecher

"There is nothing ugly in art except that which is without character, that is to say, that which offers no outer or inner truth." —Auguste Rodin, *Art. 1912*, translated by Paul Gsell

“The object of art is to give life shape.” —Jean Anouilh, "The Rehearsal"

"The real question is: To whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong? To those who can apply it to their own lives, or to a cultural hierarchy of relic specialists?" —John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

"Not what man knows but what man feels concerns art." —Bernard Berenson, 1897

## A writing lesson, using “Crayon, 1955” as a model:

Many new writers begin with autobiographical material, but an exacting adherence to truth rarely makes good fiction. You can escape the tyranny of fact and produce something deeper by following these steps.

STEP 1: Take two events which happened at slightly different times in your life. Write two or three pages on each, separately. It could be mostly narrative summary. You will put it into scenes with direct dialogue later, unless the dialogue comes easily on this first draft. Suggest what growth or character change occurred as a result of each.

STEP 2. Think about how these events would have been impacted if they happened simultaneously. If the moods are different, would the character vacillate between them? Would one dominate over the other? Would one experience make the other experience happen differently? Would the main character learn something different, grow or change in a different way because of the two events occurring together? Most likely, yes, if you've picked well. Work toward creating an entirely new dynamic requiring new exploration and invention beyond the mere recording of memory which you did in step one. Write a narrative summary of the new story.

STEP 3. Add to the character based on you one important element you don't have, and take away one element that you do have. Such elements might be: personality characteristics; attitudes; social or regional background; nationality; level of education; ability, interest or passion. These can't just be tacked on your existing material. They must reshape it.

STEP 4: Search deeply for those issues in which the truest self of this new person resides. Now write your fiction with scenes and dialogue accordingly.

## Discussion questions:

### THEN

#### **Mimi with a Watering Can**

1. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote “What is art but life on a larger scale.” How does this relate to Jérôme's ennui and his capacity to lift himself out of his melancholy?
2. How do Mimi, Paquin, and Renoir unwittingly help to change Jérôme's frame of mind?
3. Why do the changes in Montmartre bother Jérôme? What does this show about him?

#### **Winter of Abandon**

1. Alice thinks, "There it was, life pared down to the essentials--food and work and love, and beauty too." Has she overlooked anything? Is there any rationale to the order she uses? Does her life attest this order? Would you prioritize them differently?
2. In what way is this a story of desire and betrayal?
3. Does it appear that the author is casting judgments on any of the characters? Do you? If so, what judgment and for what reason?

#### **Cradle Song**

1. How aware is Sylvie of the dynamics of her relationship with Berthe Morisot? What brings them together? What forces them apart? What is at stake for both of them?
2. Literacy is one thing that separates the two women. How does letter-writing play out in both of their lives?
3. Why does Sylvie turn on Berthe and want to see her pain? What makes her turn back?

#### **Olympia's Look**

1. Suzanne from "Olympia's Look" and Sylvie from "Cradle Song" are both outside of the Edouard Manet-Berthe Morisot connection. In what way are Suzanne and Sylvie struggling with similar emotions?
2. What are the range of emotions that Suzanne goes through in the course of the story?
3. Letter-writing appears in this story, too. Why can't Suzanne immediately see that Edouard Manet's letter to Isabelle is only "a sweet silly note," as she finally calls it, and nothing to be concerned about? What experience and realization are necessary for her to arrive at this conclusion?

#### **The Yellow Jacket**

1. Henry Ward Beecher said, “Every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures.” How does this relate to van Gogh painting Armand's portraits? Consider his comments as he's painting them.
2. What effect did the night café painting have on Armand? In Armand's mind, how did it relate to Jacqueline?
3. Why did the yellow jacket have the effect it had on Armand—first when he pulls it out of his father's mail sack and then when he sees the painting?
4. In what ways is this a story about yearning for both characters ?
5. In a letter to his brother Theo, Vincent van Gogh wrote, "And in a picture, I want to say something comforting, as music is

comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring." How does this apply to the paintings of Armand? What do you think van Gogh saw in Armand?

### **Of These Stones**

1. Is Anatole strong or weak in character? Give examples to support your answer.
2. Paul Cézanne wrote, "The labor which brings about progress in one's own calling is sufficient compensation for a lack of comprehension on the part of fools." Do you think, in spite of this, it was difficult for Cézanne to deal with criticism? What resources did he turn to in order to bolster himself against criticism?
3. What would make a child develop the cruelty that Marc exhibits?
4. In what way is this a story about loyalty?

### **A Flower for Ginette**

1. What two repeated activities bring Monet and Émile together? How are they different?
2. Monet once said, "To me, the motif itself is an insignificant factor; what I want to reproduce is what lies between the motif and me." How does this apply to Émile?
3. Why was Émile so moved at Monet's words, "beyond an old man's powers?"
4. Claude Monet lived at Giverny and painted his garden for forty-three years. Many museums around the world have his paintings of the water garden or the flower garden at Giverny in their collections. Why do you think these paintings are so beloved by so many?

### **In the Absence of Memory**

1. Giovanna searches the chest, the exhibit, and the streets of Paris for some shred of connection with her father—some bit of information she can shape into a memory. But what ultimately fills the void of memory for Giovanna?
2. What narrative purpose was served by the reference to the onset of World War II, and how did Giovanna personalize it?
3. What does the story say about pain?

## **INTERLUDE**

### **Adventures of Bernardo and Salvatore, or The Cure: A Tale**

1. Examine the relationship between Bernardo and Salvatore. Is it a good one? Why?
2. From this sample, what are the literary conventions of a tale as opposed to those of a traditional short story?
3. What are the benefits of living in the time and place of this story, 17th-century Tuscany, as opposed to contemporary times?
4. In the deepest sense, what is the cure for human ill?

## **NOW**

### **The Things He Didn't Know**

1. What similarity is suggested between St. Sebastian and Steve? Between the third Mary and Steve?
2. After his experience with Kathy, what can Steve write on his two lists?
3. What does Steve have in common with Bernardo and Salvatore? As Steve explores the world of art, is there anything he learns similar to what Bernardo or Salvatore learn?

### **Uncommon Clay**

1. What is hardest thing for the daughter to do?
2. How do the protagonist's ceramics express her issues in dealing with her mother's memory loss?
3. How does Kita-oji's presence create a different kind of visit with her mother?
4. Why does she name the last pot "The Balm of Gilead?"

### **Respond**

1. The world did not act to stop the genocide in Rwanda. How does that relate to the title of the story and to Brad's tears?
2. Whose concerns were more important—Cynthia's or Brad's?
3. What is it that wakes up Cynthia so dramatically?
4. How has the sculpting class served Cynthia?
5. If you were a marriage counselor or Cynthia's mother, what advice would you give her?
6. Speculate: Will this couple stay together and learn from each other, or is there not enough holding them together? Support your assessment.
7. Who grows?

### **Crayon, 1955**

1. How is Jenny changed by the experiences of this summer?
2. How can death be a rich experience?

### **Five Hundred Words, With Sincerity and Honesty**

1. What is really motivating Josie in “Five Hundred Words?” Is she foolhardy or wise? Is she smart or just a smart aleck? Why do the other students pick on her and get her in trouble?
2. Do you think going to this school is a good experience for Josie? If she has to leave this school, what will she take away from it?
3. Reduce this story to one word. What is it about?

### **Gifts**

1. The title is in the plural. How many gifts are given in this story? Which are the most valuable to Charles?
2. In what way is art a test of love? Can art be a test of love in general— beyond this story?
3. How do you think Charles' experience of losing a grandchild influences his interaction with the mute girl on the bus?

### **Their Lady Tristeza**

1. What are the four main opinions of the drawing? Whose opinion of the drawing is the most valid, or can this not be answered?
2. Speculate on whether Miss Talmadge will stay on in this town for another year.
3. What purpose is served by the commentary on the color of the lines of the *Blue Nude*?

### **Tableaux Vivants**

1. What do Cynthia from "Respond" and Eileen from "Tableaux Vivants" have in common? What is different about their relationships with their husbands? In what way do they have the opposite problem?
2. Is Jeffrey aware that the experience he orchestrated for his mother is good for her and not just “cool?” If so, how aware is he of the benefits of the experience?
3. In what ways does the story explore the boundaries between illusion and reality?
4. How does The Cure from "The Adventures of Bernardo and Salvatore" relate to Eileen?

### **General questions:**

1. In what way are the stories in this collection tableaux vivants? Which was your favorite story in each section, and why? Who was the most appealing character to you?
2. How does the collection as a whole explore the ideas of acceptance and redemption?
3. Pablo Picasso said, “Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the songs of a bird?” Which painter from this collection might agree with Picasso?
4. The English painter and founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Holman Hunt said, “Art is love.” In what sense could this be true? Are there any stories in this collection that bear this out? What are all the various kinds of love illustrated in these stories?
5. John Ruskin wrote, "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three, the only trustworthy one is the last." Six of the eight stories in the "Then" section are told about French painters. Looking at the paintings by these six in the "Paintings and Passages" section of this website, what do you think they say about France?
6. In *A Writer's Notebook*, Somerset Maugham wrote, "Art, if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach men humility, tolerance, wisdom and magnanimity. The value of art is not beauty, but right action." Which stories can be associated with each of these human qualities?

For more information on this title, including reviews, excerpts, and paintings, please visit

**[www.svreeland.com](http://www.svreeland.com)**

To e-mail the author directly, please send comments and inquiries to

**[susan@svreeland.com](mailto:susan@svreeland.com)**

### **Ordering Life Studies for Your School**

*Life Studies* is available from Penguin Books in trade paperback, ISBN 0-14-303610-6. Please visit our website at

**<http://us.penguin.com>**

for more information.