

Reading Relational in Mildred D. Taylor: A Black Feminist Care Ethics for Children's Literature

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Mildred Taylor's 1976 Newbery Award-winning novel, features at its core a Black family in the rural Mississippi of the 30s and, accordingly, a thoughtful exploration of the family's interiority in the face of exterior prejudices. As historical fiction crafted to critique many of the racist ideologies that have lingered to this day, the depiction of the Logans presents readers with the sorts of intermeshed, multi-generational relationships that construct ethical identity. A prank on a whites-only school bus, a refusal of an assigned textbook, an organized boycott. The ethical decisions of Taylor's world are often presented contextually, rendering its moral values through familial bonds and the presumed interdependence of the novel's characters. Likewise, a special attention towards the vulnerable—political, economic, or otherwise—reveal that the text offers fecund ground for a feminist ethics of care approach.

This paper aims to pair this approach with special considerations to what children's literature scholar Roberta Trites identifies as the three defining characteristics of a feminist children's narrative: narrativity (voice), subjectivity (choice), and community. The ways in which Taylor's novel balances these three possibilities, I will argue, offers a truly unique interpretation of care ethics in racialized contexts by challenging the traditional—and largely racially indifferent to the point of exclusion—belief systems that underpin Western moral reasoning, just as proponents of feminist ethics of care such as Carol Gilligan and children's literature scholar Mary Moran have done to be more inclusive towards women. The work of Patricia Hill Collins and social work theorist Mekada Graham, among others, will provide the basis for the alternative ontologies and epistemologies necessary to recast care ethics towards racial acknowledgement. This paper models its approach with *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* but suggests that a Black feminist ethics of care can be a powerful critical tool for children's literature overall.