

Symbolism in Where the red fern grows

The Tree

On the first night of coon hunting with his dogs, they tree a coon, but it's in the largest tree in the area. This tree symbolizes Billy's last step from boyhood to manhood, as only by chopping it down can he fulfill his promise to his dogs and capture his first coon. Very important to the symbolism is the fact that Billy first sets about cutting down the tree with the axe his father gave him, which is too small. It's only when Billy gets a real axe (given to him the next day), that he can cut down the tree, his last obstacle to leaving boyhood behind, and capture his first coon.

The Ghost Coon

The second main symbol in the book is the ghost coon, a raccoon that no hunter had been able to tree for many years. Billy's dogs manage to tree it, and Billy manages to discover its secret. But rather than killing the raccoon, Billy lets it live. A fight ensues between Billy and the Pritchard boys (who had bet him that he couldn't tree the coon), resulting in the death of the older Pritchard boy. The ghost coon symbolizes a long-standing and permanent tie to the area, the Ozarks. That none of the other hunters could tree the coon was a symbol that they are destined to stay. But Billy manages to overcome the tie to the Ozarks, eventually allowing him to leave the area at the end of the book.

The Coon Hunting Contest

Then comes the coon hunting contest. This event is attended by coon hunters from all over the area and represents the last stage in Billy's maturation process and preparation to leave the Ozarks. During the contest, Billy takes his place among the great coon hunters of the area and lifts himself (and as a result, his family) from the poor hand-to-mouth existence of their daily grind. He has, in effect, transcended his upbringing.

The Red Fern

Last, and certainly not least, is the red fern. Following the contest, Billy's parents wanted to leave the Ozarks and move to the city. But they knew Billy's dogs couldn't live in the city. As fate would have it, Old Dan is killed in a fight with a cougar and Little Ann dies from loneliness at the loss of her brother. Billy buries the two dogs together, and on the day the family leaves, he goes out to pay his respects to the two dogs he raised and loved. Growing in between them he finds a red fern, a symbol of love. And more than just the love of two dogs for each other or a boy for his dogs, it's the love Billy has for the life he has been given. It makes everything he has gone through that much more special, for it has been touched with the rarest of gifts.

The book has other symbols in it as well, but these four are the most important to the story of a young boy growing up and finding his place in the world. A place marked by where the red fern grows.