

A SOLITARY BLUE

LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

CYNTHIA VOIGT

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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SYNOPSIS

A Solitary Blue is the story of Jeff Greene, the guitar-playing high school boy Dicey Tillerman meets in *Dicey's Song* (1982), but the connection isn't forged until late in the novel. The story begins with seven-year-old Jeff finding his mother Melody's note that said she left to help the world's less fortunate and to "make things better." Jeff is left with his father, a stiff and expressionless history professor. Despite his age, Jeff does much of the cooking and housework.

Jeff leads a lonely, solitary life. He does poorly in school and has no friends. Other children ignore him; his father is totally preoccupied with his studies and teaching. Jeff's father, referred to as "The Professor," is friends with Brother Thomas, who tries to instill some order in the house, but his efforts come to little. Only when Jeff is seriously ill with pneumonia does the Professor take some action. Nonetheless, matters return to their usual state when Jeff recovers. Once more he is cooking and cleaning for his father. In terror that his father will leave him, too, Jeff becomes an expert at repressing his feelings and giving his father what he thinks the man wants: quiet, peace, and a lack of emotion.

When Jeff turns twelve, his mother invites him to stay with her in Charleston. Although he doesn't see very much of his mother at all, Jeff is overcome with love for her. Astonished by her beauty and grace, Jeff is blind to her faults: selfishness, cruelty, greed, and hypocrisy. Jeff is impressed by the richness of his great-grandmother's home, complete with a servant. Melody tells him that one day she will inherit the home and contents and then will be rich herself. Jeff cherishes the memory of her throughout the next school year, writing monthly letters that she never answers. He even buys a cheap used guitar because she had played one that memorable summer.

That Christmas, the Professor buys Jeff a wonderful guitar, and Jeff realizes that his father loves him deeply, even though he is often unable to show his feelings. Money is tight in the household because the Professor does not earn much and he has to pay for Jeff's tuition at the University school. The Professor tells Jeff a little bit about why his marriage to Melody failed, targeting the differences in age, temperament, and interests.

The next summer Jeff returns to Charleston. This time he sees even less of his mother because she is off on long trips with her dangerous boyfriend Max, a drug user and ex-con. Since his great grandmother, called "Gambo," suffered a stroke over the winter, he has nowhere to go. Aimlessly, he roams the streets and spends time at the cemetery. As the summer progresses and it becomes painfully obvious that Melody has no interest in seeing her son, Jeff buys a small skiff and spends time alone on an island in the area. This time, Jeff returns home dangerously withdrawn.

The Professor earns a large sum of a money from a book,

the result of years of research. To his astonishment, the book is a commercial as well as critical success. To Jeff's enormous pride, his father has dedicated the book to him. Jeff's healing process begins several months later when Jeff and his father move from Baltimore, Maryland, to the Chesapeake Bay cabin he and his father have selected together and purchased with the proceeds from the book. Jeff does much better at his new school both academically and socially. For the first time he earns "A's" and makes some friends. Among his new acquaintances are several boys and girls from school as well as Dicey Tillerman and her family. Jeff spends time with the Tillermans. Jeff takes some of the Tillerman children crabbing to help them earn extra money. He realizes that he is falling in love with Dicey.

At the same time, he and his father become much closer, even though his father is still a very reserved man. Jeff realizes that his father loves him very much and is a solid, reliable man, in contrast to his selfish, flighty mother.

As Jeff approaches the end of high school, Gambo dies. To the astonishment of everyone involved, Gambo leaves her entire estate to Jeff—not out of love, but solely because he is the male heir. Jeff inherits \$25,000, a very valuable diamond ring, and some smaller and far less valuable pieces of jewelry. In an attempt to get her hands on the money, Melody tries to gain custody of Jeff, but both Jeff and the Professor resist her attempts. Jeff decides to give all the money to Opal Carter, Gambo's loyal, long-time African-American servant. Gambo had not left Mrs. Carter even the smallest bequest, even though the impoverished black woman had served her loyally for many, many years and now has no means of support. Melody once again shows up, and Jeff gives her the valuable diamond ring, knowing she will sell the heirloom as soon as she can to finance her selfish lifestyle.

Jeff decides to go into ecology: "No, not saving the world or getting back to the good old prehistoric days, not that," as he tells his father. "But responsible management of it, somehow. . . with computers, too. . ."

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born on February 25, 1942, in Boston, Massachusetts, Cynthia Voigt was the second of five children. In keeping with a family tradition, Voigt attended a boarding school, Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts. "A private girls' boarding school gave us a great deal of intellectual as well as physical freedom and I loved it," she says.

By the time she was in the ninth grade, Voigt knew she wanted to be a writer. At first, she wrote mostly short stories and poems. While attending Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, she took a number of creative writing courses. After graduation, Voigt moved to Manhattan and took a job with the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. "New York seemed the place to go after college," she says. "I

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worked for a wonderful woman in public relations. . . who had led a very exciting and interesting life."

In 1964, Voigt married her first husband; they soon moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Experiencing difficulty finding other work, Voigt took a teaching position even though she had once vowed never to teach. However, she loved the job and felt instantly at home. Eight years later, after she and her husband divorced, Voigt settled in Annapolis, Maryland. Voigt had not written much during her first marriage; she believes this was part of the reason for its failure. To support herself and her young daughter, Voigt worked as a tutor but managed to set aside one hour a day to write.

In addition, Voigt taught English to second, fifth, and seventh grade students in Glen Burnie, Maryland. It was then that she realized that she could tell stories that had the shape of adult novels for younger readers. "I felt like I had suddenly discovered and was exploring a new country," she said.

In 1974, she married Walter Voigt, a Latin and Greek teacher at the same school. Soon after, Cynthia became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She used the time home with her son to finish writing some major novels, including *Tell Me If the Lovers are Losers* and *The Callender Papers*. She also began work on *Homecoming*. All three novels were published within the next few years. Voigt continued to write and refine her craft. In 1983, *Dacey's Song* was awarded the Newbery Medal and a host of other honors. Voigt was thrilled with the acclaim.

Voigt does not always have an easy time developing her characters. "It was difficult for me to cook up a reason why a woman would leave her children—something that happens in both *Homecoming* and *A Solitary Blue*," she notes. She finds setting much easier, however. Most of her stories take place in Maryland. "Maryland is lovely, and spacious, with a lot of flat land and a huge expanse of sky overhead. It reminds me in some ways of the Southwest, which is also beautiful country."

"Do it, not for awards, but for the pleasure of writing," is her advice to young writers". And remember that publication is often a matter of chance. *Homecoming* was turned down by three of the five editors to whom I submitted the first three chapters."

CRITIC'S CORNER

Voigt's novels are noted for their realistic plots and three-dimensional characters. Many revolve around families, often in untraditional configurations. For example, her first novel, *Homecoming*, centers around the Tillerman family. Twelve-year-old Dacey takes charge of her three younger siblings after their mother, on the brink of a nervous collapse, deserts them. Some critics found the novel overly descriptive and not believable; others praised its compelling plot. *Dacey's Song* follows the lives of the four Tillerman children after they move in with their grandmother. This book was much more favorably received than *Homecoming*: critics praised its tight construction and true-to-life psychological underpinnings.

A Solitary Blue recounts the painful childhood and adolescence of Jeff Greene, a boy introduced as a secondary character in *Dacey's Song*. This work, as with Voigt's other novels, focuses on family issues: the desertion of Jeff's mother, his distant father, the dynamics of the Tillerman household. *Tell Me If the Lovers are Losers* explores the friendship between four people with very different histories and attitudes toward life. Only *The Callender Papers*, a mystery, is slightly differ-

ent from Voigt's other novels. Nonetheless, like her other works, this novel has a realistic plot, careful pacing, and a thematic base in the family.

A Solitary Blue received mixed reviews. Some critics, like the reviewer for *Kirkus*, praised Voigt's depiction of Jeff's feelings. That reviewer found them "compellingly real and affecting," and was also enthusiastic about how Voigt made the growing closeness between Jeff and his father subtle and moving. Nonetheless, the reviewer found the novel's ending disappointing, calling it "overly simplistic."

Jane Langton, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, had this to say about *A Solitary Blue*: "The reader guesses from the beginning of this beautifully written story that the mother is a washout—guesses too that the father's still waters run deep. The book has a natural suspense. One wants to see the boy discover the truth about his parents and himself. There is an 'I could have told you so' satisfaction in seeing him betrayed once again by his mother, pleasure in watching the development of his new friendship with his responsible father. Professor Greene's repression and inhibitions begin to seem like virtues compared with Melody's treacherous 'I love you's.'" Although the reviewer found the novel "slightly damaged" by the appearance of the Tillermans at the end, she nonetheless wrote that "nothing can undo the artistic thoroughness of this study of a boy in pain."

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To explore family dynamics
2. To compare and contrast different styles of parenting
3. To understand the results of repressing emotions
4. To understand the healing power of nature
5. To contrast settings
6. To realize the importance of love and consistent parenting
7. To explore the author's use of irony
8. To decode symbols
9. To chart the effect of human cruelty and kindness
10. To describe different cultural norms

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the relationship between Jeff and his mother, Jeff and his father, and the Professor and Melody
2. To explore why Melody deserts her son and goes off to save the world
3. To understand why Jeff works so hard to repress his feelings about what has happened to him
4. To comprehend why Melody and the Professor got married, separated, and ultimately divorced
5. To analyze what the great blue heron represents in the novel
6. To account for Jeff's strong feelings toward his mother, Melody
7. To understand what nature comes to symbolize in the novel
8. To probe the effects of parental abuse on a child
9. To discuss the Tillermans' function in the novel, especially what Dacey means to Jeff
10. To understand why Jeff gives his inheritance to Opal and the huge diamond ring to Melody

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MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers pinpoint the context in which the item appears.

1. Melody didn't talk to the Professor the way she talked to Jeff; she didn't talk to him very much at all. When she tried to, he asked her questions that she answered unhappily until he finally said, "It's not as simple as that." (Chap. 1, p. 7)
(Jeff's young and beautiful mother Melody—a woman who at first glance seems as graceful and blessed as a song—deserts her husband and young son to "save the world." Before she leaves, Melody tells Jeff that people are making the world worse by dumping garbage in the water, killing fish and wildlife. They are also spewing smoke into the air. According to Melody, politicians and countries are fighting wars that kill many innocent people with bombs, fire, and poison. Many people do not have warm, loving families, either. Melody grossly simplifies world affairs for herself as well as for Jeff. She does not understand that helping the world is not as easy as it appears and often begins right at home, by helping those who need the help most, such as her own son. Voigt is using the Professor as a mouthpiece to mock Melody's simplistic, selfish, and ultimately cruel view of the world.)
2. He had hurt her feelings, so he added quickly, "It doesn't matter; I don't care." (Chap. 2, p. 40)
(To protect himself from further pain from his mother, father, and outsiders, Jeff has learned to repress all his emotions. In this scene, Jeff is baffled and hurt because his mother arrives to pick him up at the airport hours after his plane has landed; she claims that a traffic jam has held her up, but readers see from her attitude that she is all style, no substance. Readers are further upset when she almost does not recognize him: how could a mother not know her own son? Her callousness subtly reminds readers that she has neither called nor written in all the time that she has been gone. With dreadful insensitively, she says, "But you look pale. Oh Jeffie, have you been terribly unhappy?" Despite all this pain, Jeff is worried that he has upset his mother by reminding her that he was waiting, which implies that she was late.)
3. "And what are you two children going to do today?" (Chap. 2, p. 50)
(Gambo, Melody's grandmother, asks this question of her granddaughter and Jeff. On the surface, it is an innocent request, but Voigt is being ironic here: Both Jeff and Melody are children, Jeff because he is only twelve years old, Melody because she is as irresponsible, flighty, and self-centered as a small child. In an interview, Voigt stated that "Melody. . . was a very hard character to write. I was interested in capturing the kind of person who tends to be long on charm, but is absolutely false. Melody wants to take care of the entire world, a common human failing—it is so much easier to concern ourselves with other people's problems while our own personal world is neglected and goes to hell.")
4. "We can really talk," Melody said. (Chap. 2, p. 55)
(Again, Voigt is being ironic: Melody has no interest in really finding out how Jeff feels about her and his life. Instead, she is interested in talking about herself. After asking Jeff some casual questions about school, she tells him in horrific detail about his birth: "I thought I'd died and gone to hell, the pain—and the horrible bright lights and sterile boxwalls with machines on them, and the nurses who didn't care about what you were going through. I dream about it sometimes." Melody has played on Jeff's love and need so successfully that he says, "I'm sorry"—apologizing for his own birth.)
5. Melody had left her purse behind, so Jeff paid for the lunch out of the twenty dollars of his own money. (Chap. 2, p. 62)
(Melody, who lives in a grand house with all expenses paid by her grandmother, connives to make Jeff pay for lunch. Jeff and his father have very little money; the Professor is very poorly paid and since Jeff reached the fourth grade, he must also pay the boy's tuition, books, and uniforms at the University School. Right before this incident at lunch, Melody tells Jeff how she tricks an old lady into selling her a ring for less than it was worth. Commenting on Melody's cruelty, critic Jane Langton wrote: "In Bleak House, Charles Dickens gave us Mrs. Jellyby, who took such a charitable interest in far-away BorriobollaGha that she failed to notice when her own wretched children were falling down the stairs. Cynthia Voigt [in A Solitary Blue] has created a contemporary version of Mrs. Jellyby, an equally appalling mother-philanthropist.")
6. Because Melody was going away, again. Because she didn't want to stay where he was. And he wasn't sure he could stand that.
He had never suspected how easy it was to break.
He couldn't think of anything he wanted to do. Ever. (Chap. 5, p. 129)
(After his mother deserted the family, Jeff closed down all his emotions. The cost of not feeling the pain was not feeling anything. But when Jeff went to visit his mother years later, he began to open up and accept his mother as a warm, caring person. When Jeff started to trust her, he realized that he had been cruelly tricked: she was neither warm nor loving. Opening himself to feeling opens him to enormous pain, which is what we see in this passage. Jeff is shattered by the pain.)
7. "I wanted a girl. . . . If you had been a girl I'd have taken you with me when I walked out on him." (Chap. 5, p. 142)
(Melody has returned and is angry that Jeff was nowhere to be found. Jeff is baffled: it is clear to him that his mother wants him to be away, yet here she is saying that he should be present. Readers understand that Melody wants Jeff available at her beck and call. Jeff is also angry at his mother's lies. Suddenly, something bursts in Jeff and he tells Melody not to lie to him. Melody retaliates by criticizing the Professor: she might be a less-than-adequate mother, but he is a terrible father. This makes Jeff even more upset and he tells her, "That's stupid." With that, Melody strikes back hard, like a poisonous snake, repudiating Jeff completely. Jeff

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knows that she is trying to wound him: ". . . he knew she wanted to break him into pieces. And he could see this: she wanted to hurt him, as badly as she could.")

8. "It wasn't the worst time when Melody left me," the Professor said. (Chap. 7, p. 160)

(Jeff returns from his mother's house emotionally shattered. His already poor grades fall even lower; his father and Brother Thomas fear that he is using drugs. When the two men are finally able to break through Jeff's protective shell, the Professor tells his son how deeply Melody has wounded him, too. "Because I didn't know I could hate anybody that much, I didn't know I could be that angry, I didn't know what to do except concentrate on my work." Like Jeff, the Professor has withdrawn into a shell for protection against Melody's viciousness.)

9. "It was the lies," the Professor said. "They were what really scared me." (Chap. 7, p. 161)

(Although the Professor is highly educated and intelligent, he still is not able to cope with Melody's perfidy. Imagine, then, what her cruelty has done to Jeff, a child without the protective shield of experience, age, and education. The Professor tells Jeff that no matter what Melody said, he was never sorry that he married her because Jeff was the result: "You always made a difference, a real difference, from the very beginning. I always knew that, inside me, but I didn't bother to learn how to show you. I'm sorry, Jeff, I should have taken the trouble." The affirmation of his father's love helps Jeff heal from the devastating family split and his mother's viciousness.)

10. And he hated her as much as ever. (Chap. 10, pp. 268-269)

(Melody has come back, claiming that she wants custody of Jeff. Jeff suddenly realizes that she was preying on the Professor's weaknesses to get what she really wants—money. Jeff feels an upsurge of love for his father and a strong desire to protect him from Melody. Jeff realizes that she has not changed at all—and that he still despises her for her cruelty and ability to manipulate people. He decides to take a firm stand and repudiate her claim on him once and for all: "I don't want to live with you," he says. "Not all the time, not for the summer, not for a week. Not ever. It's my decision, not his. It's what I want.")

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

Questions 1-5 Literal Level

1. How do the Professor and Jeff manage when Melody leaves?

(The Professor is too overcome with grief and sorrow at his failed marriage to deal with housekeeping and child care; as a result, Jeff assumes much of the burden. Although only seven years old, Jeff is able to prepare simple meals, do light cleaning, and take care of his clothing and basic personal hygiene. He is even able to do the vacuuming and shopping when the Professor is

burdened with exams. The Professor has Jeff in school and child care for much of the time as well. The rest of the housekeeping and child care is taken care of by a succession of university students who exchange their services for room and board. Some of these young men are well meaning; all are unskilled in household arts and largely indifferent to Jeff and his needs. Tony forgets to get Jeff's hair cut; Andrew leaves Jeff untended and is angry at all the work. Ian quizzes Jeff about the Professor's relationship to Melody; by sixth grade, Jeff is on his own.)

2. How did Melody come to live with Gambo?

(Gambo is Eulalie Melville, Melody's grandmother. The nickname "Gambo" is a corruption of "Grandma." Melody's father was killed in World War II and a few years later Melody's mother remarried. Melody's mother had more children and the family moved to Minnesota, but they did not prosper there. One summer when Melody was eight years old, she went to visit Gambo—and was so happy. Melody loved living without siblings, without worrying about money, and without responsibilities. She asked Gambo if she could stay; Gambo agreed. Melody tells Jeff that she is Gambo's heir.)

3. Why does Jeff decide to start playing the guitar?

(When Jeff visits Melody for the first time, she has started playing the guitar. Like a parody of a 1960s social activist, Melody plays turgid political songs—and very badly. Nonetheless, the guitar provides Jeff with a visible link to his mother, and Jeff desperately needs a way to connect with his then-beloved mother: "His guitar was his link to Melody, his token; that was its value to him" (page 87). Melody does not write to Jeff, she does not call him, she does not even answer his letters to her, but Jeff has the guitar to link them.)

4. Before Jeff and his father move to Chesapeake Bay, how does Jeff get along with the other children in his class and neighborhood?

(Jeff has no relationship with his peers. Since earliest childhood, he has not had any friends. "He had gone from being nobody much to somebody nobody liked. He wasn't disliked, exactly, he was just in the way" (page 101). When he was very young, the other children simply ignored him. But as he gets older, the kids do not want him around; he is in their way like an annoying fly.)

5. How does Jeff come to the realization that his mother does not love him?

(Jeff is shattered by his second visit to Gambo's home. Melody has virtually ignored him, preferring to spend all her time with her boyfriend. When Jeff returns to his father, the young man is unable to function in school or at home. He starts skipping school and hanging out at the local amusement park. The Professor and Brother Thomas suspect that Jeff is on drugs.

After much concern and discussion with Brother Thomas, the Professor decides to confront Jeff directly. This is extremely unusual for the Professor, a man who likes to avoid all scenes. "Look at me, Jeff," the Professor said, making Jeff meet his eyes. "I don't care about the schoolwork. I'm not angry, I'm frightened. Tell me what's bothering you, and we'll figure out the best way to handle it." Jeff refuses to admit anything. His

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father probes a bit more deeply.

The Professor takes the extraordinary step of opening his soul to his son. "I thought to myself, the way you've been acting, that it was probably Melody. I thought it had to have something to do with her. Judging from my own experience, I've been assuming that she told you, somehow, the way only Melody can, that she didn't love you. And you thought she did," (page 159). The Professor continues with his own confession of his sorrow at his wife's falseness.

Jeff realizes through his father's extraordinary confession that his mother never loved either him or his father. This opens the way for Jeff's healing.)

Questions 6-8 Interpretative Level

6. What does the title mean?

("A solitary blue" refers to a solitary blue heron, a bird. Jeff first sees the bird on the island where he has gone to escape from being unwanted by his mother, Gambo, and the other residents of the house.

Here is how the author describes Jeff's first view of the bird: "One of the small ponds came up into view. A solitary blue heron stood at its edge, half-hidden in the pale marsh grass. The heron's legs were like stilts under its clumsy body. Its dusky feathers hung shaggy, ungroomed. It was perfectly motionless. Its long beak pointed down from a head both un noble and un beautiful. Its beak aimed down into the still, dark water. The heron occupied its own insignificant corner of the landscape in a timeless, long-legged solitude" (page 73).

The book takes its title from this great blue heron Jeff sees in the South Carolina marsh while he is visiting his mother. The bird's solitude matches his own; the bird symbolizes Jeff's isolation from others—his emotional deadness.)

7. How does Jeff feel about Dicey? What role does she play in his life?

(Like Jeff, Dicey Tillerman has had a difficult life. Her mother deserted the family. Dicey took her three siblings on a long, arduous journey to their grandmother's home, where they are currently staying. The family has little money and Dicey has learned to be resilient about life's blows. Jeff is captivated by her strong individuality, her ability to be complete within herself, her open expression of her feelings. As he gets to know her better and better, Jeff finds himself falling in love with Dicey.

One afternoon, Jeff angers Dicey. "Her feelings washed over him, like waves, and he didn't know how he'd let this happen. He had been in this scene before, with Melody, with the anger and dislike attacking him and breaking him down. He could feel himself cracking, inside. He didn't know why he kept forgetting what he was really like." Jeff is in terror that he has spoiled the beginning of their friendship, but Dicey gently reassures him that everything is fine. It is then that Jeff realizes that he loves her: "She had pronged him, with a single stroke, pronged him through the heart and he was caught. . . And besides, he didn't feel pronged, he felt—overwhelmed, out of breath, breathless" [pages 231-232].

As with the Professor, Dicey is able crack though Jeff's shell to let him feel and enjoy life. She shows him

what real love, selfless love, can be like.)

8. What does the house on the Chesapeake Bay represent in the novel?

(The house represents security and safety. Thinking of the house, Jeff realizes, "To himself, he called it a safe place, and when they were finally settled in at the end of July, living in the three-room house where windows gave out over the water and woods and sky, he knew he had been right" [page 174].

Ironically, Jeff had been terribly lonely when he was forced to stay alone in the house in Baltimore, even though the house was close to many other similar homes. The run-down house on the Chesapeake Bay is isolated on several acres, far from any neighbors. But there Jeff feels safe, cradled in nature. This oneness with nature helps lead Jeff to his decision to become involved with ecology as a career.)

Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. How are the Professor and Brother Thomas similar?

(Both the Professor and Brother Thomas are intelligent men. The Professor had won a Rhodes scholarship in his youth, written a very successful book in middle age, and served for many years as the head of his department at the University. Brother Thomas is equally intelligent and well-read, another real scholar. Further, both men are quiet and able to respect what was central to the other's life. The Professor has his study of history, whether reading it, writing it, or thinking about it. Brother Thomas has his deep, stabilizing faith, the touchstone of his life. In addition, both men enjoy solitude and their own company; neither likes parties, raucous gatherings, vulgar people. Both enjoy good food and wine; Brother Thomas is something of a wine connoisseur.)

10. How does Voigt use figures of speech in this book?

(Figures of speech are words and expressions not meant to be taken literally. Figurative language uses words in fresh, new ways to appeal to the imagination. Figures of speech include similes, metaphors, extended metaphors, hyperbole, and personification.

Voigt uses a great many similes, metaphors, and a great deal of personification to evoke the characters' appearance and emotions. She also uses these figures of speech to paint the story's time and place.

The simile on page 86 evokes the setting while implying the romantic side of Jeff's character: "He [Jeff] would be Melody's knight, here in their scruffy little house like old-fashioned knights who loved their ladies—sometimes without seeing them for years." The effect music has on Jeff, another facet of his character, is shown by the simile on page 88: "But when he started to play and the music filled the air in the room, winding and weaving until it lay over Jeff like a net, Jeff almost forgot to breathe." The simile on page 96 reveals that the Professor is too preoccupied with his studies to pay much attention to the dinner at that moment: "The Professor couldn't carve a chicken without hacking it into unrecognizable, unappetizing slabs; when the Professor carved, the chicken looked as if it had been torn apart by some inner explosion."

The metaphor on page 97 underscores the depth of the Professor's initial love for Melody: "When she first

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loved me," the Professor said, thoughtfully, without expression, "when she loved me, I felt as if—I had swallowed sunlight. Like the sun was rising inside me." The metaphor on page 106 serves to describe the setting: "It was almost two hours later and Jeff stood dreaming by the tall windows, half watching a jet taking off into a blood red sunset, the air shimmering behind the turbines. . ."

On page 88, Voigt personifies the guitar to show how the music becomes an extension of Jeff's psyche: "It was like guitar music, the plucking on strings, the tones reverberated out from the belly of the instrument, the one hand on the neck, the other on the strings. . . He felt the music enter his body and flow along with his blood." The words *belly* and *neck* combine to make the guitar a living creature.

Questions 11 and 12 Creative Level

11. A number of reviewers have been disappointed with the novel's ending. What do you think of the ending? Write an essay in which you either defend or criticize the novel's ending. Provide at least two reasons for your opinion. Be sure to cite specific details from the novel to reinforce your reasons.
12. Written in a purposefully detached style, the early sections of the novel read like a journalist's case study of child neglect. Those first chapters describe how Jeff is physically abandoned by his mother and psychologically abandoned by his father. The seven-year-old is left to fend for himself—including cooking, shopping, cleaning, and personal hygiene. Imagine that you are a social worker sent to the Greenes' house at the beginning of the novel. Write your report, detailing what you saw. Include a recommendation for further action: should Jeff be removed from the house or be allowed to stay with his father?

LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Cynthia Voigt's style, present the following terms and applications in her novel:

Irony occurs when something happens that is different from what was expected. In *verbal irony*, there is a contrast between what is stated and what is suggested. In *dramatic irony*, there is a contrast between what a character believes and what the audience knows is true. In *irony of situation*, an event reverses what the readers or characters expected. Voigt uses a great deal of each kind of irony in this story to create her picture of the Greene family. For example, on page 118, Voigt uses dramatic irony to reveal Melody's hypocrisy. Melody does not think that there should be servants, so she always eats breakfast in the kitchen with the servant, Miss Opal. Nonetheless, Melody still expects Miss Opal to cook her meal and clean up afterwards. In other places in the novel, Melody complains when Opal does not do what she is supposed to with sufficient alacrity. "We have to leave tonight and drive straight through, to get there in time," Melody says in a later chapter. "I had to wash and iron everything, and Miss Opal is so slow—it takes her ages to do anything these days" (page 128).

It is equally ironic when Melody complains to Jeff that he wasn't around when she wanted him—even though this is the first time that she has wanted to see him all

summer. "Jeffie, what a terrible thing to say," she complains, "after all everybody's done for you" (page 140). The irony, of course, is that no one has done anything for Jeff, least of all his mother. Voigt uses irony a little later in the same scene to reveal Melody's blindness to her own selfishness. Melody is criticizing the Professor for not being connected to the world: "You don't know anything about the world," she says, "he hasn't taught you anything up there in his ivory tower, safe and secure, not about the dangers or what really goes on." (page 142). The irony is that Melody is the one sheltered in an ivory tower, secure in her grandmother's house without having to make a living, care for a child, cook or clean.

Setting is the time and place where the events take place. The setting of a story may be stated outright, or readers may have to infer it from details in the story. Writers give clues to the setting in the characters' speech, clothing, or means of transportation. *A Solitary Blue* is set in Baltimore, Maryland; the Chesapeake Bay, Maryland; and Charleston, North Carolina in the present day. Since the setting is so important to the plot and theme, Voigt clearly points out and describes each specific place in great detail.

In some scenes, the setting becomes a crucial plot element, reinforcing the theme. For example, Jeff's emotional awakening occurs at his new home on the Chesapeake Bay: "A one-room, red-shingled cabin that faced across a broad creek to marshes, that sat right on a point where the creek emptied into the Chesapeake Bay. The cabin was just one room, with a bathroom tacked onto the back; the whole front wall was plate glass doors that looked out over to where the creek flowed by, hurrying into the bay, and where the level top of marsh grasses were all you could see, except for a line of low trees in the distance" (page 170). The Professor has the house cleaned and greatly enlarged in size before they move in and it becomes a symbol of security and safety for Jeff. He calls it "a safe place, and when they were finally settled in at the end of July, living in the three-room house where windows gave out over the water and woods and sky, he knew he had been right" (page 174).

Theme is the main idea of a literary work, a general statement about life. The theme can be stated outright in the work, or readers will have to infer it from details about plot, characters, and setting. Readers can infer the theme of *A Solitary Blue* from its events. One of the key details occurs at the end of the book when Jeff comes out of his emotional shell and realizes that isolation is not the way to cope with heartache. This allows him to connect with his father, his friends, and Dacey. The novel's theme, then, is the importance of feeling—even bad feelings—to humanness. Without emotion, people cannot connect with themselves and with others.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Art

1. Gambo leaves Melody her antique ring, a gift she thinks Melody would treasure but that Melody doesn't like at all. Draw the ring, based on the different descriptions of it in the novel.

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2. Select any three scenes from the novel and illustrate them. Under each scene, write a caption that highlights the scene's importance in the novel.
3. With a group, create the outfit that Melody wore when she met Jeff at the airport for his first visit to Charleston.
4. Make a bulletin board describing why the Chesapeake Bay is important to the ecology of the region.
5. Make a three-dimensional diorama showing Jeff's home on the Chesapeake Bay. As an alternate activity, make a floor plan after the renovations.

Music

1. Write a song that Jeff could play on the guitar. Your song might be about relationships in the novel, important sites such as the island, or Jeff's changing feelings about his family. Record your song and play it for the class.
2. Jeff is astonished at the magnificent guitar music he hears at the concert with his father and Brother Thomas. Find out more about famous classical guitarists. For the class, play a recording of a fine classical guitar performance.
3. Pick a passage from the novel that you found especially meaningful on a personal level and select background music that captures the mood of the scene. Read the scene to the class as you play the music for them.

History/Social Studies

1. As the member of a Southern family with deep roots in the region, Jeff is naturally drawn to the Civil War. Find out more about the great "War Between the States." Possible topics include great generals such as Lee and Grant, important sites such as Manassas, and key events such as the burning of Atlanta. Present your findings in an oral report.
2. In his youth, the Professor won a Rhodes scholarship. Find out more about this prestigious award. When was the award established? By whom? For what purpose? What are the qualifications? What famous people have won the award?
3. Jeff travels by bus from Gambo's house in North Carolina back to Baltimore. Write a set of directions that the bus driver could use to make the trip.

Language Arts

1. In her farewell note, Melody refers to a book she and Jeff had read together, *The Lorax*. Read this children's book and explain its significance to the novel.
2. On page 284, the Professor says, "Maybe it's like love; it's so easy to fall in love—the way you fall into the water when the weather is hot—but living in love is different." The Professor is creating a metaphor, a comparison between falling in love and falling into water. Write five more metaphors that explain what it means to fall in love.
3. Explain to a small group of classmates how you would help Jeff make friends.
4. Voigt also mentions Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe*, which Brother Thomas read to Jeff. Read the novel. Then write a paper explaining why Brother Thomas read it to Jeff while the child was sick in bed. Was it a good choice for a sick child? Why or why not?

5. Compose a job description for a baby-sitter. List at least ten qualities that you think a baby-sitter must have, such as reliability, patience, intelligence, and compassion. Next to each item, explain why it is important. Then make an advertisement that the Professor might put in the newspaper to get a baby-sitter for Jeff.

Science and Health

1. Describe the causes, symptoms, and treatment for bacterial pneumonia, the illness that Jeff gets in the beginning of the novel.
2. Define child abuse. Debate with some friends whether Melody is guilty of psychologically abusing Jeff.
3. Find out more about the blue heron, the central symbol in the book. See if the creature is endangered, for example, and what it needs to survive.

Drama

1. At the end of the novel, Jeff gives Gambo's diamond ring to Melody. Should he have done this, or should he have given the ring to Dicey (as he had planned) to finance her college education? Debate this issue with a group of classmates.
2. Working with a partner, act out the scene near the end of the book where Jeff meets Dicey for the first time. Try to capture each character's emotions at their meeting.
3. With a friend, improvise a scene between Melody and the Professor in which they each express their feelings about their marriage and divorce.
4. Select any chapter you especially liked and recast it as a script. Then work with a group of classmates to perform your script. You may wish to videotape your performance so you can watch it later.
5. With two other classmates, prepare a skit showing what would happen if Melody and the Professor went into marriage counseling. One member of the group should be the Professor; another, Melody; and the third, the counselor.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. On page 205, Brother Thomas says, "When you think of all the lost souls in this world. What life does to people. Do you know what I mean?" What does he mean? Explain Brother Thomas's comment.
2. One of the books Brother Thomas reads to Jeff when he is ill is *Lord of the Rings*. Read the book and explain why Brother Thomas selected it to share with Jeff.
3. Imagine that you are Melody. Write a letter to Jeff, explaining your feelings about the divorce and your loss of custody. Be sure to describe your emotions clearly.
4. Readers often select books based on critical reviews printed in journals, magazines, and newspapers. Write a review of *A Solitary Blue* to be printed in a newspaper. In your review, analyze the novel based on such elements as characterization, setting, plot, theme, and mood. Cite specific examples and quotations from the novel to support your opinion.
5. Suppose that you were casting a movie version of *A Solitary Blue*. List some actors and actresses who you think would be right to play the major characters in the novel. Next to each name, write a sentence explaining why you think this person would be suitable for the role.

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6. Imagine that Melody did not desert the family. What do you think would have happened to the Professor and Jeff in that case? Write an outline showing how the book would be different if Melody had not left.
7. On page 267, Melody says, "John Smith wrote about the bay and how fertile it was. You could stick a sword into it and fish would jump on the blade. . . . The Professor answered, "John Smith was a terrible liar." Find out who John Smith was and if the Professor was right about him being a liar.
8. Explain in a paragraph how you would help parentless children like the Tillermans. Discuss the advantages of your proposal.
9. At the end of the novel, Jeff realizes that Gambo's antique ring is what he wanted all along. List three family heirlooms that have special meaning to you. Explain why each one is important.
10. A description of the Professor and his accomplishments appears on page 197. Using the information on that passage, write a brief biography of the Professor that could be reprinted on the back cover of his book.

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List at least three scenes that show that the Professor loves Jeff very much. Then discuss how the Professor shows his love.
2. Create a plot diagram, showing the exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution of the action in this novel. Explain why the author placed the climax so early in the novel.
3. Compose a scene in which the Professor finally gets to meet Gambo. The scene should explain how each character feels about the other and why they have not met until now.
4. Write a sequel to the book in which you explain what happens to Jeff and Dicey.

OTHER BOOKS BY CYNTHIA VOIGT

Building Blocks
The Callender Papers
Come a Stranger
Dicey's Song
Homecoming
Izzy, Willy-Nilly
Jackaroo
The Runner
Stories About Rosie
Tell me If the Lovers Are Losers

RELATED READING

C.S. Adler's *In Our House Scott Is My Brother*
Judy Blume's *It's Not the End of the World*
Candy Boyd's *Charlie Pippin*
Eve Bunting's *Is Anybody There?* and *Sharing Susan*
Barbara Cohen's *The Long Way Home*
Barbara Coororan's *I Am the Universe*
Paula Danziger's *Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?* and *The Divorce Express*
Betty Wright's *The Summer of Mrs. McGregor*

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VOCABULARY TEST

Using the vocabulary words that follow, complete each sentence. You will have answers left over.

abate
adorning
anticipation
charming
confidently
depressed
echoed

fertile
fiduciary
heirloom
inciting
insisting
mayhem
mimic

motionless
overwhelmed
pastel
polluted
prohibitive
radically
reticent

reverberated
riveted
symmetry
thronged
turpitude
turquoise
wishful

1. At the end of the novel, Melody gives Jeff Gambo's antique ring, a family _____.
2. The house in Charleston was too expensive to keep; just the electric bill would be _____.
3. When he returned home from Charleston the second time, Jeff was so _____ about discussing his experiences that the Professor did not know what had happened at all.
4. People guilty of moral _____ have very poor values.
5. The lawyer in charge of Gambo's funds had great _____ responsibility for the money.
6. It appeared that _____ might erupt when Jeff and Melody started fighting over Jeff's custody.
7. The _____ incident occurred when Jeff told his mother that he had no intention at all of living with her — ever.
8. The tension started to lessen and _____ when Melody realized that she would get the diamond ring. . . all she ever seemed to want.
9. Jeff kept _____ that he wanted Melody to have the ring; he was firm in his decision.
10. By the end of the book, Jeff had changed so much that it was plain he was _____ different from what he had been like before.
11. The tones _____ from the guitar.
12. The heron stood perfectly _____.
13. *Time* magazine described The Professor as perfectly _____.
14. Jeff felt _____ when he realized he was in love with Dicey.
15. John Smith wrote that Chesapeake Bay was very _____.

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COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (30 points)

Match the following descriptions with each character from the novel. Choose your answers from the list below. Each answer will be used only once.

- | | | |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------------|
| A. Jeff | F. Dicey | K. the Professor |
| B. Melody | G. Phil | L. Horace Greene |
| C. Andrew | H. Miss Opal | M. Beauregard Jacobs |
| D. Max | I. Belle | N. Mina Smiths |
| E. Gambo | J. the Tillermans | O. Brother Thomas |

- _____ 1. the real name of the author of *Earth's Honored Guests*, a very well-reviewed book about famous people
- _____ 2. Eulalie Melville, Jeff's great-grandmother
- _____ 3. the person to whom Jeff gives nearly all of his inheritance
- _____ 4. Gambo's lawyer
- _____ 5. the teenage girl with whom Jeff falls in love
- _____ 6. the Professor's closest adult friend
- _____ 7. Jeff's mother, the woman who deserts the family
- _____ 8. a boy who becomes one of Jeff's first friends in school
- _____ 9. one of Jeff's early baby-sitters
- _____ 10. the nickname Jeff calls his father
- _____ 11. Jeff's cousin, also called "Booty" after a character in *Beauty and the Beast*
- _____ 12. Melody's unsavory boyfriend
- _____ 13. a girl who becomes one of Jeff's friends in school
- _____ 14. the family Jeff helps earn extra money by crabbing
- _____ 15. the character identified with the solitary blue heron

Part II: True/False (20 points)

Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false. Write your answer in the space provided.

- _____ 1. In *Time*, Brother Thomas is described as "a handsome, ageless man whose eyes twinkle with dry humor . . . a thoroughly charming man, who weighs his words and is worth listening to."
- _____ 2. Jeff Greene is in the second grade when his mother Melody deserts the family.
- _____ 3. Melody is fifteen years younger than her husband and has long, thick dark hair.
- _____ 4. When Jeff goes to visit his mother for the first time at Gambo's home, Melody spends a lot of time taking him sight-seeing and to lunch.
- _____ 5. At the end of Jeff's first visit, Melody trades his plane ticket for a bus ticket and keeps the remaining money for herself.
- _____ 6. After this visit, Jeff buys himself a very expensive guitar to help him get closer to his father.
- _____ 7. Jeff sends Melody a Christmas gift and many letters, but she does not contact him.
- _____ 8. The Professor tells Jeff that the marriage dissolved because Melody was disappointed in him.
- _____ 9. Jeff is fond of Max, Melody's boyfriend, and thinks he will make a fine new father.
- _____ 10. Melody tells Jeff that she would have taken him with her if he had been a girl rather than a boy.

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Part III: Cause and Effect (20 points)

Justify each of these statements. Write your answer in the space provided.

1. Melody leaves her family because _____

2. After Melody's departure, the Professor becomes even more quiet and withdrawn because _____

3. Jeff goes to visit his mother the first summer because _____

4. Jeff sends his mother gifts and letters because _____

5. Melody sends Jeff home by bus rather than by plane because _____

6. Melody comes to visit Jeff and the Professor because _____

7. The Professor buys the house on Chesapeake Bay because _____

8. Jeff starts to hang around the amusement park because _____

9. Jeff begins to make friends and do better in school because _____

10. Jeff gives Melody the diamond ring because _____

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answer two of the following in essay form. Include specific details from the book in your answer.

1. Explain how Jeff and his mother feel about each other.
2. Analyze what the blue heron symbolizes in the novel.
3. Describe nature's role in healing Jeff.
4. Argue that the Professor is a better parent than Melody.

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COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Identify the settings that fit the following descriptions. Choose your answers from the list below. Each answer will be used only once. You will have five answers left over.

- | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| A. amusement park | F. Nova Scotia | K. Gambo's home |
| B. Charleston | G. Minnesota | L. New York City |
| C. France | H. the University | M. Blue Mountains |
| D. England | I. Washington | N. the small island |
| E. Baltimore | J. restaurant | O. Chesapeake Bay |

- _____ 1. where Jeff was born
- _____ 2. the place that employs the Professor
- _____ 3. where Jeff spends his days during his second visit to Melody
- _____ 4. location of Jeff's new home; the place where he finally feels safe
- _____ 5. where Melody lives after she leaves Jeff and the Professor
- _____ 6. place where Jeff goes when he skips school
- _____ 7. country where Brother Thomas travels for a year
- _____ 8. where Brother Thomas takes Jeff when Jeff returns from Melody's the first time
- _____ 9. state where Melody was raised until she was eight years old
- _____ 10. the city where Gambo's home is located

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Explain the significance of the following details from the novel.

- 1. the blue heron

- 2. Gambo's big diamond ring

- 3. the Professor's best-selling book

- 4. the house on Chesapeake Bay

- 5. the guitar

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Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Select the best answer for each question. Write your answer in the space provided.

- _____ 1. The "handsome, ageless man whose eyes twinkle with dry humor. . . a thoroughly charming man, who weighs his words and is worth listening to" described in *Time* is
- Brother Thomas.
 - Horace Greene.
 - Max.
 - Jeff.
- _____ 2. Eulalie Melville is Jeff's
- mother.
 - grandmother.
 - cousin.
 - great-grandmother.
- _____ 3. Melody is best described as
- surly and selfish.
 - beautiful but aging.
 - young and beautiful.
 - rich and successful.
- _____ 4. When Jeff goes to visit his mother for the first time at Gambo's home, Melody
- virtually ignores him to pursue her own interests.
 - makes it plain that she does not want him there at all.
 - spends a lot of time taking him sight-seeing and to lunch.
 - gives him money every day so he can do what he wants.
- _____ 5. At the end of Jeff's first visit, Melody
- carefully packs him a snack for the trip.
 - trades his plane ticket for a bus ticket and keeps the remaining money.
 - promises to write and call everyday.
 - goes off to stuff envelopes for women's liberation.
- _____ 6. Jeff gets an expensive guitar
- from Brother Thomas.
 - from his father.
 - from Melody.
 - by saving his money and buying it.
- _____ 7. The Professor tells Jeff that the marriage dissolved because
- Melody found another man.
 - they did not love each other.
 - Melody was disappointed in him.
 - of Jeff.
- _____ 8. The book Jeff's father wrote is called
- The Unifier*.
 - The University System in America*
 - The Chesapeake Bay*.
 - Earth's Honored Guests*.
- _____ 9. Max is best described as
- affectionate and warm.
 - deeply religious.
 - well-meaning but not used to children.
 - dangerous.
- _____ 10. At the end of the novel, Jeff gives his mother
- a big diamond ring.
 - a book.
 - all the money he inherited.
 - his guitar.

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Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answer two of the following in essay form. Include specific details from the book in your answer.

1. Compare and contrast the Professor and Melody.
2. Analyze the author's use of figures of speech in the novel.
3. Trace how Jeff changes as a result of his experiences.

TEACHER'S NOTE

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ANSWER KEY

VOCABULARY TEST

- | | |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1. heirloom | 9. insisting |
| 2. prohibitive | 10. radically |
| 3. reticent | 11. reverberated |
| 4. turpitude | 12. motionless |
| 5. fiduciary | 13. charming |
| 6. mayhem | 14. overwhelmed |
| 7. inciting | 15. fertile |
| 8. abate | |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. L | 6. O | 11. I |
| 2. E | 7. B | 12. D |
| 3. H | 8. G | 13. N |
| 4. M | 9. C | 14. J |
| 5. F | 10. K | 15. A |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. T |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. T | 10. T |

Part III: Cause and Effect (20 points)

Answers will vary.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. A |
| 2. H | 7. D |
| 3. N | 8. J |
| 4. O | 9. G |
| 5. K | 10. B |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Answers will vary.

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. b | 6. b |
| 2. d | 7. c |
| 3. c | 8. d |
| 4. a | 9. d |
| 5. b | 10. a |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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