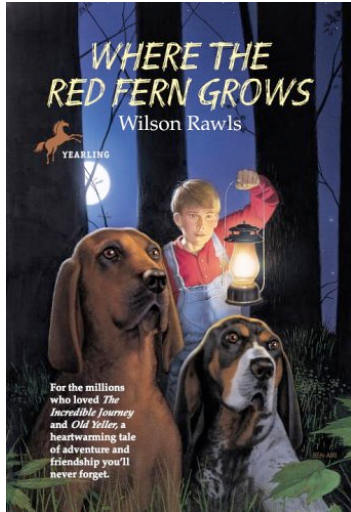


# *Where the Red Fern Grows*

## Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls, Yearling, NY, 1996



### Organizational Patterns

This book is narrated by Billy Colman, an older man who lives in Idaho. In chapter one he tells how he came upon a dogfight and rescued the underdog. He explains how he could tell by the slick paws and bony structure that this dog had traveled far and was starving. He takes this dog home, feeds him and fixes a place for him to sleep. As soon as the dog is rested, he takes off. The rest of the chapters are comprised of the memories “that went back over half a century” (p. 15) that this dog has vividly brought back to him. There are 20 chapters in all ranging in length from four to seventeen pages, with the majority of them being about 10 pages long. They are most often divided by a lapse of time, but sometimes a new chapter begins with a change in the action. The shortest chapters begin and end his story.

### Issues related to this Study of Literature

#### THEME

**Love.**--Billy loved his dogs. Their first night at his house he slept outside with them. He trained them to hunt and he played with them everyday. He talked to them like they were his best friends. His dogs loved him. They jumped on him and licked him and listened to him.

His mama loved him. She worried about him whenever he was gone so long. She cried when he brought her material for a dress and held him when he cried for his dogs. She told his papa something had to be done when he quit eating because he wanted dogs so badly.

Papa loved Billy, too. He gave him responsibility when his mama thought he was still too young. He stayed by his side in the snow storm when the other men wanted to turn back. He took time away from the farm to go with him to the Championship Coon Hunt.

One of the men at the Coon Hunt expressed his thoughts on love,

“You can read every day where a dog saved the life of a drowning child, or lay down his life for his master. Some people call this loyalty. I don’t. I may be wrong, but I call it love – the deepest kind of love. It’s a shame that people all over the world can’t have that kind of love in their hearts. There would be no wars, slaughter, or murder; no greed or selfishness. It would be the kind of world that God wants us to have – a wonderful world.” (p. 184)

**Sacrifice.**--How does someone best show his love? He gives something that he cannot easily replace.

- Billy gave his little sisters a bag full of candy, only saving a few pieces for himself. (p. 30)
- His papa bought him a couple of traps when he and his wife were saving every penny they could so they could move to the city. (p. 19)
- Billy worked for two years to earn enough money to buy his dogs. When they ended up costing less than he had saved, he spent the extra money on overalls for his papa and material for his mama to make dresses for herself and his three sisters.
- (p. 35) The ultimate sacrifice came when his dogs jumped in front of the mountain lion to save Billy from the attack. (p. 193) They both ended up losing their lives as a result.

**Loyalty.**--Billy could not go anywhere without his dogs wanting to tag along. They came whenever he called and fought with him in every battle. They would have done anything for him. But, even more than their loyalty to Billy they took care of each other.

- Old Dan would not go hunting without Little Ann.
- Little Ann licked Old Dan’s ears whenever they needed cleaning or were cut open in a fight.
- When Little Ann fell into the freezing river and could not get back up on the ice, Old Dan would not leave until Billy rescued her.
- When one was attacked the other came charging in.

They slept side by side. They hunted side by side. And when Old Dan died at the end of the story, Little Ann quit eating and drinking and died by his side.

**Faith.**—So many times in a boy’s life he wants something so bad and sees no way of getting it. There were a number of times that Billy felt just that way, but he had been taught to pray and pray he did.

- When his parents couldn’t afford to buy him the hound dogs he wanted, he prayed. It was right after that he found the ad in the magazine for hound dog puppies. He felt like God helped him find that ad and gave him the strength to work hard enough to earn the money. (p. 25)
- When his dogs treed their first raccoon, they ran him up the biggest tree in the “bottoms.” Billy knew he couldn’t disappoint his dogs by not cutting down that tree and catching that raccoon. But after two days of swinging his ax, that tree was not budging and his hands were too blistered to go on. As he started to leave he prayed that somehow that tree would fall. The wind came up



at

that moment and within a few seconds that tree came down and his dogs caught that raccoon. (p. 87) He prayed for help rescuing his dogs, protecting himself and his dogs, and finding them in a snow storm. Every time he knew his prayers had been answered.

## SETTING

This story takes place in the Ozark Mountains of northeastern Oklahoma, unsettled Cherokee land given to Billy's mother because she was part Cherokee. Billy's house was on a strip of land by the mouth of a canyon between the Illinois River and the "mighty Ozarks." From the front you could see the banks of the Illinois River, "cool and shady," and the "bottom land near the river studded with tall sycamores, birches, and box elders." (p. 17) In the spring the land was covered with wild flowers. The land was rich and fertile. Billy and his family lived miles from the small town with a grocery store and over 20 miles from a larger town with a school. "To a ten-year-old country boy it was the most beautiful place in the whole wide world." (p. 17)



They lived there during the depression, 1929-1939, so money was tight and although cars had been invented there were very few around. Billy and his family wore patched up clothes and lived off the land. They hunted their meat, grew their vegetables, kept chickens for eggs and a cow for milk. What they couldn't provide for themselves they saved up for or did without. Billy's dad told Billy, "Some of the farmers had quit farming and were cutting railroad ties so they could feed their families. If things didn't get better, that's what he'd have to do." (p. 19) Those were hard times.

## POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE

This story is told by Billy Colman, the protagonist, but not as the ten-, eleven- or twelve- year-old we come to know in the book. He tells the story looking back from over half a century later. He begins some of his paragraphs with phrases like;

- "I suppose there's a time in practically every young boy's life when he's affected by that wonderful disease of puppy love," (p. 17), and
- "It seems that the worries and wants of a young boy never cease," (p. 55), and
- "I've never been back to the Ozarks. All I have left are my dreams and memories."

He takes us from his first desire of wanting those dogs, through the hard work of earning enough money to buy them, training them, hunting with them, winning the Championship Coon Hunt with them and in the end, losing them.

His memories are vivid. His descriptions bring the story to life.

- The dogs "boiled out of an alley." (p. 11)
- "With a splattering sound, I landed. I felt the air whoosh out between my teeth." (p. 38)
- "With its loud roaring, the north wind seemed to be laughing at us." (p. 174)

- “Our old mule was jogging along. Water was shooting out from under his feet in small squirts at every step.” (p. 131)

We get the understanding of an adult as we experience the events of his youth.

## CHARACTERIZATION

The descriptions of specific events and dialogue give us an idea of what the characters are like in this story.

- Papa wants so badly to get some hunting dogs for his son. Billy could “tell by the look on his face.” (p. 16)
- After he learns that the cat can’t leave the traps alone and that that is why all four of his paws are bandaged, Billy describes his Papa like this: “Papa walked off toward the barn. I heard him laughing fit to kill.” (p. 21)
- When he spoke to Billy about moving to the city he said, “A man’s children should get an education. They should get out in the world and meet people. There’s more to education than just reading and writing, much more.” (p. 53)
- When Old Dan was trying to get back into the cave around the fire he whimpered and cried, but Billy wanted to see how he would figure it out so he “said not a word; just watched.” (p. 46)



- For grandpa it was, “With a mischievous smile on his face,” (p. 55)
- “Grandpa never overlooked an opportunity to brag.” (p. 121)
- “Seems like that old man can cook up more deals than anyone in the country.” (p. 137) The characters become real through Billy’s detailed descriptions.

## FORESHADOWING

“I had seen the time when an old hound like that had given his life so that I might live.” (p. 12) Billy says this on the second page of the book. If you are paying any attention you have just been told that at least one of his dogs dies! The majority of the foreshadowing in this story comes from Billy.

Again in the first chapter, Billy notices the two cups on his fireplace, one gold and a smaller silver one. “There was a story in those cups – a story that went back more that a half century.” These are the cups that his dogs win at the Champion Coon Hunt.

Half way through the story we get a glimpse of the future again when Billy says “Because of my grandfather’s bragging, and his firm belief in my dogs and me, a terrible thing happened.” (p. 111) His grandpa had pulled him into a wager, that his dogs could catch a “ghost coon.” The coon hunt ends with the Pritchard boy falling on Billy’s ax and dieing.

## METAPHOR



Rawls has peppered his story with metaphors! In describing the dog in the first chapter Billy says, “The paws were worn down slick as the rind on an apple.” (p. 12) When he was trying to answer the stationmaster and his words finally came out, “They sounded like the squeaky old pulley on our well when Mama drew up a bucket of water.” (p. 40) When he was embarrassed he says, “My face was as red as a fox’s tail.” (p. 42) He describes his reaction to the older coon hunters teasing him saying, “I always took their kidding with a smile on my face, but it made my blood boil like the water in Mama’s teakettle.” (p. 93) And his reaction to one of those Pritchard boys when he asked if he was yellow was, “My stomach felt like something was alive and crawling in it.” Not only are his metaphors descriptive they place us in a certain time and place. The words he uses are words used during the 1930s in the back country.

## tone

The tone is calm and easy. It pulls you into the country.

- “My overalls were patched and faded, but they were clean.” (p. 34)
- “Yawning and stretching his arms he said, ‘It sure is hot today. It doesn’t look like it’s ever going to rain.’” (p. 39) You can almost see a sleepy, dusty town.

When Papa and Billy were coming home from the Championship Coon Hunt Papa said, ‘You’re going to see a scramble as soon as we round that bend.’ It was more like a stampede than a scramble. The little one came out first, and all but tore the screen door from its hinges.” (p. 187) The story is filled with this language. It is relaxing and comfortable.

## The Central Question/Enduring Issue

A Story of Hard Work and Integrity: Billy worked to earn the money to pay for his dogs. He set his traps and sold the hides, he picked berries and sold them at his grandpa’s store, he sold minnows and fresh vegetables to the visiting fishermen. He saved every penny he earned. His feet and hands got scratched and it took him two years but he never quit. He walked over 20 miles into town to pick up his dogs. He carried them in a burlap sack on his back for the 20 mile return trip. He caught a raccoon and used the hide to train his dogs. He worked with them everyday watching and directing and watching some more. He cut down the biggest tree in the bottoms because he couldn’t let his dogs down after they had treed their first raccoon. It took him two days and his hands were blistered from the ax handle. He took his dogs out almost every night to hunt raccoons. He was respectful to his grandpa even when his grandpa was telling tall tales about him. He was respectful to his mama when she worried so about him. He was a man of his word. When it looked like his dogs did not find the “ghost coon” he paid the \$2 his grandpa had bet that they could. This book shows us that hard work will not only help us achieve our goals but will also help us grow more and more responsible.




## Affective Issues Related to the Work

There are a number of ways students can relate with the main character in this book. Although the protagonist is a fourteen-year-old boy, who lived during the 1930s, in the country, some of the challenges he faced are universal. He wanted dogs in the worst way. Many students have things they want that their parents can't or won't get for them. They can see in Billy his willingness to work hard, over a long period of time to earn what he wanted. He wanted to be respected. He proved himself responsible in caring for his dogs and trapping animals that the family used for food and money. His dad started treating him more like a man.

The behavior of kids during that time is not so different from the behavior of kids today. The boys from town made fun of Billy because he dressed differently and didn't have any shoes, his hair was messed up and he was a stranger. The following issues beg further examination:

- The issue of being poor: How do you react to someone who doesn't dress as well as you? Does being poor automatically mean someone is not as bright?
- The issue of being a stranger: How do you treat someone you don't know who looks so different from you? Do you try to get to know them? Do you give them a chance before you make any judgments?

We may not have all been poor in our lives but we have all had to enter a place where we didn't know anyone. It is nice to reach out when we see someone else in that situation.

Billy is not allowed to own a gun until he is twenty-one but the other men in the story all own guns. They use them to hunt, to get food for their families and to get animal hides to sell. Guns are used for a many different  purposes today. This would be an interesting conversation to have with the students, to help them see that there was a time when guns were used mostly to support the family.

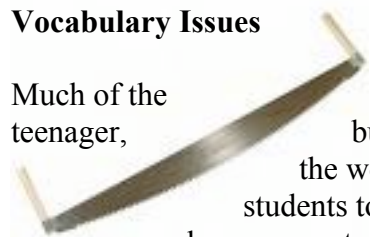
Faith and prayer are brought up regularly throughout this story.

- Billy prays for God to help him get his dogs, to help him cut down the big tree in the bottoms, to help him save his dogs and to help him find his dogs. He feels like God answered every one of his prayers.
- His mama goes out and gives a prayer of thanks when Billy won enough money for their family to move to the city.
- His papa tells him at the end of the story that he feels that it was God's will that his dogs died so that Billy could move into town with his family.

The students today may or may not be able to relate to this but it is good for them to understand that there were families that believed strongly in God.

## Vocabulary Issues

Much of the teenager,



language Rawls uses is very easy to understand. Billy talks like a teenager, but he talks like a teenager from the country in the 1930s so some of the words that were very common back then will not be familiar to students today. For example, his papa used a "crosscut saw." (p. 17) Billy knew every trail in the "canebrakes." (p. 17) When he crossed the river he looked for a shallow "riffle." (p. 72) His papa told him to "Shell" a sack of corn. (p. 111) He described

his grandpa by saying, “His friendly old face look like a gobbler’s wattle.” (p. 113) And, his mother got mad as a “sitting hen.” (p. 133) Pictures of these things from so long ago will not only help the students understand but also relate to what Rawls is trying to describe. “When the words finally came out they sounded like the squeaky old pully on our well when Mama drew up a bucket of water.” (p. 40)

### **Background Knowledge**

As mentioned before, this story takes place in Oklahoma during the Great Depression, 1929-1939. Students would benefit from a study of life in that area during that time. Not only was the language different but the dress styles were different, the responsibilities of the children in a family were different. Most fathers were farmers and their wives worked right beside them in trying to feed the family. Families had more children. And, no one living in the country had any money. The phrase, “use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without,” certainly applied to them.



It would also be beneficial to talk to them about how the country still had vast areas of wilderness. There were not any utilities that went to those areas. Bathrooms were outhouses. There was not electricity in the country. You had running water if somehow you were able to rig it up from the well. Daily life consisted of doing things to help the family survive. It would help students to see that although these folks lived in America, their lives were extremely different from the lives these students live today.

### **Implications for Students of Diversity**

Billy was from the country. When he went into town he was totally different from the children he saw there. His clothing was different, his hair was different, his language was different and he felt like a total stranger. Students who have moved into your area even from another area in the United States can feel these very same differences. This book does not show a positive resolution to these differences. The boys from town try to beat him up. The positive side of that is that an adult helps him out and ends up respecting him for his work ethic. His father tries to help him understand, “Billy, I don’t want you to feel badly about the people in town. I don’t think they were poking fun at you, anyway not like you think they were.” (p. 53) It does show that he feels like everyone is staring at him and being critical of him when that may not have been completely true. Adolescents often have a difficult time reading emotions correctly. This could be a good launching point for a discussion about jumping to conclusions about what others think of them.

### **Gender Issues**

There is not much focus on the women in this story. In fact, the only women we read more than a line or two about are his Mama and little sisters and we don’t even know the little sisters’ names. His mother is a typical woman who lives a frontier life. She has four children and is pregnant

with number five. She cares fiercely about her children, works very hard and cries when she is worried. She cooks and sews and prays. She could be seen as the stereotypical frontier woman but there is no comment one way or the other in the book about her role. That's just the way it was in those times and no one seemed to have a problem with it.

### Research Issues/Project Ideas

**FIND AN AMERICAN CHARACTER.** Billy's grandpa says to Billy, "You know Billy, about this tree chopping of yours, I think it's all right. In fact, I think it would be a good thing if all young boys had to cut down a big tree like that once in their life. It does something for them. It gives them determination and will power. That's a good thing for a man to have. It goes a long way in his life. The American people have a lot of it. They have proved that, all down through history, but they could do with a lot more of it." (p. 82)



Describe how Billy's determination and will power helped him go a long way in life. Then, find a character in American history that showed determination and will power. Tell their story. Paul Bunyon and Johnny Appleseed are both examples of folk heroes. What is it that made them great? What kinds of experiences made their characters strong? How did their determination help them go a long way in life? Compare what they did to what Billy did.

**WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT TO DO?** "Son, a man can do anything he sets out to do if he doesn't give up." These words, spoken by his father, were what inspired Wilson Rawls when he decided he wanted to become a writer. It took him twenty years to write *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Now, over 40 years later, it is still in print. What do you really want to do in life? Research what it would take to be able to do what you want to do. Find someone else who has done it and see what steps they had to take. Write about the steps they had to take and what you will need to do.

**READ ANOTHER STORY.** Find another story about a family that lived during the Great Depression. Write about their lives during that time. How were they different from Billy's? How were they the same? What did they do to try to make money? Where were they living? What specific challenges did they face?

**HOW IS YOUR LIFE DIFFERENT? HOW IS IT THE SAME?** Billy grew up in the country during the great depression. His papa was a farmer and his mother worked day in and day out to feed and clothe the family. There was no indoor plumbing, no electricity, no running water and no extra money. Billy worked hard for every penny to pay for his dogs. As you read the novel keep a compare/contrast matrix about Billy's lifestyle and yours.

**HAVE YOU EVER BEEN HUNTING?** Compare your hunting experience to Billy's. Talk about the places he hunted compared to where you have gone. What types of animals did he hunt? What have you been after? How did he go about capturing them? What do you do? How did he use what he caught? How do you use it?



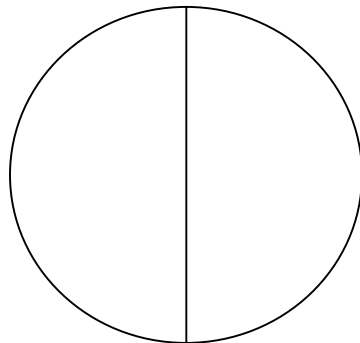
WHAT BOOK HAS CHANGED YOUR LIFE? When Wilson Rawls was a boy the only stories his mother read to him were stories like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Chicken Little* – girl stories! When his mother brought home *Call of the Wild* by Jack London it changed his life. He couldn't put it down. He read it and reread it. He even read it to his dog. What book has changed your life? What was it about? What about it affected you? How did it affect you? What do you want to do as a result of reading that book?



CREATE A MANDALA: 1. Choose a character. 2. Write down 10 adjectives to describe the character. 3. Keep all of the adjectives in mind while choosing a symbol for each of the following: a. animal, b. plant, c. color, d. mineral, e. shape and, f. number, to fit or represent the personality of your character. 4. When all the symbols are selected for the Sun Side, write a paragraph defending your selection with a proof from the text. 5. Go through your list and revise any symbol that cannot be defended. 6. For each symbol, pick an opposite. (Your first reactions are usually accurate!) These opposites will comprise the Shadow Sides of your characters. 7. Brainstorm in small groups, how the opposites fit the characters that you have chosen and write a paragraph justifying these choices. 8. Draw the Mandala and color it. 9. Present your findings and analyses to the class in an oral report.

Sun Side

Animal  
Plant  
Mineral  
Color  
Shape  
Number



Shadow Side

Animal  
Plant  
Mineral  
Color  
Shape  
Number

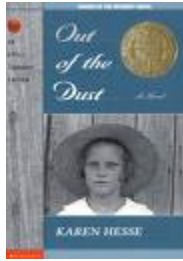
### Information/Functional Texts

#### Information About The Author:

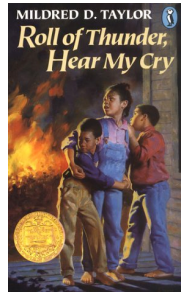
When *Where the Red Fern Grows* became popular Wilson Rawls was asked to speak at many different schools. He encouraged kids to stay in school and to follow their dreams. It was the same every time he gave it. It is now recorded on CD and is called *Dreams Can Come True*. To hear an excerpt go to <http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/rawls-excerpt.ram>. There is also an essay on his life in a book called, Jim Trelease's anthology, *Hey! Listen to This*. <http://www.amazon.com/Hey-Listen-This-Stories-Aloud/dp/0140146539>

Scholastic BookFiles, A Reading Guide to *Where the Red Fern Grows*

### Other Novels About the Great Depression:



*Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse is another young adult book about a young girl living in the dust bowl of Oklahoma during the Great Depression. The story is told through free verse.



*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, by Mildred Taylor tells the story of an African American family living in Mississippi trying to keep their own land and some of the civil rights issues they faced.



*A Year Down Yonder*, by Richard Peck is a humorous story of two young teens who leave Chicago to spend the summer with their eccentric grandmother in the country.

### A Photo Essay of The Great Depression

Pictures with captions from the New York Stock Exchange to campers on the roadside in California <http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/depression/photoessay.htm>

Any other information about The Great Depression

### Maps of Oklahoma

This site has links to Oklahoma's history, landforms, famous facts etc.  
<http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/namerica/usstates/ok.htm>

Native American Indian Lore <http://www.ilhawaii.net/~stony/loreindx.html>

Native American Indian Resources <http://www.kstrom.net/isk/mainmenu.html>