

Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"You live in hill country, it takes a while for the sun to rise. Got to scale the mountains first."

—Marty, *Shiloh*

S*hiloh* takes place in Friendly, West Virginia, some time during the mid- to late-twentieth century. The setting is rural—it takes place in the countryside—and poor.

The author establishes the rural setting in a number of ways. She describes where the Prestons live, where Marty finds Shiloh, and where Marty and Shiloh play. She tells about Marty's father's job. She talks about the characters' activities and pastimes. And she has them speak in a rural West Virginia dialect (see page 29).

Marty and his family live up in the hills above Friendly, West Virginia. Friendly is near Sistersville, which is halfway between Wheeling and Parkersburg. The Prestons live in a four-room house that is surrounded on three sides by hills. Marty loves the hills, and the animals he can see there.

Much of the story takes place in these hills. There are woods, a creek, and a meadow. It is on one of the hills that Marty builds a

pen and hides Shiloh. The boy and dog run and play on this hill. And it is there that Shiloh is attacked and nearly killed by Baker's German shepherd.

Marty finds Shiloh down by the old Shiloh schoolhouse, by the road that follows the slow-moving river. There are some houses along this road, but not many.

Marty's father is a rural mail carrier. Mr. Preston uses his Jeep to deliver mail to two hundred families in Sistersville and two hundred families in Friendly. By Marty's estimate, his dad travels eighty-five miles a day to make these deliveries. Many miles of these country roads are impassable in winter.

Rural activities and pastimes play an important part in this book. Hunting, which can only take place in the country, is an important part of the story: Judd Travers bought Shiloh because he was a good hunting dog; Marty catches Judd Travers hunting out of season, thereby paving the way for him to blackmail Judd to sell him Shiloh; even Marty, though he doesn't hunt, owns a gun and uses it for target practice.

The countryside is also a great place to play: Marty and his best friend, David, like to run on the hills behind Marty's house; Marty's sisters like to catch fireflies outside the house. Finally, it is a place with enough land for gardens and animals: Marty's mother and Judd Travers both have vegetable gardens and Marty's family even keeps hens.

The author further establishes *Shiloh*'s setting by having her characters speak in a West Virginia regional dialect. This means that the characters' vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation are unique to the area in which they live. We hear this dialect from the beginning, in the first sentence of the book when Marty says, "The day Shiloh come, we're having us a big Sunday dinner." The use of dialect helps us *hear* where the story is taking place.

The setting of *Shiloh* is poor as well as rural. The author both shows us and tells us of the poverty of the area. When Marty is looking for a job, his father tells him that he doesn't know many folks with money to spare. And when Marty applies to be a newspaper carrier, there are already six other names on the list—and one is a grown man with a car.

Marty's family is also poor. Though Marty's father has a job as a mail carrier—one of the better paying jobs in rural areas—the family struggles financially. They live in a small, four-room house, and Marty's bed is on the couch in the living room. Marty's mother does laundry using an old washing machine with a wringer that only works if you turn it by hand. The Prestons don't even have a telephone; if they want to make a call, they have to go to Doc Murphy's house. And when Dara Lynn outgrows her sneakers, Mrs. Preston cuts the tops off to make room for her toes until they can afford a new pair.

The story of the love between a boy and a dog is timeless, and the author doesn't give the reader many hints as to the exact time that this story takes place. The book was published in 1991, and it is not at all futuristic, so it's safe to guess that it takes place

before 1991. The existence of Jeeps, televisions, and telephones could place it as early as the mid-twentieth century.

Thinking about the setting

- Where does *Shiloh* take place?
- When does *Shiloh* take place?
- What is dialect? How does the author's use of dialect help establish the story's setting?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"Nothing is as simple as you guess—not right or wrong, not Judd Travers, not even me or this dog I got here."

—Marty, *Shiloh*

These words—among the last in *Shiloh*—express the overriding theme of the book: that right and wrong are not always clear-cut, not always black and white; instead, right and wrong are often different shades of gray.

According to the author, *Shiloh* deals with the difficulty of making ethical decisions in complex situations. "Much of life is, of necessity, compromise," Naylor has said. "When should he [Marty] give in, and for what principles should he hold out? Where is the dividing line between lawful duty and being true to one's conscience? Between loyalty to one's family and the love of a dog?"

Marty struggles with these questions throughout the book. In the beginning, when Shiloh follows Marty home, the boy wants to feed him. But Marty's mother has often said that they can't have a pet because they can't afford to feed it. Marty thinks about trying to sneak Shiloh some of his dinner anyway, but his mother is watching him too closely. She tells him that he'd better not

feed his dinner to the dog; if Marty doesn't want his dinner, his father can take it to work the next day for lunch. So Marty excuses himself, goes out, takes an egg from one of the hen's nests, and feeds it to Shiloh. Already he is doing something he knows he shouldn't be doing—taking away from his family to feed the dog.

Even when he's just thinking about trying to buy Shiloh from Judd, Marty knows that feeding him will be a problem. "There aren't many leftover scraps of anything in our house. Every extra bite of pork chop or boiled potato or spoonful of peas gets made into soup," he says. He wants Shiloh so badly, he refuses to think about how he might feed him once he gets him. "I figure to get to that problem later on," he says.

But Marty has to face that problem—and a host of others—sooner than he realizes, because Shiloh shows up outside his house the next day. Marty's first decision puts him in that gray area between right and wrong: He decides not to bring Shiloh back to Judd Travers.

"I don't have time to think how I had promised Judd if I ever saw Shiloh loose again, I'd bring him back," Marty thinks. "Don't even think what I'm going to tell Dad. All I know right then is that I have to get Shiloh away from the house, where none of the family will see him."

Why does Marty break his promise to Judd Travers and begin deceiving his family? In his eyes, it's the only way he can protect Shiloh. "I'm not never going to let anybody hurt him again ever,"

he says to himself. Marty has to do what he knows is wrong in order to do what he believes is right.

The next day is filled with lies—both to Judd Travers and to his family. Marty doesn't have too much trouble lying to Judd. He makes up a prayer to justify not being honest with the man about Shiloh. "Jesus," he says, "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?"

"The problem's more mixed up than that, though," Marty thinks. "I'm lying to my folks as well." Marty sees that life is full of trade-offs. "I'm *not* eating the leftover meat loaf I've put away. Every bit of food saved is money saved that could go to buy Dara Lynn a new pair of sneakers so Ma won't have to cut open the tops of her old ones to give her toes more room," he thinks. But he convinces himself that he's not taking anything away from the family, because he's giving Shiloh food from his own plate.

Marty is hungry all the time because he's giving Shiloh half his food. So when he goes to visit his friend David Howard, he eats his fill at lunch and then asks Mrs. Howard for food for the walk home. The food is really for Shiloh. Marty thinks, "Ma would have blushed with shame if she heard me ask this, but seems I'm at the point where I'll do most anything 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."

Marty also learns that the simple things he does for Shiloh—telling David his mother has headaches so he shouldn't come over, going to the corner grocer and asking Mr. Wallace if he has any old food he can buy, cheap—have repercussions for the whole family. The townspeople ask Marty's mother how she's feeling and offer her headache remedies. When she shops, she finds everything she wants is on sale. And people start leaving food for Marty's dad in their mailboxes. In his attempts to protect and care for Shiloh, Marty entangles his family in a web of deceit.

When his mother discovers Marty and Shiloh on the hill, Marty begs her not to tell his dad about it until the next day. She reluctantly agrees. When he finds out, it causes trouble between them.

And then Marty has to face the worst result of his hiding Shiloh: The beagle is attacked in his pen by a big German shepherd. "Worst of all," Marty thinks, "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."

Marty's dad is angry about Marty secretly keeping Shiloh. And, though Marty understands his dad's anger, he's angry, too. He wants his dad to understand that "it's not all so black and white" as he makes it out to be.

"You would have thought more of me if I'd let that dog wander around till Judd found it again, kick the daylights out of 'im?" Marty asks his dad.

“I want you to do what’s right,” his dad tells him.

“What’s right?” Marty asks.

His father knows that there are no clear answers to this, but finally says, “You’ve got to go by the law. The law says a man that pays money for a dog owns that dog. You don’t agree with the law, then you work to change it.”

But Marty refuses to give up. “What if there isn’t time, Dad? Shiloh could be dead by the time somebody looked into the way Judd treats his dogs.”

Right and wrong aren’t black and white, they’re shades of gray.

Marty is caught in these gray areas again when he sees Judd shoot a deer out of season. “One way you look at it,” Marty thinks, “it’s my duty to report a killed doe. The way folks up here look at it, though, that’s snitching. And if I *might* could tell, but bargain not to, it’s something else again: It’s blackmail.” Marty knows that none of these choices is perfect. But he must choose and, in the end, he chooses blackmail. “Like I said,” he thinks, “I’d got to the place I’d do most anything to save Shiloh.”

Marty knows his choice is as much wrong as right. Marty knows “that by lettin’ him get away with this, I’m putting other deer in danger.” Marty reminds himself that he’s doing this for Shiloh, and puts these thoughts out of his head.

But his conscience still troubles him. “I begin to see now that I’m no better than Judd Travers—willing to look the other way to get something I want,” he says.

Marty and Judd make an agreement that Marty will work twenty hours to pay for Shiloh. Judd is mean to Marty, and at times it looks like Judd isn’t going to stick to his end of the bargain. But, in the end, he does. And he gives Marty an old collar for Shiloh. This kindness, coming from Judd, surprises Marty, who summarizes the main theme of the book: “I’m thinking how nothing is as simple as you guess—not right or wrong, not Judd Travers, not even me or this dog I got here.”

Honesty

Another important theme in the book is honesty. Marty gets himself and his family into trouble by being dishonest about Shiloh.

Marty knows that it’s wrong to lie. He lied once about eating the ear of Dara Lynn’s chocolate Easter rabbit, and felt awful about it. He knows he shouldn’t be lying now, but can’t think of any other way to save Shiloh.

Marty’s dishonesty takes two forms. First, there are the “flat-out lies.” Marty lies about what he’s doing with the food he sets aside from dinner, saying he’s saving it for when he’s hungry later, when he’s really saving it for Shiloh; he lies when he tells his parents that there’s nothing for his friend David to do on the hill, when he knows there’s lots for David to do; Marty lies when he

tells Dara Lynn that he saw “the biggest, meanest snake” on the hill that morning, just to keep Dara Lynn from following him and finding Shiloh. These are examples of Marty’s outright lies.

Then there is the dishonesty that Marty describes as lying “not only by what you say but what you don’t say.” This is called lying by omission, by not telling the whole truth. One of many instances in which Marty tells this type of lie is when Judd comes to the Prestons looking for his dog, and Marty says he hasn’t seen him in their yard that day. “That was the honest-to-God truth,” Marty thinks, “because Shiloh hadn’t been anywhere near our yard.” But Marty knows he has lied to Judd, because “what I’d kept inside myself made him think that I hadn’t seen his dog at all,” when, in fact, Marty had just come from playing with Shiloh on the hill behind the house.

Marty begins lying so much that it becomes “easy as falling off a log.” When Marty’s mother discovers his secret, he begs her not to tell his dad, at least not until the next day. But Marty’s mother is reluctant to agree to this.

“I never kept a secret from your dad in the fourteen years we’ve been married,” she says.

“You ain’t going to tell him?” Marty says.

“Marty, I’ve got to,” she says. “He ever finds out about this dog and knows I knew but didn’t tell him, how could he trust me? I keep this one secret from him, he’ll think maybe there are more.”

And she's right. When Marty's dad finds out about Shiloh, he's angry at Marty and at his wife for keeping the dog a secret.

"Marty," his dad says to him, "what else don't I know? . . . You keeping Judd's dog up there on our hill. . . . What else you keeping from me?"

"*Nothing, Dad!*" Marty says.

"How do I know that's not another lie?"

"'Cause it's not."

"You saying so don't make it true."

Marty later hears his mother and father talking late into the night. He hears his father questioning his mother, upset that she kept this secret from him.

Even when Marty makes a deal with Judd to work to buy Shiloh, he realizes how much damage dishonesty can do. "You've got my word," Marty says to Judd. Then he adds, to himself, "which, considering all the lying I'd been doing lately, didn't seem like it amounted to much."

Responsibility

Responsibility is another important theme in the book. Marty has a responsibility to his family, to Shiloh, to society, and to his conscience. He also must take responsibility for his actions.

Marty's responsibility to his family is to do what he can to help the family and to obey his parents' rules. He does this without much difficulty until Shiloh appears. Then he begins giving food to Shiloh that he should be eating. But he knows that if he takes extra, "then it means Shiloh's costing us money we can't afford." Marty knows that he is potentially causing his family a lot of trouble by hiding Shiloh. But the responsibility he feels for the dog is greater than what he feels for his family.

Marty feels obligated to help Shiloh. He feels bad after he takes him back to Judd the first time, feels that he let the dog down. "I'd disappointed him," he says, "whistling like I meant something that first time, gettin' him to come to me, then taking him on back to Judd Travers to be kicked all over again." Marty believes Shiloh needs him, "needs me bad." So when Shiloh comes back to him, Marty says, "He's my dog now, and I'm not never going to let anybody hurt him again ever."

In order to fulfill the responsibility he feels for Shiloh, Marty must also ignore his responsibility to society. He ignores the rules of behavior in Tyler County, that "around here folks keep to their own business." He ignores the law by taking another man's dog.

Finally, Marty must take responsibility for his own actions. When Shiloh is attacked by the German shepherd and Marty and his dad bring the dog to Doc Murphy's, it's Marty, not his dad, who has to tell the doctor that this is Judd Travers's dog. It is also Marty who is going to have to figure out a way to pay Doc Murphy for fixing up Shiloh. And when Judd Travers finds his

dog at the Prestons', it's Marty who has to explain to him how he got there. And, in the end, it's Marty who works for Judd to pay for the dog.

Dogs

Another theme running through the book is that there's nothing like the love of a dog. Marty thinks, "Nobody loves you as much as a dog. Except your ma, maybe." And his parents, though they know that having a dog is an expense they really can't afford, are nearly as delighted as Marty that Shiloh is theirs. As Marty's dad says, "There's food for the body and food for the spirit. And Shiloh sure enough feeds our spirit."

Thinking about the themes

- What is the main theme of *Shiloh*? What are some other themes in the book?
- Do you agree with Marty that "nothing is as simple as you guess"? What experiences have you had in which right and wrong were not black and white, but shades of gray?
- How important is honesty? Do you think Marty was wrong to lie? Is it ever right to lie?
- What do you think Marty's primary responsibilities are? What are yours?
- Do you agree that there is nothing like the love of a dog?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



There are about a dozen characters in this book. The main characters are Marty Preston, Shiloh, and Judd Travers.

Here is a list of characters, followed by a brief description of each of the most significant ones.

Marty Preston	an eleven-year-old boy
Shiloh	the beagle Marty rescues
Judd Travers	Shiloh's owner
Lou Preston/Ma	Marty's mother
Ray Preston/Dad	Marty's father
Dara Lynn	Marty's seven-year-old sister
Becky	Marty's three-year-old sister
David Howard	Marty's friend
Mrs. Howard	David's mother
Doc Murphy	the neighborhood doctor
Mr. Wallace	the corner storekeeper
Baker's German shepherd	a dog that attacks Shiloh

Marty Preston: Marty, the main character in the book, is an eleven-year-old boy who respects his parents, understands his responsibility to his family, loves animals, and thinks he lives in the best place in the world. Marty also has a keen sense of justice

and is willing to take risks for what he wants, and for what he believes is right.

That Marty respects his parents is clear from the beginning of the book. When Marty remembers his mother's words—that if you can't afford to feed an animal and take it to a vet when it's sick, you have no right taking it in—he tells Shiloh to go home, even though he's already fond of the dog and would love a pet. And he gets in the Jeep to return Shiloh to Judd when his father tells him to, even though he doesn't want to go.

Marty also knows his responsibility to his family. When he is trying to think of ways to make money, he remembers reading about kids earning money baby-sitting. Even though he baby-sits his younger sisters a lot, he says it would never occur to him to ask for pay. He knows if he asked, his dad would say, "You live in this house, boy? Then you do your share like the rest of us."

We learn of Marty's love for animals on page one, when he can't eat his fried rabbit after learning that the animal didn't die right away when his father shot it. Then Marty goes out with his .22 rifle and says that he will shoot at an apple or a row of cans. "Never shoot at anything moving, though," he thinks. "Never had the slightest wish." Marty's love of animals is also expressed in his desire to be a vet one day. Finally, Marty shows his love of animals in the way he takes care of Shiloh—risking trouble for himself and his family, and going without half his food, to save the dog from abuse.

Marty also loves where he lives. He expresses this love after he reveals that his father told him that Sistersville was one of the best places to live in the whole state. “You ask *me* the best place to live, I’d say right where we are, a little four-room house with hills on three sides.”

Marty’s keen sense of justice is evident throughout the book. It’s evident when his father makes him take Shiloh back after he first finds him, and Marty wants to report Judd for not taking care of his dog. It’s evident when his mother finds him with Shiloh up on the hill and tells him that, in the eyes of the law, the dog belongs to Judd. “What kind of a law is it, Ma, that lets a man mistreat his dog?” he asks. Marty also shows his strong sense of justice after he sees Judd shoot the doe. He thinks about how people are supposed to mind their own business, and wonders if that is always right. Marty thinks, “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.”

Shiloh: The beagle that Marty first sees down by the old Shiloh schoolhouse is also one of the main characters in the book. The young dog—Marty guesses he’s a year or two old—is scared, but when he learns to trust, he is very loving and friendly. Shiloh is smart. He also likes to run “all over creation,” as Judd tells Marty when the boy returns the dog to his owner.

When Marty first sees Shiloh, he describes him as “just slinking along with his head down, watching me, tail between his legs like he’s hardly got the right to breathe.” When Marty walks toward him, the dog backs off. Marty says that when you see a dog

cringe like that, “you know somebody’s been kicking at him. Beating on him maybe.” This mistreatment is confirmed when Marty and his dad return Shiloh and, as soon as Shiloh leaps onto the ground, he “connects with Judd’s right foot.”

The dog remembers Marty’s kindness, and runs away to Marty’s house the next time Judd takes him out hunting. When Marty tells Shiloh to be quiet, that he can’t let his family hear him, the dog seems to understand. He lets Marty carry him up the hill and doesn’t make a sound. And he doesn’t make a sound when he’s left alone in his pen, either. The only time he makes any noise that would give him away is when he’s attacked by Baker’s German shepherd.

Shiloh shows how loving and friendly he is from the beginning. When Marty first whistles for him, “It’s like pressing a magic button,” Marty thinks. “The beagle comes barreling toward me, legs going lickety-split, long ears flopping, tail sticking up like a flagpole. . . .” And his tail, when it’s not tucked between his legs in fear of Judd Travers, is always wagging, like a propeller or a windshield wiper.

Judd Travers: Judd Travers, Marty’s neighbor and Shiloh’s owner, is another main character in the book. First we hear from Marty why Judd is not a likable character. Then, after we meet Judd, we learn to dislike him on our own.

Marty states his reasons for disliking Judd in the beginning of the book. The first of these is that Judd mistreats his dogs. In

addition, Marty has seen the man cheat Mr. Wallace at the cash register. He has also caught Judd killing deer out of season.

We first meet Judd when Marty and his dad return Shiloh. We hear Judd curse, yell at the dog, kick him, and promise to whip him if he runs off again. Marty's description seems just right.

We also get a glimpse of Judd's interests by reading what magazines he gets. The day that Marty and his dad deliver the Sears fall catalog, Judd doesn't get a copy, but he does get two magazines—*Guns and Ammo* and *Shooting Times*.

Even though Judd is an unlikable character, the author keeps us from truly hating him by giving us information that helps explain why Judd is the way he is. Judd tells Marty at one point, "Far back as I can remember, Pa took the belt to me—big old welts on my back so raw I could hardly pull my shirt back on." Later, when Marty asks Judd if his father took him out hunting when he was little, Judd answers, "Once or twice. Only nice thing about my dad I remember." And Marty feels sorry for Judd Travers. Readers do, too.

By the end, we see that Judd can be nice. He's mostly mean to Marty while he's working to pay for Shiloh. Sometimes, though, Judd gives Marty water. And, after Shiloh is paid for, Judd gives Marty a collar for the dog.

Lou Preston/Ma: Marty's mother is also an important character in the book. She is a very practical person; with money tight, she has to be. When Marty first finds Shiloh and the dog

follows him home, Marty hears his mother's practical voice in his head saying that if you can't afford to care for an animal, you have no right taking it in.

Marty's mother is also very perceptive and observant. She can tell just by looking at Marty that he is still thinking about Shiloh. And she is the only one to suspect that Marty is saving food from dinner for someone other than himself.

When Marty's mother finds Shiloh and Marty together, she tells him, "I never kept a secret from your dad in the fourteen years we've been married." But she is willing to keep Shiloh a secret for one day as long as Marty promises not to run away. Her son's safety is more important than anything else.

In the end, Marty's mother is as softhearted as she is practical. She can't bear to see Judd take Shiloh back and, even though there's little money to spare, she asks Judd if they can buy the dog. When Marty finally earns the dog, Ma bakes a chocolate layer cake to celebrate. "A real cake, too, not no Betty Crocker," Marty thinks, showing just how special his mom and everyone else think Shiloh is.

Ray Preston/Dad: Marty's father, another important character in the book, repeatedly tells Marty to "keep to your own business." When Marty worries that Shiloh has been mistreated, his dad tells him, "If it's Travers's dog, it's no mind of ours how he treats it." Having said that, Ray Preston later asks Judd how the dogs are, and reminds him that he's got to keep them healthy if he wants to have them around for a while. He does this for Marty's sake, because he knows how his son cares for Shiloh.

Ray Preston is a firm believer in personal responsibility. When he and Marty take Shiloh to Doc Murphy's, the father makes his son tell the doctor what happened. And when Judd comes storming to their house because he's heard Shiloh is there, Ray makes Marty explain how Shiloh came to be there, and how he was hurt.

Like many people, Marty's dad tends to see things in black and white; something's right or wrong, there's no middle ground. After leaving Shiloh with Doc Murphy, Ray Preston tells Marty that he wants him to do what's right. When Marty asks him what's right, his dad is momentarily stumped. Marty, who sees the gray areas between black and white, wants his dad to see them, too.

Every night after dinner, Ray Preston goes out to look at the sky; he knows there's more to life than hard work. So it's not such a surprise at the end of the book when he says, after worrying about how they can afford to feed Shiloh, "But there's food for the body and food for the spirit. And Shiloh sure enough feeds our spirit."

Thinking about the characters

- In your own words, how would you describe Marty Preston? Do you think you would like to be friends with a boy like Marty? Why or why not?
- How does the author show us that Shiloh has been abused?
- How does the author keep Marty's character from being all good, and Judd's from being all bad?