

Hazelwood Trilogy-Let our circle be unbroken

Aligning with ELA CCSS Common Core State Standards Literacy

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Spread over an eight year publication period and spanning the junior and senior years of a circle of Hazelwood High School friends as they endure two deaths and other suffering, these books have forged a place in the growing canon of Young Adult literature. While these emotionally powerful works can each stand as gripping adolescent experience novels, taken together as a trilogy for the beginning of an author study; they offer teachers an opportunity to fully realize the deep, engaged, reflective and responsive reading that is at the core of the ELA CCSS literacy standards. Beyond the standards and skills these work taken as a trilogy epitomize, they also present a immediately relevant 21st culturally affirming, civically proactive , and self empowering set of precepts which teen readers can apply to their own decision making.

Sharon M. Draper 's decades of outstanding high school teaching, inherently infuse her plot, characters, word choice, craft, genre and allusions to other texts with the requisite literacy and LIFE teaching components for rigorous alignment. She also includes as a teaching professional, actual snapshots and samples of ELA classroom conversations (rigorous student centered collaborative and comprehension driven) and assignments (text based task driven), that parallel the words and style of teaching Common Core ELA literacy. Educators may want to use those chapters in the trilogy books for as texts for the students to read with the task being to identify the components of CCSS literacy being implemented by Ms. Blackwell, the Hazelwood English teacher. The fact that Ms. Draper, a veteran English teacher, anticipated these components in the late 1990's before the actual iteration of the standards, says much about what "counts" in literacy learning.

The veteran English teacher alignment below and suggested directions for projects/short research that address CCSS ELA standards are just the tip of a deliciously melting but easily replenished chocolate double fudged sundae of literary sweet and some bittersweet (add in some metaphoric bittersweet chocolate and some almonds to that fictive instructional sundae) opportunities for real reading and life study of this trilogy's enthralling characters, situations, challenges, decisions, and interaction with other adult, contemporary and media classics. Hopefully these sample suggestions will inspire educator's to easily and deeply align these exemplary works with their own skills, content and life lessons approaches.

Standards for Literature (RL)

Key Ideas and Details

RL1 Cite textual evidence that strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL2 Determine a theme or central idea and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL3 Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character or provoke a decision.

The trilogy is replete with textual evidence that supports an analysis of each separate book's and the trilogy's as a whole interlocked themes. These are developed within each separate work and then underscored and textured by the framework of the trilogy as an entity. While the central setting of the work is Hazelwood High School per se, the work shifts its setting to student homes, the waffle house, picnics, church, hospital waiting rooms, police stations, stores and ponds. These diverse settings allow for the key characters to converse as friends, talk with their parents, interact with school staff, be alone and reflect in interior monologues, and as need be interact with those outside their social circle such as the homeless. The trilogy which parallels the lives of the majority of teens is filled with lines of dialogue and incidents/decisions that reveal or define evolving character's values/selfhood.

In *Tears of a Tiger*, the preface quote before the title page "A man shrieks in pain. Crying to the universe. Pain is abrupt," can both serve as poem and as a foreshadowing of the deaths by accident of Robbie and the deliberate suicide of Andy on the night he fails to connect with those who cared so deeply about him. Besides accidental and deliberate deaths of those who are young (and think themselves removed from that possibility) and grieving of the survivors, the initial work in this trilogy focuses on Draper's insight that loss can be sustained by focusing on the good times and experiences one had with the departed. Andy's interior monologue before his actual suicide includes: "I just can't stand the pain of livin' anymore. I just want the hurt and pain inside to go away." As Andy's old beyond his age, 7 year s, kid brother Monty notes: "I 'll never forget that it's okay to put dragons in a jungle and tears on a tiger." As previously mentioned, the fact that Draper includes not only straight narrative from different character perspectives in this work but also parts of homework and counseling assignments (letters) makes the text complexity qualitative task of reading that much deeper, more challenging and more reflective for student readers. Hence the letter that Marcus, a minor character in this work, writes as part of "write a letter to Andy grieving exercise suggested by a grief counselor brought to the school, contains important explicit evidence which informs the text purpose. In the letter to a deceased peer, he did not really know, Marcus notes: "I wanted to be like you-popular – and likeable – and well known. I never realized the price you were paying for the mask you were wearing." This quote which introduces one of Draper's sub themes so relevant to both teen and adult life- popularity and the price plus concealment of truth within it often demands is a rich for class discussion and argument writing. This letter writing exercise with the actual responses presented in letter format in the book-immediately through layout and its emotion filled true to student voice language- accesses and invites students to grapple with other parts of Draper's theme and central ideas in this work. Therefore through the words

of Tyrone's affirming letter: "Life ain't perfect but it's life!" And Gerald's poignant "toughening it out" written from a perspective of a domestic violence ridden "secret" home life plea: "Suicide is the coward's way out. Brave men face their problems"; Draper sets forth her message about life and its values despite all its pain and challenges.

Forged by Fire which is Gerald's back story is connected thematically with Tears of a Tiger in that unlike Andy who succumbed to the despair of those tears and Robbie who died in the fire of a car crash, Gerald is a survivor of two fires. Draper develops this theme of surviving challenges and disasters by giving three year old and even then resilient and mature Gerald, a plotline where his mother abandons him at home for an evening. When the drug addled Monique returns, she finds her toddler has almost killed himself by setting a blaze using her left behind lighter. Monique, of course, is off to jail and loses custody to the life affirming and resilient Aunt Queen. Aunt Queen's attitude to life and its emotional challenges is to focus on "the things that we do have control over." While the theme of this work is Gerald and Angel's pain filled and violence ridden childhoods, Draper uses chapter endings to throw in additional underscoring of that pain: "He [Gerald] wept for all the pain he had known in his short life and for the pain yet to come."

In foreshadowing that pain and hinting of the villainous nature of Gerald's stepfather, Draper names him Jordan Sparks, a foreshadowing of the "fiery" end that will justly come to him. While Gerald is to rise victorious from not one but two actual fires and survive the fiery violence of his childhood by assuming the role of warrior and protector, his sister aptly and probably deliberately named "Angel" uses "dance" to make her whole again. This concept/idea/theme of music, dance, prayer or poetry as making one whole is defining for Angel a talented future dance star, but also an important one for the arts and prayer as a saving expression theme that underlies the trilogy.

In Darkness before Dawn, the concluding work of the trilogy, Keisha a major character in the first work and the first person narrator of the concluding work notes: "I just live one day at a time." As class president of the graduating class that endured two deaths-one by car accident and one by suicide, in the span of five months, this is an important and viable life survival theme which Draper advocates throughout the trilogy. Keisha who overcomes and lives for "the best revenge" (as Rita a minor character terms it) a terrible date/rape assault is living power of the human spirit to veer up and to fight for life. Keisha of all the teen characters in the trilogy takes most pride in embodying the power of the Descartes statement: "I think therefore I am." It is a deliberately planned plot twist that the conniving predator Jonathan elicits this dictum from her which will ultimately save her from his wiles and his knife.

As befits the concluding work of a trilogy, the plotline of Darkness before Dawn ends with graduation and of course the title references back the darkness of the deaths, domestic violence, incest, alcohol abuse, survivor anguish, abandonment and more that preceded the graduation plus the hopes for "the dawn of our tomorrows" that await the graduates with their college years and bonding to society/community ahead. Key quotes in this work abound as it is Keisha's specialty to do well in poetry, but also to be a speaker and communicator supporting others mostly successfully throughout the works.

Although Keisha's initial reaction to the news of Andy's suicide (which is replayed here verbatim from Tears of a Tiger) was an empathetic "I felt dead too. Like living was stealing breath," she ultimately has within the 14 months beyond that death, come to feel the life philosophy Draper embraces: "you gotta hold on to the memories and step out into the future."

In terms of plot details the silver of Keisha's dress, floating colors, lavender, and a butterfly necklace, plus comparisons of Keisha to a black butterfly- think an impaled one are key threads to follow within this color rich and seductive scent plotted tale of attempted seduction. It is also interesting that the character of Jonathan, however villainous and rightfully removed from the community, has a back story which includes abandonment- a situation which challenged Gerald as a toddler. A key quote with a cultural Ibo root is offered by Jilani (who also like Leon has lost her mother)" Beware of the gift wrapped with silence. The snake hides under the silver moon." Teachers can easily align to the mandated CCSS focus on words and key details as emblems of author theme/purpose by having students read this work for references to butterflies and to the color silver.

Ultimately Draper has deftly wrapped up not only this final volume of the Hazelwood trilogy, but the trilogy itself with Keisha's moving graduation speech that closes the work. The entire text of that speech can form the crux of an analytic discussion of theme, central ideas, character study explanatory paper or an argument for or against aspects of Draper's life force philosophy. An added bonus is Draper's inclusion of a Keisha authored prayer like recitative that draws readers into the final sentiments and optimistic life view Draper advocates. Here are some key quotes from the speech and poem for teachers to immediately use to start an ongoing reflective and staircase of complexity discussion of the final text of the trilogy and its message as a whole entity:

"Our shared tears have become the glue that binds us together in love.

Let us take our spirits now, like the flames of many candles , to a new world, a world of hope and possibilities , a place where butterflies are magic and dreams can never die.

Poem Keisha wrote

Let our circle be unbroken –she asks that the audience repeat after her-

Let our joys and sorrows sing.

Let our circle be unbroken.

For our circle never ends.

Craft and Structure

RL 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

RL 5 Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

RL 6 Analyze how differences in points of view of the characters and the audience or reader create such effects as suspense and humor

While it reads as a fast moving, engrossing tale of adolescents unexpectedly experiencing deaths, domestic violence and abuse , *Tears of a Tiger* is exquisitely crafted. The chapter headings summarize in quick narrative, headline format with date and time the movement of the plot. The headlines also serve as teasers and commentary on the plot. Among these headlines that can be the focus of a craft and structure analytic reading can be: crash, fire, pain, Oh No! It Just Can't Be, Baloney Sandwiches and Bad Breath, and Facts Without Feelings. English teachers will enjoy and be able to build on Ms. Blackwell's discussion of color words –“society implants positives and negatives onto certain words.” Students will enjoy expanding the student responses to “black” being a positive or negative color as they expand on the Hazelwood's brainstorming pool of “black magic, black gold.” In terms of comparative texts this work offers up the refreshing perspective of the Jacqueline Earley poem “Nineteen hundred and sixty eight winters” which can be a text that enhances the word tone and meaning discussion begun with the focus on the use of “black” as a color and as a modifier. Beyond word choice, meaning and tone, this can expand to a culturally relevant look at word choices and author structure in terms of crafting a culturally and racially affirmative work. Students can also be asked to note the use by the guidance counselor of the term “too demanding” as far as Andy's inclination toward pre-law in college. They can be focused on the word choices and conversations among staff as well as staff to students in terms of focusing on how word choices affect student responsiveness to school plus affect general social (family, friend, and community responses). Andy's talk with his father whose live has been driven by showing himself as equal or better than his white co-workers, is highlighted by his father's urging Andy to achieve and to “work hard to show counselors he is better than white kids.”

Draper crafts this novel with a mixture of texts that make it accessible and appealing to all readers including: news articles, a school newspaper, police reports, school essays, and letters to Andy. Together these different and functional documents detail differences in characters as filtered through the multiple perspectives that life renders. Since the student readers have additional knowledge through sifting the various perspectives, they become engaged and caring readers in the Louise Rosenblatt reader receivership mode that is so attuned and anticipatory of CCSS ELA literacy.

The pivotal and foreshadowing comparative text for this work is *Macbeth*, which is under discussion in Andy's English class a few weeks before he takes his life. Draper includes the text of *Macbeth* Act 5, Scene 5, - the announcement of Lady Macbeth's death with its lines – “Out, out, brief candle!/Life's but a walking shadow,. . . / It is a tale /Told by an idiot , full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing.” Andy rushes out during this discussion which can resonate with many students and teachers who have noted intensely personal anguished and exaggerated responses to texts that signify a call for help. The text can be discussed for its own structure, meaning and style and for whether its message is applicable to Andy . Students can also write an argument at the end of the study focusing on how author Draper would respond to the style and meaning of this text given her theme in *Tears of a Tiger*.

Although Gerald is probably economically and educationally the least well situated of the main characters in the trilogy, in *Forged by Fire* we find out that his Aunt Queen made certain to read various key life resiliency and classic stories to him. Among these works are Tom Sawyer and Sherlock Holmes. In addition, Gerald's identity as a proud African American is enhanced by the readings he did with his aunt in the works of Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. In *Forged by Fire* Dunbar employs a last lines emotional segue way and twist/jolt approach to the story. Chapter one closes with toddler Gerald crunched behind the sofa of his burning apartment, thumb in mouth musing about "how he could see so many colors with his eyes closed." Of course, the reader understands the situation through a broader lens and is concerned for this aged beyond his years and yet innocent sweet child. In chapter 18, while victimized and sexually molested Angel has found a true friend in Robbie's sister Kiara, she still holds back from sharing all with this peer. The chapter telling concludes with the omniscient narrator noting: "No, not everything, Angel thought as she hung up the phone. Some things had to stay in secret places.

Of course, the key words in *Forged by Fire* have to do with flames, sparkles, cigarettes, lighters, gas flames, and of course the name of the molester, aka Gerald's stepfather, Jordan Sparks. It should also be noted that kitten who is so cherished and attempts to protect Angel is called Tiger, perhaps a tie in to the initial trilogy tale. Draper nicely follows through on her embedded chapter endings with one alluding to flames but also to music and hope as she closes this affecting story with: "With the flames and fear behind them, Gerald and Angel rode together to the music of the sirens which had decorated their past and would forge their future."

Darkness before Dawn- is exceedingly structured with the envelope narration of Keisha waiting to give her graduation speech and reviewing the traumatic and life changing events of her junior and senior years at Hazelwood High School. Like *Forged by Fire*, Draper closes the work with an apt ending that echoes her theme and title: "And all of us marched proudly out of the auditorium into the dawn of our tomorrows." Key words and word choices in this work which completes the trilogy and is a captivating story of a powerful and spirited young woman, are : circle, unbroken circle, friend, spirit, colors, tiny butterfly, spirit as a shining silver star, and silver. Students can trace the use of these words and artifacts to follow how the theme and main ideas of this work are developed.

The work offers several comparative texts that lend themselves to reverberation within the lives of the Hazelwood students. One is the old camp song they all sing at the park- "Kumbaya" which with its choral lines expresses the many streaming emotions shared by these students who unexpectedly have lost two of their class to death and within whose ranks several have already weathered loss or abandonment or molestation. The use of lines with "dancing, hurting, and praying" are all very meaningful for this work. Anticipating Keisha's need to show her warrior capacities as a result of her fascination with Jonathan Hathaway, the Blackwell English students in this work study Beowulf. Keisha also personally researches the female warrior Boudica, a princess of Iceni, 61 A.D., who formed her own army in England and killed hundreds of Romans in retaliation for the rape of her daughters, a very apt and foreshadowing reference-comparative text research for her. Draper replays the classroom chapter where the students realize that Andy is not only missing from class, but has checked out of life.

As seen through Keisha's perspective, she feels pain and rushes to comfort Andy's seven year old kid brother, Monty.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

RL 7 Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stay faithful to or depart from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.

RL 9 Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

Taken together the works of the trilogy cry out for students who are already a target audience for the Twilight, vintage Ridgmont High School, Ferris Buller, and other teen films, to develop a film treatment for the trilogy with setting, cast decisions, choice of directors, music and theme taken from the texts of the three works. With a stable of famous teen and young adult who play teen stars, the casting of this work and the direction- say by Lee Daniels, should be the stuff of an easy, enjoyable and ironically career preparation (pitching screen treatments is a lucrative media communications career) task that has real world commercial as well as literacy response possibilities. Certainly, the first work of the trilogy draws on the patterns of the school year, the traditional junior year Shakespeare study of Macbeth complete with the telling passage that so upsets a suicidal Andy and religious works such as the Bible which are heavily referenced by B.J. and Keisha in their letters after the suicide. The first work in the trilogy establishes patterns of the friends supporting one another and becoming part of one another's family circle. In particular in the initial work of the trilogy, Keisha and Rhonda forge strong and deliberate ties with Monty who first notices the dripping blood on the ceiling that signals Andy's successful suicide. Part of the patterning is moving the plot through the filtering of shared friend conversations, coming together, and collaboration. This perfectly models the same Speaking and Listening collaboration and comprehension that CCSS ELA literacy advocates for students. Indeed although written in the late 1990's, as an expert English teacher herself, Draper anticipates that working together as a team by having plot lines where the pals do research together on poetry and in the final work on Beowulf.

Forged by Fire draws on the image of Angel in the name of this sweet and victimized dancer with her look and talent. As part of Angel's star role in the dance recital, she dances to the story of the lost child. The ballet is focused on a myth common to many cultures of "a child who feared darkness but found the light with the help of the wind and the stars. . . The music was her voice, and the dance her only means of escape." This myth of course parallels Angel's trajectory from molestation to a life of fear protected by Gerald, who happily assumes the role of warrior and protector which he will play out in this work. Kiara and Angel the younger siblings of Robbie and Gerald forge bonds in this work which Draper extends in the final work. In doing so and including Monty, the seven year brother of Andy as a junior mascot of the key high school friends, Draper follows her pattern of forming circles of friendship, love and bonding that strengthen as the characters move forward.

In the final Darkness before Dawn chapter of this YA trilogy, Draper expands on her pattern of circles of friends to include in that rituals of gathering. Among these are the picnic, the Valentine Dance, the waffles place after dates, double and triple group dating, group singing and group recitations, plus group holiday celebrations, Among the patterns expanded and completed in this work are a beautifully framed interstice of how parents come to include their children's friends in their family circle and silently but willingly help the adult parents of their children's friends. Thus Gerald and Angel become part of the Washington family through tragedy and renewal and Monique is silently helped by Washington. As in life new friends are welcomed into this ongoing community and share their back stories which include common components of loss, divorce, abandonment and fear/love. The final work of this trilogy, is both a typical graduation plot- a bittersweet African American real Glee- but also a powerful new argument for forging through fire of pain and lights of joy the bonds that will help heal the tears of a tiger tormented by the realities of life.

Range of Reading

RL 10 This standard fosters the CCSS goal that students will over a year in the classroom read and comprehend literature at a high end of text complexity independently and proficiently.

Just the stream of referenced works and topics throughout the three volumes of the trilogy: Macbeth, Beowulf, Jacqueline Earley poetry, Kumbaya, the craft of poetry, Boudica, the Bible and myths of heaven, the lost child, Ibo sayings, the connotations of color words and the use of letters to forward the action of the text, model and assure that students can be directed to read a range of texts as comparisons and for research purposes. Beyond that Draper directs readers of Forged by Fire to the National Child Abuse Hotline and the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

But a CCSS ELA study of this trilogy need not conclude with the reading, discussion and alignments to the standards given. Teachers can have their students go further to consider connections and implications of these powerful works as part of their CCSS ELA Writing Standards alignment, but in truth also as a natural extension of engaging students in active discussion and reflection about the issues, arguments, philosophy/guidelines for proactive living presented in these works:

Among research (mandated by CCSS) papers might be:

1. A discussion with textual evidence of what the main tenets of Draper's life philosophy is in terms of dealing with family, personal and societal issues (an informative/explanatory text. (W2)
2. Student literary and life response arguments for /against or mixed as far as the efficacy of adapting Draper's philosophy life within his/her own life –an argument (W1)
3. A study of Draper's craft and structure techniques to quilt these separate stand alone works into a rich matryoshka type set of works that inform and embed within one another - -an informatory/explanatory text (W2).
4. Authoring a spin off or a sequel to Darkness before Dawn- say one that follows the lives of Rhonda and Tyrone , or Gerald and Jalani or the younger peers Joyelle and Angel and Monty as they navigate the same territory and time frame of life- a narrative- (W3).

5. Research the musical influences in Draper’s work and how she uses them to serve her purpose and set the tone –an informative/explanatory texts.
6. Score a live performance of a play version of one of these books –a narrative text and an informative text (W2 and W3) with notes about how and why the music was chosen and changes that had to be made in the author’s text for a play version.
7. Find out more about the Nigerian culture, the training of a modern dancer, the craft of poetry as seen by professionals and report in those topics (W2).
8. Write a reader’s personal response to the trilogy detailing characters whose emotions, responses, and reactions mirror yours or resonate with you. Explain each aspect of your reader response to literature (W2).
9. Research suicide prevention and argue whether Andy could have been saved or does his family have grounds for a lawsuit against Dr. Caruthers (W1).
10. Research Anorexia Nervosa. Do you have friends who display symptoms which may indicate that? If so , how would you help them or direct them to go for help? (W2 explanatory)
11. Find five poems titled “Poetry is” or definitions of poetry and argue for the one you feel fits best or aspects of each that are defining (W1 and W2).
12. Draper closed out her trilogy with Darkness before Dawn because readers wanted to find out what happened to the characters. Which characters would you like Draper to develop further and at least reference in a future work? Which characters do you have a strong feeling you can envision in ten years after their high school graduation? Take these to a Hazelwood tenth anniversary reunion and have them share what they’ve been up to.

Obviously with its spectrum of literary classic allusions, pop culture music lyric references, domestic violence, molestation, school experiences, sibling relationships, friendships, Shakespeare, cultural issues, easy connection to headlines of teen driving deaths, suicides, myth, poetry, and bible references , Draper’s inherently relatable story of these “tight” friends over the last two years of high school more than resonates with students. Beyond its appeal, which is enhanced by the shifting character focus over the trilogy and multiple back stories and insights into characters just glimpsed in one work but articulated in another, Draper forges through the fire of her positive purposeful life force philosophy a literary narrative that has value for today’s students. Her craft inculcates habits of insightful reflective reading and personal response to the issues of that reading which lead students to reflecting further and reaching out to peers and family for support. These connections forged by reading a deeply felt and experienced narrative of peers have import beyond alignment to CCSS ELA standards. They help students build standards of their own for lifelong literacy and linking to community. That is the ultimate purpose of any author study to platform students to the study of life, literacy and love. Draper readers join a circle of reading for living and for coping, they will voluntarily expand with peers and family.