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The Deconstruction of the Traditional American West

A White Woman's Alternative Story of the Frontier through the Eyes of Laura Ingalls Wilder

Abstract

Frederick Jackson Turner's impact cannot be overstated when it comes to the presence of the American West in not only American history but in popular culture as well. Turner's hyper-masculine version of the West is well documented as being fully imprinted into the rhetoric that many Americans continue to use even today when discussing the 'pioneering' and 'establishment' of the western United States. Within Turner, the roles of women are regularly ignored, Native Americans are often relegated to the 'Vanishing Indian' trope, and impacts of settler colonialism on the environment are consistently disregarded (1893). Laura Ingalls Wilder, however, writes a pioneer narrative that is not the Turnerian tale of male success and adventure that generally comes to mind when discussing Western mythmaking. Rather, Wilder's autobiographical Little House *series works toward the destruction of the masculinized West that has long outlived Turner in American culture. Wilder's main character, Laura, has a renegade personality when it comes to, most particularly, the rules of femininity as established by her mother, and thus, Wilder is an activist of sorts as her works offer a nontraditional narrative that exemplifies what a girl's life could be like during Western Expansion.* The Little House *series brings voice to white females who, as Laura experiences in the novel, were usually shushed rather than welcomed in terms of conversations and situations that greatly affected their own lives.*

Keywords: *pioneer, gender, the American West, masculinity, femininity*

Laura Ingalls Wilder was born in Pepin County, Wisconsin in 1867. As is chronicled in her novels, her entire childhood and adolescence took place on the Western American frontier, among her family and within the company of other men, women, and children who came to the West in search of free land and promising opportunities. During Wilder's childhood and into her adult life, historical sources were primarily written by men, and Western women were almost entirely represented one-dimensionally among the rhetoric of the frontier myth. Wilder's viewpoints, therefore, offer great insight into a scholarly field that is even today relatively minor

and neglected. Frederick Jackson Turner is known for his popular conception of the American West (1893); however, Wilder's novels offer a different story. Wilder's *Little House* series centers a white Western woman's voice, and her representations of her own life help us to have a better understanding of a woman's experience on the Western frontier.

Many Wilder scholars remember reading the *Little House* novels with affection.[1] We devoured the novels when we were younger, and we have fond memories of entering into Laura's world, as she traversed the prairie in a covered wagon with her family.[2] As children, Wilder's novels provided comfort while, at the same time, they confronted some of the major issues of the world.[3] As Elizabeth Segel states, this can be seen in Wilder's series as readers spend time "with Laura […] shar[ing] the questions and concerns that arise from [the novels' plot lines] to trouble her. In this way, the experience of reading the story may help young readers deal with their responses to the still troubling injustices they perceive in the world around them" (1977, 67).

Some critics see Wilder's depiction of important issues as Wilder expressing respect for children. For example, Segel argues that the language within Wilder's novels supports the idea that "complexity" and "tragedy were not beyond the comprehension of young children" (1977, 70). Other scholars of children's literature maintain that the genre in general carries "an impulse to intervene in the lives of children." An author's viewpoint, though often "invisible" to children, cannot help but transmit immensely powerful ideologies to children readers (Stephens 1992, 8-9). While reading as a child, one is swept away by the storybook coziness of the first novel or by the romantic respect that Almanzo portrays for Laura as a teenager,[4] but adult readers recognize that it is important to consider the possibility of underlying viewpoints that may be unconsciously dismissed in light of the emotions the novels convey. The novels may impart an autobiographical outlook on white womanhood on the frontier, but is this viewpoint grounded

[1] See Blackford 2008, 147; Lee 1979, 74; Romines (1995, 115); Fellman, who refers to her own children's experiences (2008, 1-2); and Louise Erdrich (qtd. in Stewart 2013, 215).

[2] See Michael Dorris for a differing perspective. Dorris does not recall childhood nostalgia but, rather, recalls immediately recognizing the absence of Native Americans from Wilder's stories when he read the novels as a young child (1993). Waziyatawin Angela Cavender Wilson as well writes of her daughter's negative experience when reading Wilder's texts while in her third-grade class (2006, 68).

[3] Pamela Smith Hill discusses Wilder as a writer of children's fiction: "Writing for children brings with it great moral responsibility, but it also requires an emotional honesty that sometimes offends and frightens adults. […] As a result, writers of children's books often tread into what adults consider dangerous, irresponsible, or offensive territory" (qtd. in Wilder 2014, 18-19).

[4] Though each of the novels is recognized by fans and critics for different reasons, *The Long Winter* (1953) is widely considered Wilder's best novel, for its rolling narrative form (as opposed to the less united vignettes that other books in the series exhibit).

in a masculinized version of the West, in Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis/myth (1893)? Does Wilder subscribe to certain systems, and how are they incorporated into her novels?

Scholars are varied in terms of the answers to these questions. Janet Spaeth, for example, argues that Wilder's stories are "balanced" and "free of didacticism" (1987, 96; 92). Rather than centering on ideas or beliefs, Spaeth sees Wilder's series as more of a character study, as she believes that Laura, the focus of the novels, is not meant to be a "role model for better behavior." Spaeth finds that Laura embodies a "cathartic companion, a true peer" who connects to children through a common understanding of how "complicated" childhood can be (1987, 92). Anita Clair Fellman, on the other hand, believes that Wilder's stories work to advance a conservative agenda, as they encompass the "essence of the American past" and promote traditional values such as "hard work, conventional morality, clearly defined gender roles, patriotism, and religious values and observance" (2008, 118; 235). The romanticizing of 19th-century values in Wilder's novels "perpetuate[s]" the frontier myth (1996, 104), and despite the difficulties that the Ingalls family encounters (the reoccurring poverty, the constant danger from nature and the elements), Fellman argues that the novels bypass these misfortunes, glossing over the true hardship of Wilder's experiences in an effort to show Western expansion as the quintessential era of American history (2008, 21).

Apparent from Fellman's interpretation, the concept of the ideology of the American West, i.e., the frontier myth, is a critical qualifier by which texts regarding the frontier era are consistently measured. When it comes to this idea and Wilder, scholars are fairly divided. There is Fellman's camp, in which Wilder is understood as subscribing to this view of the past and actively altering the public's consciousness in regard to this interpretation. Scholars such as William Holtz agree with this analysis (1993, 7). Others, however, disagree, finding that Wilder is more of a stand-out in terms of the progressive stances that she adopts. Mainly with the advent of the New Western history,[5] which gained in popularity among scholars and the general public in the

[5] The New Western History (NWH) is comprised of historians as far back as the 1970s who have taken on the challenge of dismantling the myths associated with the 19th-century American West and Western Expansion. In popular recall of this time in history, the roles of women are regularly ignored, Native Americans are often relegated to the 'Vanishing Indian' trope, and impacts of settler colonialism on the environment are consistently disregarded. New Western historians have argued for the necessary inclusion of these ignored perspectives when it comes to American Western portrayal in both historical texts and popular media, and despite legitimate criticisms that New Western viewpoints oversimplify a complex topic, the New Western history is today recognized for what it accomplished in the 1990s, its ability to "revitaliz[e] a field that for decades had been viewed as an academic backwater held hostage by Turner's Frontier Thesis" (Smoak 2009, 85).

1990s, Wilder's works have been recognized for addressing issues that Turner ignored (1893), such as variability in gender, race, and ability. We can see this in the novels as Wilder consistently portrays Laura in moments of gendered resistance, as Ma tries to force Laura into a femininized box—or a feminized sunbonnet!—and scholars have also found that Wilder's novels "engage with disability," as according to Keri Holt and Christine Cooper-Rompato, Wilder's portrayal of Laura's sister, Mary, a woman who is blind, is considerably more empowering than most early 20th-century children's literature (2019, 43). Scholars have also noticed how Wilder's novels include, at length, white settlers encountering Native American populations. Indians are definitely present in Wilder's novels (whereas with Turner, they were relatively invisible), and thus, scholars such as Amy Fatzinger argue that Wilder's choice to "emphasize" rather than dismiss Native Americans is significant and suggests a "contradicting [of] the premise of manifest destiny" and a "confounding" of the "basic expectation" for stories of frontier life (2017, 188; 181).[6] While the Native presence in Wilder's novels cannot be denied, Wilder's portrayal of Native American culture has, at the same time, been linked to issues of racism and ethnocentrism. In 2017, for example, the American Library Association (ALA) decided to drop Wilder's name from their prestigious lifetime achievement award as they felt that Wilder's books "reflect dated cultural attitudes toward Indigenous people and people of color" (ALA). Since the 1990s, issues relating to diversity have become more pronounced in American culture, and scholars and the public alike continue to debate Wilder's status in relation to such topics and the Western myth.

This conundrum surrounding Wilder and the frontier myth is also wrapped up in the originally undisclosed role of Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, in the writing and executing of the *Little House* novels.[7] Lane, who is most well known for her Libertarian manifesto, *The Discovery*

[6] See Miller (2000), Heldrich (2000), Campbell (2000), Foley (2019), Frey (1987), Brack (2019), and Mowder (1992) for more on Wilder's positive incorporation of Native Americans into the novels. For opposing viewpoints, see Wilson (2006), Dorris (1993), Smulders (2002), McAuliffe (2005), and Kaye (2000).

[7] Within his biography of Rose Wilder Lane, *The Ghost in the Little House* (1993b), Holtz is the first to suggest that the majority of the words of the *Little House* novels should be rightfully attributed to Wilder's only daughter. Though the actual statement in which he claims that Lane was Wilder's "ghost" writer is buried in the appendix at the end of the book, the whole of the biography suggests that Holtz believes that Lane's voice is dominant in the novels as well as in other examples of Wilder's writing, such as the speech that she made at the Detroit Book Fair in 1937 (1993, 385). At the time of publication, Holtz's assertion caused an uproar among scholars and fans, perhaps largely because, as others have stated, readers had an image in their mind of the author who had made the American Western frontier real for them.

of Freedom (1943), was passionate about "political ideals" (Woodside 2016, 117), and thus, scholars find that her views were more nationalist and mythic than her mother's.[8] Lane likely influenced portions of the novels that contain political rhetoric, especially within *Little Town on the Prairie* (1971d), but Wilder is the writer of the series whose actual memories are attached to the content. Analyzing the novels, her original memoir, and Wilder's journalism articles can offer a rather complete perspective of what Wilder felt in terms of a woman's role on the frontier. Though Wilder's texts are a representation of the West, just as Turner's views are, Wilder, an individual with firsthand experience, differs from Turner's popular conception in that she offers women a voice within a decidedly masculine space. Her main character Laura has a renegade personality when it comes to the gendered rules of the era, and thus, Wilder is an activist of sorts as her works offer a nontraditional narrative distinct from the usual Western tale. Wilder centers a female figure within her novels. She prizes a woman's perspective over the traditionally masculine Western viewpoint.

A constant theme throughout the *Little House* novels, this centered female perspective, Wilder's main character Laura, is regularly reprimanded for not being like everyone else. In particular, Laura does not match up to the 19th-century feminine standards that her mother has set out for her and which her older sister, Mary, consistently meets. While familial connections are a huge part of Laura's life, Wilder spends much of the early novels describing Laura at odds with the other females around her. Laura is not like Mary; she does not have perfectly golden hair, and she finds it difficult to sit quietly within the house, which Mary does effortlessly.[9] Laura does not match the pattern that a traditional girl in the 1860s typically fits. Rather, Laura's personality is more a mirror for her father, whom she greatly admires. Pa is strong and brave. His life is never dull as he has stories to tell and his fiddle to play, and he is able to make everyone feel safe. He is about actions, while Ma is about expectations and appearances. Because Laura lives on the frontier, however, Wilder pens her as a character not only dreaming of exceptions to the rules of life but as a girl who is able to experience those exceptions. Laura

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Wilder was supposed to be a little white-haired old lady penning these gorgeous novels for children, and the idea that she had not written the novels solely by herself shattered this image and required readers to rethink what they thought they had known of Wilder and her childhood. Now, years later, the scandal has calmed down, and most have come to realize that while (probably, solely) Lane went to lengths to keep their partnership a secret, there is considerable evidence that the novels are the work of these *two* talented women.

[8] See Holtz (1993, 237; 307), Ann Romines (1997, 202-203), Dawn Sardella-Ayres (2019, 20-23), and Fraser (2017, 433-435).

[9] For more on the rivalry between Mary and Laura, see Ellen Novotny who notes that this rivalry is often "misread, ignored, or overlooked by androcentric critics" (1995, 48).

does not grow up being forced to observe the traditional rules of the era; instead, Wilder's texts offer Laura and readers a different sort of narrative than was traditional during this time in American history. On the prairie, Laura is able to live out her true self in ways that other girls of the times were not able, and ultimately, Wilder uses this character, once grown up, as an example of what a Western white woman's life was like on the prairie, what her preferences and priorities were, and what she had to go through to achieve these desires. Laura expresses that life on the frontier does not require her to consider life in dichotomous terms. In fact, the gender binary of the West, as Wilder shows, is unstable, as life on the frontier creates a different kind of opportunity for women.[10] Women can be who they want to be, and for Laura, that is an amalgamated woman, one who inhabits traits from both the traditionally masculine and the feminine realm. Laura can be the person that she has always been, since her early days in Wisconsin, feisty and independent, and her intrinsic capabilities and the desires of her childhood heart are possible within this nontraditional coming-of-age experience. Wilder blurs the gender boundaries as Laura is able to live her true self on the frontier.

1. Laura and Pa

The characterization of Laura as a nontraditional woman begins in *Little House in the Big Woods* as from an early age Laura is drawn to the teachings of her father (1971b). Pa is her protector and her entertainer when she is young. She is sometimes in awe of her mother, but she does not identify with Ma as she sees her as not only beyond her comprehension but as likely beyond what she would *want* to comprehend, or want to be.[11] In *Big Woods*, the love that Laura has for her Pa is related to the practicality and the safety that he brings to her life (1971b). Pa is consistently described as a provider for the family in terms of food and the security that his presence provides. Pa is associated with his gun as well as with the family's dog, Jack, and thus, there is a double force that keeps the family safe even when, within the first pages of the novel, a threat—two wolves—shows up outside of the house. This very early instance sets the tone that, while the wolves are potentially violent and scary, Laura can trust in her father's ability to make the situation not only safe but adventurous. These are two things that help to train young Laura in the ways of the masculine West, rather than in the ways of convention. Wilder writes:

[10] As Afettouche and Guendouzi state, Wilder "presents the Frontier as a stage of resistance to the limiting social roles allowed for women by the dominant frontier authors" (2018, 357).
[11] See Blackford who argues that "Ma's civilizing rituals in *Big Woods* are represented with a considerable amount of anxiety and awe" (2008, 148).

> One night her father picked her up out of bed and carried her to the window so that she might see the wolves. There were two of them sitting in front of the house. They looked like shaggy dogs. […] Jack paced up and down before the door, growling. The hair stood up along his back and he showed his sharp, fierce teeth to the wolves. (1971b, 3-4)

Here, her father takes her from the comfort of her bed to see something new, and while wolves have the potential to maim and kill, Laura is safe in her father's arms. The wolves do not even appear scary as wolves generally are; instead they look like dogs, even more like a dog than Jack as Jack bares his sharp teeth, ready to attack. As a man, Pa is showing Laura that he can encounter scary situations and make them not only less scary but actually interesting, and sometimes even fun. He is planting the seed for a growing Laura who will never be content with stagnancy or with not knowing. She will be a person, like her Pa, who appreciates new and exciting things.[12]

This concept is reinforced when, later in the novel, Pa is playing 'mad dog' with Laura and Mary. Within this scene, readers are reminded of the wolves that Laura witnessed outside her house, but here, Pa embodies the wolves who are mysterious and unknown. Pa shows Laura that the feelings that come from this mysteriousness can be entertaining and exciting for her, too, as she is captivated with the variability that the wolves, outdoor features, suggest. In the mad dog game, Pa imitates a wolf, or perhaps he imitates Jack protecting *against* wolves; either way, Pa is enacting a changing of self that represents stepping away from convention, as he "run[s] his fingers through his thick, brown hair, standing it all up on end" and proceeds to pretend to chase and corner the girls as if they have no way out (1971b, 34). Laura is frightened though having fun as "Pa growled so terribly, his hair was so wild, and his eyes so fierce that it all seemed real." Through this game, Pa teaches Laura that even when scared, she can be strong and take care of herself. Laura differs from Mary, who "was so frightened that she could not move" (1971b, 35). Laura has to push past Pa to save her sister as Wilder writes that "with a wild leap and a scramble she went over the wood-box, dragging Mary with her" (1971b, 35). This "wild leap" mirrors the behavior of Pa who takes on the persona of a *wild* dog in Laura's mind,[13] despite moments later reverting back to his old self. "There was only Pa standing there with his blue

[12] Blackford and Lockhart argue that Jack as well can be compared with Laura as Jack "expresses Laura's liminality between feelings of rebellion, in resistance to female domesticity and settlement, and acceptable conformity" (2020, 246). Jack's allegiance to Pa and likeness to Laura causes the three to connect in ways that Laura does not otherwise with the females of the family.

[13] See Segel, who states that "'wild' does not hold for [Laura] the negative connotations that it does for her mother," as Laura has wishes of being an Indian (1977, 67), and Campbell who draws comparisons between "wild men" such as Indians and Pa and Mr. Edwards (2000).

eyes shining, looking at Laura" (1971b, 35). Here, Laura and Pa both exhibit power and undomesticated delight at this game, and Pa reinforces Laura's strength and agility as he exclaims, "but by Jinks! you're as strong as a little French horse!" (1932d, 35). In later novels, an adolescent Laura is sad when reminded that she is stout rather than "tall and slim" (1971d, 241); however, in this instance, coming from Pa, it is a compliment. The lessons that she learns from Pa teach a young Laura that she can be the type of girl she chooses to be rather than what is chosen for her by tradition. She can embrace what is scary and unknown, and she can embody difference as she solves problems with creative and experimental solutions.[14] Laura becomes a curious person under the tutelage of her father.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura's curiosity expands beyond the familial realm when Pa offers her a different perspective on Native Americans than she has so far experienced (1971c). Far away from the Big Woods, a young Laura hears on repeat that Ma "just do[es]n't like" Native Americans, but as she learns, Pa is much more open to engaging with Native Americans and in learning about them as a people (1971c, 46). Pa treats their newfound reality in a way that inspires curiosity in Laura and which works against the contrasting of cultures Laura has experienced from her mother. This is shown when Pa takes Laura and Mary to see the Indian Camp. Upon arrival, Laura asks while looking into the hollows, "'Are Indians in them?' she almost whispered. [Pa] said he didn't know. There might be" (1971c, 175). Though Native Americans are not at the camp when the family comes, Pa shares the custom of visiting with his daughters by bringing Laura and Mary to the camp. This visiting is something that occurs throughout the novel as Indians on multiple occasions come unexpectedly to the Ingalls family home. At times they converse with the family, enjoy some of their food, and smoke tobacco in companionship with Pa. The events of this chapter can be viewed as metonymic for settler colonialism, or for the stealing of Native Land, as Pa may visit in an effort to appropriate Native American resources and expertise (and as the girls take Native American beads for their own use). But, as Margaret Noodin writes, Wilder's texts also open up a space in which Native American culture can be studied alongside the white settler culture of the Ingalls family. Wilder expresses Laura's curiosity in Native American culture, though she does not show Laura reaching "the level of actual engagement with a specific nation" (2019, 185). However, as Noodin asserts, in present day, adults can step in to "help young readers understand some of the history that shaped Wilder's life and introduce the complex cultures to which she alludes but that she

[14] See Frey who writes that Pa and Laura's voices, through the omniscient narrator, are often confused, as it "might be described as a combination of remembering back to childhood and also imagining from the vantage of adulthood what one's father must have experienced" (1987, 125).

never full encountered" (2019, 183). Though representative of a settler colonialist, Pa inspires cultural curiosity in Laura which, in turn, can prompt readers to "seek out more of the voices of those who were there before" the Ingalls family arrived (2019, 193).

There are additional instances in the novel in which Wilder relates Pa to Native Americans in an effort to show that they are equals. For example, in a later scene in *Prairie*, Pa recounts a story in which he talks to a Native American father who is concerned about a panther attacking his family. As Pa tells his family of this encounter, Laura makes the connection that just as Pa was worried about their family's safety, this man was worried for his, as he likely felt that his own "little papoose" needed to be protected lest the panther would "kill and eat her, too" (1971c, 262). In a manner that connects Laura's family to the families of Native American men, Pa teaches Laura that he and the Native American are both fathers, they have similar priorities, and just as he and the father have commonalities, so does she with the daughter.[15] Such a lesson sticks with young Laura and, because of her respect for Pa, continues into her life as the young Western woman we will see in later novels. Pa teaches her about the connections that the outside world encompasses.

These scenes from Laura's early childhood align well with the books of Laura's adolescence as readers can see the ways in which Laura's (masculine) upbringing have impacted her desires and responsibilities as an adult. In the fifth novel, the Ingalls family has moved to Silver Lake so that Pa can take a job with the railroad, and in this new environment, Laura becomes more and more interested in the things that, during her childhood, had been previously reserved for Pa. For example, Pa makes room for Laura in the outdoor world (1971a). As with the wolves and with the Indian camp later, Pa takes Laura to see something that is unfamiliar to her, exposing her to the unknowns of the world, as he finds value in educating her beyond the readers that she has been learning from with Ma. Throughout *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura has been exclaiming over the things that she has seen—"Oh, but Ma! The sunrise! You should have seen the sunrise!" (1971a, 72)—or the things that she is pondering, such as the purpose of the big house in the distance, despite Mary arguing that "[t]here's no use [in] wondering" (1971a, 80). And while she is usually reduced to a voyeur, stuck inside the house watching the men

[15] In this scene, Wilder uses the pronoun 'her' to refer to the Native American daughter, which draws a connection between them, as they are both daughters; however, in a later section, a papoose is described as an 'it': "The little baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura's eyes" (1971c, 308). Kaye uses this instance to argue that Wilder's descriptions are proof that "we are looking at stereotypes, not real people" and that the novel contains a "false sentimentalism" rather than real feelings for the Natives' exile (2000, 136). The existence of both pronouns, earlier, however, suggests that the answer may not be as clear cut.

"through the open door," Pa finally overrides Ma and takes Laura outside to watch the railroad being built (1971a, 91). In a moment that brings much consternation from Ma and ridicule from Mary, Pa brings Laura outside so that she can simmer her curiosity and so that she can understand the innerworkings of this place that she has been living in, yet unable to experience, for quite some time. "Now watch, Laura," Pa commands as Laura takes in the men plowing, shoveling, and scraping. "'It all goes like clockwork,' said Pa. 'See, no one stands still, no one hurries'" (1971a, 97-99). While Laura as a child was constantly hurrying through her work so that she could go outside and play, railway work is different. These men do not rush; rather, it is important that they all try their best because this is a critical job that must be done right. Whether or not this is an intentional dig at Laura's work ethic or a comment on the value of the railway work over the women's work that Laura has been doing, this scene is wrought with language that divides the Western man from his counterpart, the Western woman. Ma, for example, before Laura goes to the work site with Pa, "talked seriously to Laura. She said that she wanted her girls to know how to behave, to speak nicely in low voices and have gentle manners and always be ladies" (1971a, 95), and when Pa and Laura return, Mary questions, "I really don't know, Laura, why you'd rather watch those rough men working in the dirt than stay here in the nice clean shanty. I've finished another quilt patch while you've been idling" (1971a, 107). Both women attempt to keep Laura contained when all she really wants is to burst out of this tight space that she has been relegated to for so long. Laura is delighted to be learning about what makes this world run, and she notices in great detail the tools that the railway men use and the processes that they undergo. Though overall Wilder pens the series from an omniscient third-person perspective, Pa, within this section, advises Laura to "watch," and thus, readers feel as if the following descriptions are plucked from Laura's own head, as if the level of detail that Wilder writes is the specificity that Laura the character is attending to this work outside of the domestic sphere.[16] Laura asks Pa: "Are there railroads because people think of

[16] When writing for the *Missouri Ruralist*, Wilder describes plane travel with much of the same wonder that the character Laura brings to railroad building. In *Silver Lake*, Pa says to Laura, "I wouldn't wonder if you'll live to see a time, Laura, when pretty nearly everybody'll ride on railroads and there'll hardly be a covered wagon left" (1971a, 101). Laura is fascinated with this idea as she remarks that she "could not imagine a country with so many railroads" (1971a, 101). This tone is virtually duplicated in Wilder's article from 1918 in which she ponders if someday people will be visiting friends overseas for "afternoon tea just as casually as we used to happen in at our next door neighbor's" (2007, 159). Clearly Wilder was interested in the technology that would broaden a person's scope and which would bring human beings, literally and figuratively, closer together. As is true of her fictional counterpart, Wilder wasn't interested in being stuck—indoors or in small communities; real life Wilder took the advice of her adventurous (fictional) Pa and welcomed the unknown.

them first when they aren't there?" (1971a, 106).[17] People, Laura states, not just men, but *people*, can come up with ideas, and with a little bit of action, these ideas can come to fruition. Laura does not participate in this divide that tradition has strengthened within her 19th-century household; rather, Wilder expresses that Laura sees the West as not a zone of bifurcation but as a place where she is a bit freer to pave her own way, to design her own life and her role within it. Her pa helps her with this, and she is forever grateful. In the later books, Laura is slowly released from her family's care as Pa becomes confident that he has raised Laura to be an independent soul.

2. Laura and Ma

In addition to her relationship with Pa, Laura's relationship with Ma is also indicative of Wilder's narrative concerning the Western woman. At the beginning of her life, Laura's identification with Pa is as much due to her attraction to the traits that her pa exudes than it has to do with her repulsion for all things related to decorum, propriety, and simultaneously, the indignity that such traits cause her to feel from her ma's reprimands. A young Laura is regularly entranced by the masculine ways of the West as they appear much more fun, more freeing, and less precise than the femininity that Ma exhibits. But as time passes, the woman that Laura wants to be is shown as an amalgamation of her father and mother's traditional gender roles. As Laura grows older, she does not eschew the aspects of herself that are clearly more related to her father; however, we can see that Laura begins to understand Ma's role in her family and to appreciate the work that Ma does so well.

Laura's changing perspective begins to occur in *The Long Winter* (1953). As Ann Romines argues, this is "Ma's book. […] Although Pa does his best, it is primarily Ma who finds the resources of endurance and culture that keep her family alive, fed, and sane through the months of unremitting confinement" (1997, 163). In this book, the family is mostly confined to their home, Ma's realm, as the elements outside often make it impossible or unpleasant to leave. The family, actually, because it is so hard to find fuel to keep the house warm, spends much of their time sitting around the stove in the kitchen, in very close proximity to each other and all within a few feet of Ma. Because they are so close to Ma and her "goddess-like powers," as Holly

[17] Wilder has admitted that this scene is fabricated, that Pa never took her to see the railroad being built. However, because the scene was added to the text, I assume that Wilder is making a point through it by showing that Pa wanted to expose Laura to things outside of the home realm and that Laura as well was interested in these things. This wasn't something that Laura actually did as a young woman in Dakota Territory, but maybe it was something that she *wished* she had done. For more information, see Wilder (2014, 167-168).

Blackford terms Ma's ability to make housework look effortless, the family, and readers, too, are given a front row seat to Ma's wonders as she makes things like meal time and familial community stand out in a time when they matter even more than they usually do (2008, 147). Within this novel, Laura begins to recognize and value the things that Ma does for her family. While previously a young Laura had diminished Ma's work as Pa had always been more mobile and exciting, Laura learns that Ma's role in the family is important, too. She appreciates Ma and sees that Ma's role is active.

Scholars have criticized the *Little House* series as the family is often portrayed as more isolated than they actually were, but this purposeful change works in Ma's favor in *The Long Winter* as Wilder draws attention to Ma's important abilities (1953). In reality, as told within *Pioneer Girl*, the Ingalls family was not entirely alone during the winter of 1880-1881. They had a young couple, George and Margaret Masters, live with them during this time (Wilder 2014, 205). Wilder's decision, however, to not include these characters in the novel gives Ma's role a larger focus as there are fewer people to account for and less drama to recount. Wilder highlights her family and in particular, and very subtly, Ma, as the under-the-radar hero of the novel. Ma is shown as an expert in rationing the family's food, and Ma also displays her innovative side, finding nonconventional ways for the family to succeed with the meager belongings and resources that they have. For example, shortly after Christmas, Ma announces that the family is consuming their last loaf of bread. Pa tries but cannot find any flour at the store; however, when he brings her wheat, Ma realizes that she can use the coffee mill to grind the wheat for a new, more moist type of bread. Wilder writes that Ma's whole wheat bread "had a fresh, nutty flavor that seemed to almost take the place of butter" (1953, 197). Thus, while wheat bread likely isn't the family's first choice, it seems as if Ma's intervention has brought optimism to the family. The bread allows them to appreciate something for its newness. Ma is also instrumental in changing the family's meal pattern from three meals to two meals a day, a simple act which helps to ration food and which also represents Ma's flexibility. When it comes to survival, Ma is able to forgo rules and propriety if it is the best for the family. "You're a wonder, Caroline," Pa praises (1953, 197).

Building on the hard winter, *Little Town on the Prairie* exhibits Laura attempting to better understand Ma and the work for which she is responsible. A shift has occurred during the family's winter in close contact, and an older Laura and Ma appear to be on friendlier terms, their tensions from Laura's childhood relatively dissipated. As Anne Thompson Lee writes, "Ma's character begins to emerge more clearly," and Laura takes on Ma as more of a confidante; perhaps Laura begins to understand Ma more and to realize that her earlier reactions to Ma

had in part been because she was a child (1979, 80). There had been aspects of life Laura had not wholly understood, and thus, she has misunderstood Ma's role. Now, however, as Laura is growing up, Wilder begins to depict Laura as speaking to the womanly struggles that she witnesses Ma enduring and which she, herself, begins to identify. Laura is given more freedom within this novel to experience the (masculine) public arena; she takes a job outside of the home and eventually gets her teaching license. She also begins to date Almanzo Wilder which leads to her not only driving but breaking the wildest of horses—a feat which catches the eye of the town and which can also be seen as a metaphor for Laura's own development. As she gets older, she breaks her own wild spirit, perhaps because she is simply given more freedom and doesn't need to make such a show of it as she had when she was younger. However, in addition to more freedom within the West's masculine realm, a teenage Laura also begins to grow in her appreciation of and in her ability to weather the feminine spaces of the West that Ma has always inhabited.

Laura stepping into Ma's role occurs when Ma and Pa take Mary to college. As the three eldest Ingallses drive away, Laura notices an empty feeling within their home, and she realizes that it is due to Ma's absence. The home is Ma's realm, and without her, the "happy stillness of the prairie" has disappeared (1971d, 116). Laura decides that she must take over Ma's role as it is important to her that "Ma must be able to depend upon her" (1971d, 116). Being Ma means, to Laura, completing the fall cleaning, but cleaning the house and keeping an eye on Grace proves to be much more difficult than Laura could have imagined. Wilder writes:

> There had never been such a busy time in all Laura's life. The work was hard, too. […] She had not known how hard it would be […]. The harder they worked, the dirtier everything became, including themselves. 'We ought to have a bath,' Laura murmured. (1971d, 116-117)

Within this scene, Laura realizes what an accomplishment it is that Ma is not only able to juggle many tasks—she can keep the house clean and manage children—but that she can do so while looking *like Ma*. Ma has been recognized throughout the series for her beauty and her poise. Appearances are important to Ma, and she goes above and beyond to set an attractive table or to make her homespun products, such as butter, extra pretty (by adding carrot for color) (1971d, 30-32). And while Laura has often scoffed at the detail that Ma puts into such things, here she acknowledges that maintaining a sense of image is not something that comes without effort. Ma is really good at a really tough job, even if she makes it look easy, and Laura seems to understand that it would be advantageous if she, herself, could be even a little bit like Ma. Laura has always bonded with Pa and wanted to emulate Pa, but readers can see now, through

an older Laura, that Ma, too, has an important role in the family's life in the West—and that despite being a role designated within the home, it is real, active work, and it is essential as it allows for them to exist comfortably.

In the later novels, Laura begins to identify more closely with her mother. Ma who has often scolded and found fault in Laura's nontraditional behavior becomes more aligned with Laura as Laura grows up and realizes the worth that 'woman's work' brings to the West, in addition to her long-preferred men's work. Wilder paints Laura as a truly unique character, a woman in the West who, in the 19th century, is not a conventionally feminine woman. She pens a path for Laura that is routed in a location that allows Laura to be different. In the West, Laura is able to encompass the best of both stereotypical gender sets; she can be an amalgamation, she can be who she wants to be. Combining traits from both a relatively traditional mother and father allows Wilder to suggest that Western women could have the best of both worlds. Laura is able to get what she wants from life as she isn't restricted to the norms of a traditional 19th-century society. Fellman argues that Wilder's story "embodies the tension between the two visions," that of the rugged, masculine West and of the feminine building of a home and community, and I concur that it *is* a *tension* that Wilder portrays, one that does not get worked out until Laura has come of age and has opened her mind to newfound realizations (1996, 105). The West is the perfect locale for Laura to attempt something different and the perfect setting for Wilder to stress the non-necessity of convention. As a woman, Laura can be whatever it is that she wants to be.

These feelings of confidence and ability follow Laura through the technical ending of the series. In the novel *These Happy Golden Years*, Laura marries her beau, Almanzo Wilder, and decides that using the word "obey" within her wedding vows is not "a promise" that she can make (1971g, 269). Laura claims, "even if I tried, I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment," and Almanzo does not press the issue (1971g, 269). He knows Laura, and he understands that she is an independent woman who is excited to be an adult, unbeholden to anyone any longer.[18] Her future is bright, with Almanzo by her side. This future, however, does not last long, as Wilder's next novel, entitled *The First Four Years* (1971f), fails to fit this previous "method" of cheer (Holtz 1984, 79). As Holtz states, her final novel "challenges the simple optimism of the earlier books" and presents a darker reality to life in the West. Holtz

[18] This scene pairs with an earlier moment, in *Little Town*, when Laura gets excited at the prospect of being in charge of herself, "when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn't anyone else who has a right to give me orders" (1971d, 76). See Claudia Mills for how "Laura's hard-won moral independence must not end with marriage to Almanzo but continue and deepen" (1996, 139).

ponders that this might be why it was published posthumously, for its dismal ending gives reason for the Wilders' eventual decision to move east (1984, 85).[19]

While *Four Years* does lack the joy and charm of Wilder's earlier novels, this book is instrumental in capping off the series on a feminist note that simultaneously deconstructs Turner's frontier myth (1971f). The concept of a different sort of narrative for white Western women is present within the novel as Wilder is able to display the dynamics of Laura's relationship with her husband and to express the equality that was present within their marriage, a consensual decision-making that wasn't always visible in, for example, Laura's parents' relationship. The first few pages of the novel are a rewriting of the final pages of *Golden Years*, but while *Golden Years* ends with "Laura's heart […] full of happiness" (1971g, 289), *Four Years* opens with Laura expressing a negative opinion toward life on a farm. "Why don't you want to marry a farmer?," Almanzo asks her. "Because a farm is such a hard place for a woman," Laura replies (1971f, 4). While Laura agrees to give farming a few years' chance, in the end, she is proven right as they lose their crops to hail, lose almost all of their belongings when their house burns down, and carry a large debt on their home and property. The novel ends with Laura feeling "her spirit rising for the struggle" of another year (1971f, 133); however, readers know that the real Wilders did not make it much longer on the DeSmet homestead. Instead, as is depicted in Wilder's travel diary, *On the Way Home*, they chose to settle down in Missouri nine years into their marriage (1990). The dream that Almanzo had held dear since his early years, depicted in *Farmer Boy* (1981), is something that he chooses to give up because he sees the reason in not only Laura's opinion but also in the reality of Western life. He respects the reservations that Wilder portrays Laura as having, he respects that the West may not actually be the epitome of America, and he and Laura start anew on Rocky Ridge Farm in Mansfield.

While the novel's fictional reality of married life on the prairie is depressing, it is still a promising ending to see Laura and Almanzo's relationship in the vein that Laura has always wanted. Rather than forced to 'obey' Almanzo, it seems that Laura's opinion holds weight within her relationship, and though they do leave their farm in South Dakota, we can see from Wilder's time as a journalist in Missouri that farm life was still important to Wilder, that what a fictional Pa had taught Laura holds true. Laura was honest with Almanzo in the novel when she stated her reservations, but Wilder's perspectives from her *Ruralist* pieces offer insight into the commitment that Wilder had for the life she had been taught and the opinion that ultimately

[19] See Rosa Ann Moore for more on the differences between *Golden Years* and *Four Years* (1980). See William T. Anderson, who discusses *Four Years* as a way of distinguishing between Lane and Wilder's parts in the writing process of the series (1983).

influenced her fictionalized self, Laura. Wilder writes of the wonderful aspects of farm life and argues that country women "are wasting their time envying their sisters in the city. […] [T]he real cultured, social, and intellectual life will be in the country" (2007, 16). The character of Laura may vocalize to Almanzo that she does not want to be a farm wife, but in reality, Wilder was happy at Rocky Ridge, a smaller and more contained farm. In real life, the family's move to Missouri was successful as it eventually leads to the plucky voice in the *Missouri Ruralist* who argues that farmwomen are, and have always been, business—and thus, outside of the home—oriented (2007, 49; 267), as well as independent thinkers, in terms of both domestic and public issues (2007, 182). In tune with *Four Years*, Wilder's articles express that she was deeply invested in the rights of women, as the character of Laura makes her voice known to her new husband, Almanzo, and as Wilder herself wrote in the *Ruralist* that a woman should speak up, not only in terms of farm life—Wilder wrote that women "know as much about the farm as her husband" (2007, 194-195)—but in relation to politics as well. From her articles, we can tell that Wilder took the female vote seriously as she argued in 1919 that women should not "hide behind their husbands and fathers and brothers;" "men are not infallible," she states, and thus "we [women] shall be obliged to think things out for ourselves" (2007, 182). Wilder was happy that times had changed and that a woman's role had expanded. "Marriage is not now the end and aim of [a woman's] existence," she wrote in 1918. "There are in the world, many, many other ambitions and occupations to take up her attention" (2007, 150). While we are not provided information regarding all of Wilder's viewpoints represented within her novels—for example, Native American culture is absent from her columns—we can see that Wilder, even as an adult, is reminiscent of her spunky and adventurous (fictional) Laura Ingalls. Wilder had big viewpoints, and the Laura of the novels does, too.

Though Wilder does leave the West to find a more viable—and serendipitously idyllic—situation,[20] she remarks in 1916 that despite living elsewhere for much of her life, the West has never left her. "We carry our own environment with us," she states, "and [we] are quite likely to stand or fall by [its] principles wherever we may live;" thus the lessons that her parents taught her of Western living persisted (2007, 71). She was always a (non-traditional) Western woman at heart, existing on the belief that she could be whatever she wanted to be and deploying her propensity for nontraditional gender roles regardless of location. This norm-defying attraction to a woman's independence, to a woman's ability to cross gender lines, is the sentiment that

[20] See Caroline Fraser, who remarks on Wilder's immediate "love" for the "beautiful" space (2017, 189), and *Pioneer Girl*, where Wilder writes that the Ozarks are "one of the most beautiful places in the world to live" (2014, 30).

Wilder employs when writing of her fictional self, and it is a belief, found within her novels, that continues to inspire readers today. Though fiction, Wilder's novels offer insight into the life of a white woman in the West in ways that male-penned historical documents or cowboy-centered Western novels never could, and shown through Laura's relationships specifically with her parents, readers can see what a woman's life could be like in this traditionally masculine space.

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