

Children's Literature as a Vehicle for Pre-College Ethics:  
Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Shiloh*

Claudia Mills

Children's literature has long had the role of providing moral instruction and shaping moral development.<sup>1</sup> Children's literature, however, has been neglected as a resource for introducing children to the concepts and questions of philosophical ethics. While some children's books, of course, offer only the most simplistic didacticism, others go beyond the task of transmitting and inculcating accepted values to portray children engaged in genuine moral reflection that can itself transcend and challenge our shared values – and, I will argue, provide an illuminating illustration, addressed to a young audience, of moral theory in action.

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's Newbery-winning novel *Shiloh* is remarkable for its recognition of certain fundamental ambiguities and limitations in the morality we share. The moral dilemma that eleven-year-old Marty Preston faces in the novel is extraordinarily complex, raising challenges both to how we reason about our obligations to members of the moral community and to how we define the scope of that community. The latter may occasion the novel's most significant philosophical triumph, in its illumination of how we fail to apply even our most central and unambiguous moral principles to children and animals.

In "real life," children are struggling with sometimes extraordinary seriousness to develop into full-fledged moral agents. In *The Moral Life of Children* (1968) and *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (1997), Robert Coles provides moving case studies of children trying to sort through their moral obligations against a background of their parents' beliefs, their religious beliefs, and the transmitted beliefs of their culture. Children also seem to have a natural curiosity

about the philosophical dimensions of their lives, as shown by Gareth Matthews's depictions of his successful attempts to engage children in philosophical dialogue (1980). I want to suggest that this capacity for philosophical perplexity, turned toward the moral seriousness of our lives, makes *Shiloh* a wonderful vehicle for engaging children in sophisticated moral reflection, for the questions *Shiloh* raises are ones that the professional philosophy literature itself has been struggling to answer.

### **Consequences and Moral Obligation in *Shiloh***

The dilemma Marty Preston faces in *Shiloh* at first glance fits into the familiar framework of consequentialism pitted against deontological respect for moral duty. Marty discovers a dog who is being abused by his owner, Judd Travers, and names the dog Shiloh. When Shiloh runs away from Judd to Marty, Marty decides to hide Shiloh from Judd and from his own family. So on one side, we see the concern for welfare characteristic of consequentialism, concern to prevent suffering and promote happiness. On the other side, we see respect for familiar moral duties not to lie, steal, and break promises. The question Marty faces is: is it permissible to violate these other moral duties in order to produce the morally desirable outcome of saving Shiloh?

Presented in this way, most readers would be initially sympathetic to the consequentialist argument -- that Shiloh's welfare outweighs the moral prohibitions against lying, promise-breaking, and stealing. Marty himself at points characterizes his decision in these terms, disregarding the moral standing of the prohibitions in favor of concern for Shiloh. "A lie don't seem a lie anymore when it's meant to save a dog, and right and wrong's all mixed up in my head" (70).

But in Naylor's sensitive treatment of these issues, complexity quickly emerges to temper our first pro-consequentialist response. Consequentialism judges acts by their consequences, and

the consequences even to Shiloh himself of Marty's hiding him turn out to be worse than the consequences of leaving him with Judd: a neighbor's vicious German shepherd leaps into the pen Marty built to hide Shiloh, leaving him near-dead -- severely injured and, even after he ultimately recovers, permanently lame. Marty reflects on this afterward: "Worst of all, I'd brought Shiloh here to keep him from being hurt, and what that German shepherd done to him was probably worse than anything Judd Travers would have brought himself to do, short of shootin' him, anyways" (96-97).<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, consequentialism insists that the right action is determined, not by assessing the consequences to any one party, but by looking at the consequences to *all* those affected by the act, extending out as far in time as one can reasonably foresee. Marty's dilemma is sharpened toward the end of the novel when consequentialist considerations, even understood only in terms of animal welfare, begin to extend more widely. Marty comes across Judd shooting a deer out of season; he decides to bargain with Judd not to report him, in exchange for Judd's promise to sell him Shiloh. But this means that future deer will now be in danger from Judd's careless bloodthirstiness, which Marty himself recognizes: "by lettin' him get away with this, I'm putting other deer in danger. He kill this one out of season, he'll figure maybe he can kill some more. To save Shiloh, I'm making it harder for deer" (125-26).

Likewise, as she decreases the attractions of the consequentialist solution, Naylor also increases the attractions of the deontologically based obligations that Marty must violate. These are not presented as items on some arbitrary and unmotivated list of commandments to be obeyed blindly. Instead, respect for moral obligation, in the world of *Shiloh*, both reveals and shapes moral character. We see Judd Travers for what he is not only through his cruelty to animals, but also through his cheating Mr. Wallace at the corner store (22), through his breaking the anti-poaching law, and through his breaking his promise to Marty at the end of the book to sell him Shiloh. Marty begins to feel his own character warp as he continues his ever-escalating

series of lies to protect Shiloh: "Funny how one lie leads to another and before you know it your whole life can be a lie" (60). Outer adherence to truth-telling and to promise-keeping can be a sign of inner integrity.

Moral duties are also situated within a larger social fabric. They are justified because of how they structure our interactions with others. Lies and broken promises lead to a loss of trust, to a rending of the fabric that binds together families and communities. It is for this reason that Marty's mother doesn't want to lie to Marty's father about her discovery of Shiloh: "I never kept a secret from your dad in the fourteen years we've been married. . . . He ever finds out about this dog and knows I knew but didn't tell him, how could he trust me? If I keep this one secret from him, he'll think maybe there are more" (83). She does keep Marty's secret, though, with the result of a subsequent strain in the marriage. And Marty experiences first hand the loss of his father's trust when he insists to his father that he isn't keeping any other secrets from him, and his father answers only, "You saying so don't make it true." (93)

Thus, the reader is left rooting for Shiloh and hoping that Marty will be able to save him, but realizing that the costs of Marty's trying to do so are genuine costs -- costs that do not evaporate with correct theoretical understanding of the situation.

Perhaps highlighting the contrast between philosophy and literature more generally, *Shiloh* ends up offering a profoundly anti-theoretical response to the moral theorist, for moral theory is largely useless in resolving Marty's dilemma. Instead, what turns out to matter is a heightened sense of moral particularity.<sup>3</sup> Marty's dad twice challenges him as to why he is so concerned to save Shiloh when there are thousands of other equally mistreated animals whose welfare -- on a strictly consequentialist view -- should matter just as much as Shiloh's: "If this dog's mistreated, he's only about one out of fifty thousand animals that is" (24); "You think Judd Travers is the only one around here hard-hearted toward his animals? . . . Open up your eyes, Marty. *Open your eyes!*" (94). But Marty rejects this insistence that he be able to generalize his

concern for Shiloh to a concern for all mistreated animals. It is perhaps the most troubling sign of Judd's moral blindness that he does not see the particularity of his animals, signaled by his refusal to name them: "Never name any of my dogs. Dogs one, two, three, and four is all. . . 'Git,' 'Scram,' 'Out,' and 'Dammit': *that's* my dogs' names" (35). Dogs for Judd are interchangeable units: "Lose one, I'll buy another" (35). It is when Marty names Shiloh as a distinct individual that he acquires his particular and personal obligation toward him. Marty is not trying to save the world, but to save Shiloh -- though perhaps saving him is one first step toward saving the world. Moral judgment proceeds case by case, and it is never easy.

### **Persons versus Animals**

While *Shiloh* lays bare some of the complexities at the heart of ordinary morality, both affirming and challenging our consequentialist and deontological commitments, it also offers a crusading challenge to ordinary morality in the questions it raises about our treatment of those who are not fully members of the moral community -- particularly non-human animals but also to a certain extent children.

At three different points in the novel, Marty compares animals to children: it has been a familiar tactic in the history of moral philosophy to try to extend moral consideration to some hitherto excluded group by stressing its relevant similarity to some included group. "What if [Shiloh] was a child? . . . If some kid was shaking like this dog is shaking, you wouldn't feel no pull for keeping an eye on him?" (24). To this his dad replies simply, "This here's a dog, not a child, and it's not our dog" (25). The other two points of comparison, however, raise questions about whether we fail as a society in protecting children just as we fail to protect animals. When Marty tells Judd, "I figure a dog's the same as a kid. You don't treat a kid right, he'll run off first chance he gets, too" (64), Judd responds with stories of how he was abused as a child by his father and still "turned out." Marty asks, "Turned out how?" The answer is clear: turned out to

be himself an abuser. Finally, when Marty, desperate for some solution to his struggle to keep Shiloh, debates reporting Judd to the authorities for animal abuse, he thinks to himself, "Tyler County hasn't hardly got the money to investigate reports of children being kicked, Dad says, much less dogs" (113), highlighting the lack of value our society places on the welfare of both.

Just as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* over a century earlier challenged existing notions of African-Americans as property, capable of being bought and sold, so *Shiloh* raises parallel questions about our treatment of animals as property. But while the character Huck shares the racist assumptions of his culture, Marty is an animal rights advocate from the first page of the novel, where he shows his squeamishness about eating the rabbit his father shot that day. Although he is not a vegetarian (and the issue of eating meat is never raised at any point in the novel), he is personally opposed to hunting, telling the reader that he shoots only at tin cans: "Never shoot any anything moving, though. Never had the slightest wish" (12).

Marty extends his concern for animals to the farthest fringes of animal creation, explicitly defending the rights of even insects and snakes. He is uncomfortable when his little sisters capture lightning bugs: ". . . seeing those bugs in a jar reminds me of Shiloh all chained up at Judd's, a prisoner as sure as those bugs" (31). He tells his sisters, "They'll die if you keep 'em in a jar" (32). Later, after having pretended to his sisters that he has seen a snake nearby, to keep them from finding Shiloh's hideout, he responds to Dara Lynn's cry, "Kill it! Git your gun and blow its head off," with "Even snakes got the right to live" (62).

Throughout, Marty's parents insist to Marty that Shiloh is Judd Travers's property, and that it is none of Marty's business how Judd chooses to treat him: "If it's Travers's dog, it's no mind of ours *how* he treats it" (24); "Judd Travers has the right to name his dog anything he likes or nothing at all. And you've got to get it through your mind that it's *his* dog, not yours, and put your mind to other things" (37); "You've got to go by the law. The law saws that a man that pays money for a dog owns that dog" (94). In contrast, Marty claims that it is love, not money, that

should establish the relation of belonging. When his mother points out to him yet again, "This dog don't belong to you," Marty shoots back, "Mine more than Judd's! . . . He only paid money for him. I'm the one who loves him" (82).

Marty is ultimately able to save Shiloh when he accidentally stumbles upon Judd in the act of killing a deer out of season; he can now blackmail Judd into agreeing to sell him Shiloh in exchange for his promise not to report Judd (out-of-season killings carry with them a \$200 fine). Although this point is not highlighted in the novel, it is clear that our societal and legal concern for animals extends only so far as establishing *when* they may be killed, not *whether*. It is a crime to kill a deer out of season; it is no crime to kill a deer in season. While somewhat more protected by anti-cruelty laws, domestic animals in a sense lack even this much protection.

*Shiloh* does not try to settle the question of how much weight we should give to animal rights or interests or how these should be weighed against human interests when the two conflict. But in a novel that is extraordinarily sensitive to moral ambiguity, the moral considerability of animals emerges as a point beyond doubt or question. Through Naylor's skill as a novelist, the reader comes to care about Shiloh as deeply as Marty does and so to reject the premise that morality should be indifferent to how animals are treated.

### **Morality, Law, Culture, Religion**

Most moral theories begin by trying to separate out, within the realm of the normative, that which is distinctively moral or ethical from action-guiding prescriptions based on law, culture, or religion. What we morally ought to do is not identical with what we legally ought to do, or with what most people in our culture usually do, for both law and culture could be wrong, as history showed us in Nazi Germany. Nor can what we morally ought to do be identified simply with what our religion tells us to do, for that will ground a legitimate ethical prescription only if we have some independent reason for accepting religious authority -- and often we accept

religious authority only because we think God is good, as shown by our independent moral evaluation of his commands.

In *Shiloh* we find Marty trying to separate out what is right from what is legally, culturally, and religiously required. But even as Marty draws these familiar distinctions, in the end he finds that all four domains -- morality, law, culture, religion -- are in his world inextricably woven together.

Marty repeatedly challenges the authority of a law which would allow a man to own and mistreat an animal as Judd mistreats Shiloh. "What kind of a law is it, Ma, that lets a man mistreat his dog?" (82). When his father tells him that if he objects to the law, he should obey it while he works to change it, Marty asks, "What if there isn't time, Dad? Shiloh could be dead by the time somebody looked into the way Judd treats his dogs" (94). The law is neither infallibly correct in the line it draws between permitted and proscribed behavior, nor is it able successfully to deter the behavior it proscribes.

Marty's world in *Shiloh* is the world of a close-knit, rural, Appalachian community with its own clearly defined code of conduct, to which Marty makes frequent reference in the novel. The code consists chiefly in neighborliness within boundaries set by an ethic of each minding his own business. When Marty's lies lead others in the community to think his family has come upon hard times, folks pitch in to help with donations of food. Even Judd Travers stops to give Marty a ride into town. But the central organizing principle of the ethic of Friendly, West Virginia, is that "folks keep to their own business. . . In Tyler County that's important. Way it's always been, anyhow" (23). This means that Marty would cause a serious rupture in the community should he decide to take Judd to court for animal abuse: "Around here it's serious business when you got a quarrel with your neighbor and you got to carry it as far as the law. Folks ain't that fond of Judd, and most of 'em likes my dad, but when it comes to taking a man's property I figure they'll side with Judd" (117). But Marty challenges this ethic, at least inwardly:

"Dad wouldn't report Judd even if *he* saw him shoot a doe out of season, because that's the way it's always been around here. That don't necessarily make it right, of course . . ." (130). Marty finds himself "Wondering, too, about whose business it is when someone breaks the law.

Wonder if Dad wouldn't never tell on Judd no matter what he done. Bet he would. There's got to be times that what one person does is everybody's business" (132-33).

Marty's own moral code is also steeped in religion. One does not sin, according to Marty's deeply devout mother, because one does not want to be "separated forever from God's love." Thus, when Marty eats his sister's chocolate Easter rabbit and later lies about it, his mother tells him, "Dara Lynn don't know who ate the ear off her candy rabbit and I don't know who did it, but Jesus knows. And right this minute Jesus is looking down with the saddest eyes on the person who ate that chocolate" (56). The memory of this episode leads Marty to offer his own prayer on what he should do in his dilemma over Shiloh: "'Jesus,' I whisper finally, 'which you want me to do? Be one hundred percent honest and carry that dog back to Judd so that one of your creatures can be kicked and starved all over again, or keep him here and fatten him up to glorify your creation?'" (57) Marty answers this question himself: "If Jesus is anything like the story cards from Sunday school make him out to be, he ain't the kind to want a thin, little beagle to be hurt" (57).

But later Marty distances himself from a religiously based resolution to his problem. In a passage that strikingly parallels Huck Finn's famous declaration -- if he has to go to hell for helping Jim to escape, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" (272) -- Marty reflects on whether he'll go to hell for the lies he tells to save Shiloh: "If what Grandma Preston told me once about heaven and hell is true, and liars go to hell, then I guess that's where I'm headed. But she also told me that only people are allowed in heaven, not animals. And if I was to go to heaven and look down to see Shiloh left below, head on his paws, I'd run away from heaven sure"(73).

Yet even as Marty separates out the question of what is right for him to do from the question of what is legally, culturally, and religiously required, in the course of *Shiloh*, law, culture, and religion play an essential role in arriving at the solution to the novel's central moral dilemma.

Marty is able to force Judd to make the agreement to sell Shiloh only by threatening to report him to the legal authorities for poaching. Marty retains his allegiance to law generally, even if he wishes that the law could go farther than it does toward the protection of animals, or for that matter, children. The law against poaching exists to protect pregnant and nursing does, to protect some kind of natural balance. And it is the sanctions attaching to violation of this law which allow Marty to negotiate his final bargain with Judd. In a world where men are not always good, law, with its attendant sanctions, is an important tool for ensuring moral compliance.

But it is one thing for Judd to make the agreement, it is another thing for him to keep it, and to keep it over the long term. The sanctions attending law -- legal condemnation and punishment -- cannot guarantee compliance with what the law requires. Marty knows that if he cannot win Judd over as a friend, Shiloh will be forever vulnerable to an "accident": "I don't want to make him mad. No use having a winner and loser, or the bad feelings would just go on. Don't want to have to worry about Shiloh when he's running loose and I'm in school. Don't want to feel that Judd's so sore at me he'll think up any excuse at all to run his truck over my dog" (140). To ensure enduring compliance, Marty must cultivate a continuing relationship with Judd as a neighbor, as a member of the moral community, rather than shunning and ostracizing him as a moral outcast. Marty comes to understand and even to pity Judd as he puts in his promised twenty hours' of work on Judd's property. Even though at one point he says of Judd, "I hate him more than the devil" (134), the novel is remarkable in its ultimate unwillingness to demonize its villain. Judd's moral failings, however grievous, are placed in a human context; we understand

why Judd is the way he is, and we find ourselves rooting not for his damnation, but for his redemption.

Finally, the novel concludes with a return to an implicitly religiously based morality. Halfway through Marty's promised twenty hours of work, Judd sneers at him that he is working for nothing, that their written agreement is worthless because it was signed without a witness. When Marty asks his parents that evening, "What's a witness?" his mother responds with the religious rather than legal sense of the word: "Somebody who knows the Lord Jesus and don't mind tellin' about it" (138). His father supplies the legal sense, "Somebody who sees something happen and signs that it's true" (138). Marty decides that all he can do, in the face of Judd's renunciation of their contract, is to continue to follow through on it himself: "You and me made a bargain, . . . and I aim to keep my part of it" (139). He tells himself, ". . . I got no choice. All I can do is stick to my side of the deal and see what happens. All in the world I can do" (140). The resolution of the stand-off comes when Marty, in essence, stands witness, in his mother's religious sense of witness, for an ethic of love, crystallized in his love for Shiloh. When Judd asks Marty, "What you going to do with that dog once he's yours?" the answer is just "Love him" (142). This answer finds a comfortable home in the novel's explicit invocation of one particular love-based ethic, Christianity.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of *Shiloh* the moral ambiguity that has characterized Marty's dilemma throughout has been resolved into a desperate kind of moral certainty. Earlier, when Marty's dad tells him, "I want you to do what's right," Marty shoots back at him the question, "What's right?" And for once in Marty's eleven years, "I think I have my dad stumped" (94). But the resolution of Marty's dilemma comes when, in the end, he witnesses for what is right in the face of Judd's refusal to do what is right. Here deontology and consequentialism at last come together. Marty

does what he has to do to produce the consequence of saving Shiloh, and he does it not by telling a lie or breaking a promise, but by keeping his word and living up to his half of a covenant, by continuing to stand by what he believes to be right. In the novel's final paragraph, Marty reports that he has learned that "nothing is as simple as you guess -- not right or wrong, not Judd Travers, not even me or this dog I got here" (144). But although right and wrong are seldom simple, in the end we can witness to the right as we see the right, a right identified with great difficulty and no guarantees, through attention to moral particularity, through a willingness to take seriously the diverse claims of law, culture, and love. Indeed, in the end, as Marty says, it is all that we can do.

## Sources Cited

Coles, Robert. *The Moral Intelligence of Children*. New York: Random House, 1997.

----- . *The Moral Life of Children*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

Matthews, Gareth. *Philosophy and the Young Child*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. *Shiloh*. New York: Atheneum, 1991.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1948 (first published 1884).

## Notes

1. See, for example, Ann Scott MacLeod's fascinating discussion in *A Moral Tale: Children's Fiction and American Culture 1820-1860* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), as well as many of the works reprinted in *From Instruction to Delight*, edited by Patricia Demers and Gordon Moyles (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982).

2. It should be noted here that a reasonable consequentialism will need to judge acts not by their actual consequences, but by their expected consequences, since it seems unfair and unreasonable to hold agents responsible for outcomes which they could not have foreseen. But here we can say that Marty should have had reason to doubt that his hiding Shiloh in this way would lead to an optimal outcome.

3. In this Naylor may be giving voice to what some feminist writers have called "an ethics of care," which values concreteness rather than abstraction and particularized others rather than generalized others. See, for example, Nell Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

4. I do not mean here to be equating Shiloh with Jim in any other sense than that both are perceived as property, for Jim is clearly a moral agent in a way that Shiloh is not.