

A COMMON CORE
CURRICULUM GUIDE TO

STELLA *by* STARLIGHT



BY

SHARON M. DRAPER



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SUMMARY



When eleven-year-old Stella Mills and her younger brother, Jojo, slip out of the house at night, they are startled by the reappearance of the Ku Klux Klan in their segregated southern town. This sight signals growing racial tensions as Klan members resort to terror, violence, and destruction to keep the black community from exercising their rights as citizens. At the same time, some members of the black community—including Stella’s father—are determined to vote in the upcoming presidential election. The year is 1932, and the place is Bumblebee, North Carolina. Stella Mills’s life is about to be changed forever as she finds the courage and strength to deal with social injustice in order to protect her family and support her endangered community.

Author Sharon M. Draper brings Stella’s story to life by showing her growth over time. Stella changes from a girl who is frustrated by her inability to write down her thoughts to a girl who can write with voice and clarity. At the same time, she grows in her ability to make decisions and act quickly in times of crisis. Stella’s powerful story guides readers to consider the larger issues of human dignity, equality, and social justice—issues that still challenge us as a society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

Key Ideas and Details

The discussion questions below address the following Common Core State Standards for understanding key ideas and details:

RL.4.1-RL.8.1: Cite evidence and examples from a text when explaining what a text says explicitly and when drawing inferences.

RL.4.2-RL.8.2: Determine the theme of a text and analyze its development. Provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.4.3-RL.8.3: Describe in depth a character, setting, or event. Compare and contrast characters, settings, and events. Describe how a plot unfolds and how characters change. Analyze how dialogue or incidents propel action, reveal character, or provoke a decision.

1. Where and when: establishing the setting. (Before beginning, remove the cover of the book so that the illustration is not visible to readers.) Chapter 1, “Flames Across the Water” opens with a description of a startling scene observed by Stella and Jojo—members of the Ku Klux Klan burning a wooden cross. The author helps us understand this setting by appealing to our sense of *sight*, *sound*, *touch*, and *smell*. Use the chart below to list the words and phrases that help you understand the setting by appealing to your senses. An example has been provided for you.

SIGHT	SOUND	SMELL	TOUCH
nine robed figures dressed all in white	dry leaves crunching beneath his bare feet	the charring pine tinged with kerosene	toes numb with cold

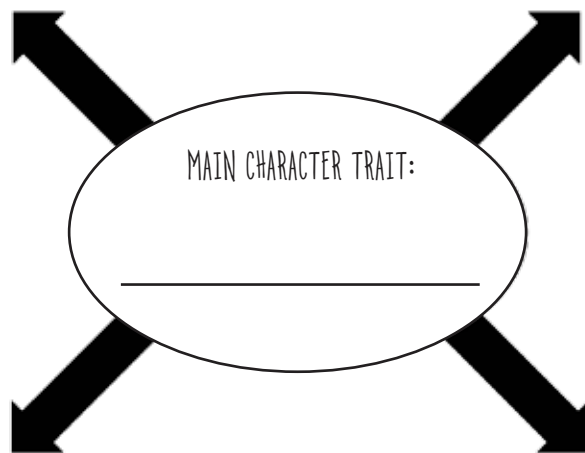
Using **only** your chart and the chapter, make a sketch of this scene. Include as many details as you can. Share your sketch and chart with your classmates. Compare your sketch with the cover illustration. How are they similar? Different? Which details most helped you envision this scene?

2. Review Chapter 2, looking for more information about the book’s setting. What details does the author give about the time and place in which Stella and Jojo live? What is the year? What town do they live in? What are the “unwritten rules” for black families? Why are they necessary?

3. Describe Stella’s teacher, Mrs. Grayson, in a single word that you think best describes her character (e.g., supportive, caring, or thoughtful). Find evidence in the book to support this description. Make a character trait chart to show the evidence you selected. Write the character’s main personality trait in the circle below. Then find four pieces of evidence in the text which reveal the trait, and write it down. Share your thoughts with other readers.

Mrs. Grayson

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4. Stella’s attitude toward writing changes over time. What is her attitude when Mrs. Grayson assigns Stella’s group of nine- to twelve-year-olds to write an essay—an opinion piece of one to two pages in length? (See Chapter 9). Read what Stella wrote. What are the strengths and weaknesses of her essay, “Wise Men”?

5. Over time Stella grows as a writer. Compare her writing at the beginning of the book with her writing at the end. Consider these factors: Her attitude toward writing; her purpose for writing; her sense of audience (who she is writing for); the topics she wrote about; how clearly she expressed herself.

6. Stella applies two ideas that help her develop as a writer. The first was from the *Carolina Times*, the newspaper her father read. It had a masthead with the motto “The Truth Unbridled.” The second idea came from Mrs. Grayson, who told Stella to write about herself. What truths and understandings does Stella learn when she follows this advice? Reread the following samples of Stella’s writing and jot down what you think are Stella’s valuable observations. The first one has been done for you.

Stella’s Writing

Truths & Understandings Stella Learned

“Truth”	“Sometimes things that look pretty, like secret fire in the darkness, are really pretty ugly.”
“Up in the Air”	
“Trees”	
“The Man Who Wanted to Be a Soldier”	
“Slaying Dragons”	

7. In the last issue of *Stella's Star Sentinel*, her “pretend” newspaper, Stella writes that ancient people believed that life was made of earth, water, air, and fire. Stella adds to this list. She writes, “Truth. I think that is the last basic element.” Explain what she means by this. Do you agree? Why?

8. Despite the obstacles they faced, Stella’s father, Pastor Patton, and Mr. Spencer all registered to vote in the presidential election of 1932. Discuss how the events listed below strengthened their determination to exercise their right to vote. How did these events propel the men to take action?

- Even when Spoon Man and others give Papa many reasons not to vote, he tells them, “I just think I ought to be able to vote.”
- Pastor Patton challenges his congregation to vote, telling them, “I am a man.” He asks members of the congregation to join him in registering to vote.
- Stella becomes Papa’s *standing stone*.
- The Registrar, Amherst Pineville, uses many tactics to try to prevent the men from voting, but they remain firmly resolved to register to vote.

9. Compare how the two white men who came in to register were treated with how the three black men were treated. How was each group treated differently? What did the Registrar mean when he said, “You know that song you was singin’ about trouble? Be on the lookout for it, ‘cause it’s comin’.”

10. Because of her response to the Klan’s torching of the Spencer family’s home, Pastor Patton singles out Stella as the subject of his sermon. Why was she worthy of the Pastor’s attention?

11. Compare Stella’s response to the fire to how these people responded:

- The volunteer fireman
- Dr. Packard
- The Spencers’ neighbors
- Pastor Patton
- Mrs. Odom
- Mr. Jamison and Mr. Bobbs
- The white church ladies from Bumblebee Baptist Church
- Mr. and Mrs. Spencer



What does this variety of responses to the torching of the Spencers’ home tell you about the people living in Bumblebee?

12. Discuss how Stella’s reactions to these emergency situations show her growing maturity and decisiveness:

- Grown men attack Anthony Hawkins
- Stella’s mother is bitten by a snake

13. What do Dr. Packard’s actions reveal about his character? Consider the following:

- His response to Stella stepping on his shoe
- His response to the torching of the Spencers’ house
- His response to Stella’s request that he treat her mother’s snakebite

- 14.** After Stella rescues Paulette Packard, she realizes that there is no reason to write about Dr. Packard. Do you agree with her conclusion? Explain.
- 15.** There are several references in the book to black people’s ability to fly. The first mention is after hearing the Spoon Man’s story, “The Chicken Who Was an Eagle.” After hearing this story about how a young eagle learns to fly, Stella almost felt she could fly. The second time flying is mentioned is when Mrs. Grayson tells the children a story from a quilt sewn by her grandmother. She asks, “Did you know that African people used to have the power...to fly?” She tells the story of Zaliqa, a slave who remembered the knowledge of her ancestors, and escaped a beating by taking flight. At the end of the book, Stella writes that “roosters never look beyond the fence. I doubt if they ever think about flying. But I do.” In what ways do Stella’s actions in the face of danger show that she, too, has learned from her community how to rise above ignorance, racism, and violence?
- 16.** Watch the video of Toni Morrison explaining the myth of flying Africans at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmSWQWMHW2c>. How does this video help you understand Stella’s thoughts about flying?
- 17.** What do you think is the big idea or theme of the book? What does the author want you to know about Stella’s life and times? Find evidence in the book that develops this idea.
- 18.** Write a brief summary of the book, using 100 words or less. Share your summary with others. In what ways are the summaries similar? In what ways are they different?

Craft and Structure

The discussion questions and activities below address the following Common Core State Standards for understanding craft and structure:

RL.4.4-RL.8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text to shape meaning. This includes figurative language, specific word choices, and allusions to other texts.

RL.4.5-RL.7.5: Analyze how the structure of texts—e.g., specific sentences, paragraphs, chapters, scenes, or stanzas—fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the theme, setting, or plot.

RL.4.6-RL.8.6: Analyze how differences in points of view of the characters and the audience or reader create effects such as suspense or humor. Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters.



1. Figurative Language. In the book, author Sharon M. Draper uses similes to compare one thing to another. These similes usually contain the word *like* or *as*. Read the sentences below from *Stella by Starlight*. Identify the two things that are being compared. Then tell how this comparison helps you understand the story.

- Folks reacted almost as quickly as the fire had spread up that cross.
- Tony was silent, as silent as the night.
- “Catching the Klan is kinda like nailing jelly to a tree,” he explained. “You work real hard, and what do you have to show for it? It just slips down the bark.”
- The two groups, however, moved around each other like oil and water.
- She sat on the stoop, listening to the voices of her parents rising and falling like stormy winds. Their disagreements were so rare that the world felt a little tilted.
- The doctor’s eyes were such an odd color green—cold like fish scales.

2. References to Music. The author refers to several spirituals and African-American slave songs in order to reinforce and reflect what is happening in Stella’s community. For example, when the Spencer family arrives in church after their house was torched, the choir sings “Hush,” a song that asks “What shall I do, what shall I do?” Following the song, Pastor Patton reminds the congregation that “sometimes we’re not sure which path to take....”

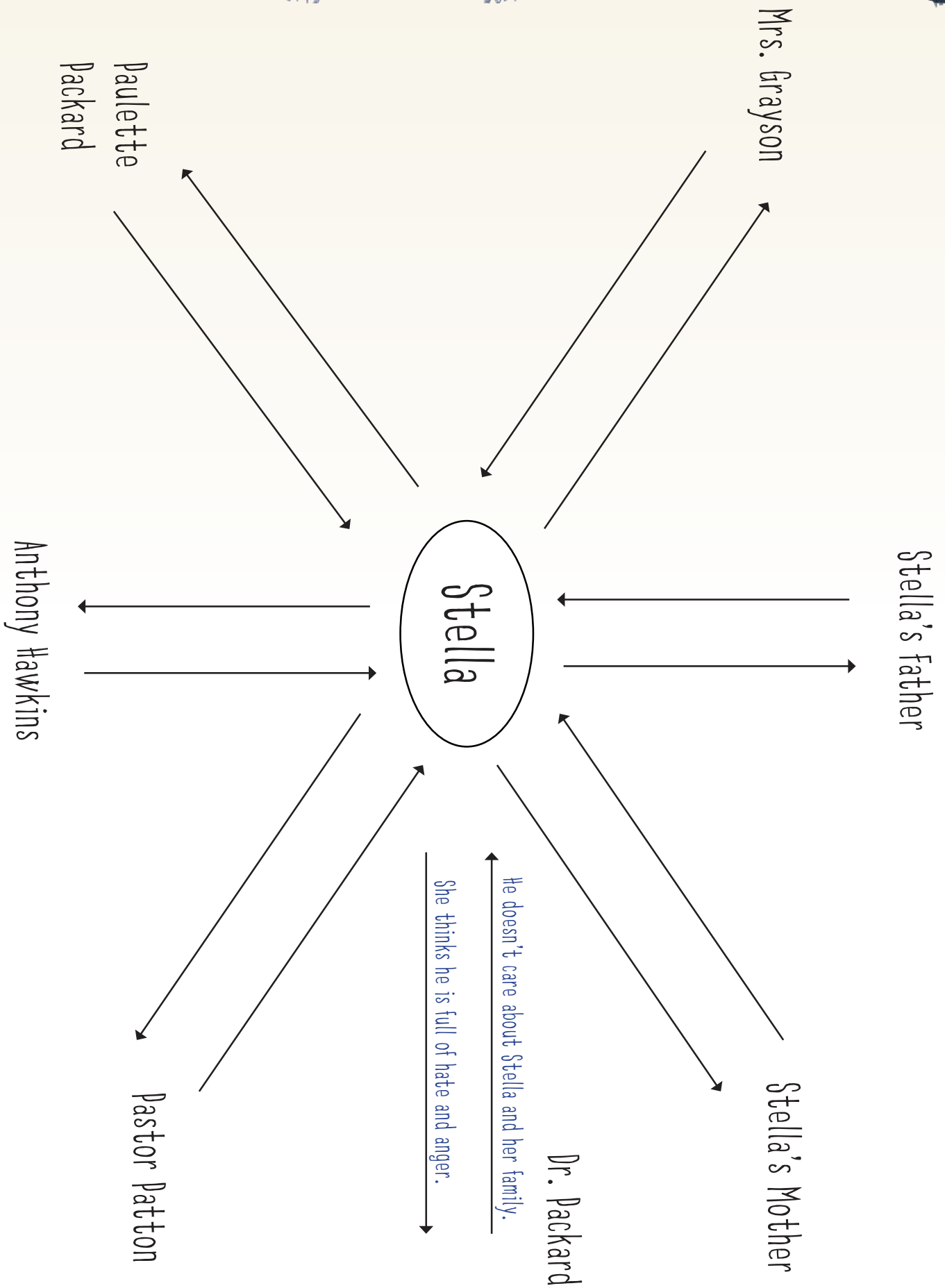
Discuss how singing the following songs reinforces and reflects what is happening in Stella’s community:

- (Chapter 22) Pastor Patton, Stella’s father, and Mr. Spencer sing “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.”
- (Chapter 35) Mrs. Hawkins is joined by the rest of the community in singing “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.”

3. “Stella by Starlight” is also the name of a jazz song featured in a 1944 film called *The Uninvited*. Why is this a good title for the book? Who does Stella believe are the uninvited?

After reading the letter from the author that begins the book, consider this question: How is the title also connected to the author’s family history?

4. Point of View. What do the other characters think about Stella? What does she think about them? Make a character sociogram showing the relationships between Stella and the following characters: Mrs. Grayson, Stella’s father, Stella’s mother, Pastor Patton, Anthony Hawkins, Dr. Packard, and Paulette Packard. Fill in the character sociogram by writing down how the characters view each other. For example, Stella thinks that Dr. Packard is full of hate and anger. Dr. Packard doesn’t care about Stella and her family. After completing the sociogram on the following page, discuss how the characters see each other.



5. Creating a Feeling of Danger. The characters in this book have different perspectives on these issues: equality, voting, separate schools for blacks and whites, Ku Klux Klan, race, and violence. Contrast the views of the following characters on some of these issues.

- Dr. Packard and Dr. Hawkins
- Jonah Mills and Mr. Bates
- Stella Mills and Paulette Packard
- Max Smitherman and Mr. O'Brian (general store clerk)
- Registrar Amherst Pineville and Pastor Patton

How do these different perspectives create a sense of danger and unease?

Writing

The activities below address the following Common Core State Standards:

W.4.1-W.5.1: Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

W.4.2-W.8.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

W.4.3-W.8.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events, using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

1. What's Your Opinion? Give your opinion about one or more of the following questions:

- Was Stella right to tell Paulette Packard about how her father behaved?
- Was Pastor Patton right to encourage the members of his congregation to vote, despite the dangers to themselves and their families?
- Did the author succeed in showing you what life was like in North Carolina in 1932?

When you share your opinion, follow these steps:

- First, introduce the question you are writing about.
- Second, state your opinion.
- Provide reasons for your opinion, using facts and details from the book. Consider using words like *for instance*, *in addition*, *for example*, and *specifically*.
- Fourth, provide a conclusion.

2. How Stella Changed Over Time. What was Stella like in the beginning of the book (Chapter 1-16) when she was startled by the growing threats to her family and community? What was she like in the middle of the book (Chapters 17-32) when she and others began to assert themselves and claim their rights? What was she like by the end of the book (Chapter 33-end) when she observes the joy in her community and recognizes her own aspirations? Use the chart on the following page to take down specific facts and details.

Section of the Book

Stella's Thoughts and Actions

Beginning (Chapters 1-16)	
Middle (Chapters 17-32)	
End (Chapters 33-end)	

Using the information in your chart, explain how Stella changed over time. Use words like *another*, *for example*, *also*, *because*, and *in contrast* to provide evidence for your ideas.

3. Add a Chapter. What events are still unresolved by the end of the book? What could happen next? Write a chapter that could be added. Here are some events to write about, but you can think of others:

- Spoon Man Returns
- Dr. Packard Learns that Stella Saved His Daughter's Life
- Mrs. Grayson's Next Project
- Anthony Hawkins Speaks Up

4. Add an Issue of *Stella's Star Sentinel*. A *sentinel* is someone who watches. In the book, Stella watches her community of Bumblebee, recording what is happening and her thoughts about these events. As Stella, write about one of the events she observed. Here are some suggested topics, but you can add more:

- The box of books that Stella's school receives from Mountain View School
- Three black men vote in the presidential election
- Some white people in Bumblebee support the black community
- The children from Riverside School put on a Christmas performance in church

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Stella by Starlight, a work of historical fiction, gives readers a sense of what it was like to grow up in a supportive, caring black community in North Carolina in 1932. The following websites provide additional information about this time in history by providing material about the Ku Klux Klan, the Great Depression, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The Ku Klux Klan

Southern Poverty Law Center Website:

<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/ku-klux-klan>

History.com Website:

www.history.com/topics/ku-klux-klan

Life Magazine Photographs of the Ku Klux Klan Initiation:

<http://life.time.com/history/ku-klux-klan-initiation-photos-georgia-1946/#1>

The Great Depression

Library of Congress Website Primary Source Sets:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/great-depression/set.html>

WGBH Website: The Great Depression. Surviving the Dust Bowl:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-great-depression>

History.com Website: The Great Depression:

<http://www.history.com/topics/great-depression>

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/education/resources/bio_fdr.html

FDR in the White House:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/franklinroosevelt>

FDR Biography:

<http://www.biography.com/people/franklin-d-roosevelt-9463381>

FDR History:

<http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/franklin-d-roosevelt>

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE OF READING THE BOOK

Find out more about Sharon M. Draper by visiting the author's website at SharonDraper.com

View videos of Sharon M. Draper discussing her work at Teaching.books.net:
http://www.teachingbooks.net/author_collection.cgi?id=52&a=1

Read an interview with Sharon M. Draper on the website of Parnassus Books at
<http://parnassusmusing.net/2014/10/22/author-sharon-draper-we-need-to-discuss-race-and-we-can-do-it-through-great-literature/>

Read more books by Sharon M. Draper:

Tears of a Tiger
Forged by Fire
Darkness Before Dawn
The Battle of Jericho
November Blues
Just Another Hero
Double Dutch
Romiette and Julio
Copper Sun
Panic
Out of My Mind

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