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Shattering the Myth : A Feminist Study of Sister-Sister Relationships in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House Books

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SHATTERING THE MYTH:
A FEMINIST STUDY OF SISTER-SISTER RELATIONSHIPS IN LAURA INGALLS WILDER'S LITTLE HOUSE BOOKS

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily those of the major department.

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ETS

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

From horses and buggies through steam railway engines to the prominence of the automobile, Laura Ingalls Wilder lived through a historically critical American experience--pioneering. At age sixty-five she published her first novel, Little House in the Big Woods, the first book in an as yet unforeseen nine book series about her experiences as a young girl raised on the Midwestern plains. Little House in the Big Woods is actually a compilation of her father's tales. Wilder feared that these stories and their value would be lost unless she preserved them in writing. Idealistically, she wanted to tell children " 'what it was like to be a child in America long ago' " (Giff 9), but, she said " 'the real things haven't changed. It is still best to be honest and truthful; to make the most of what we have; to be happy with simple pleasures and to be cheerful and have courage when things go wrong' " (Anderson, Laura Wilder of Mansfield 29). When Little House in the Big Woods met immediately with public success, Wilder planned the rest of her books with the help of her daughter Rose Wilder Lane, an already renowned author. The Little House series has "entertained and inspired readers for many years and in many countries" (Anderson, Laura Wilder of Mansfield 2).

Although Wilder's work attracted world-wide readership, it receives scant serious analysis. Wilder's Little House books are generally perceived as overly-romanticized idealization of family life, despite the evident hardship of the plains. Although "nowhere in the Little House books will one find a

wholesale endorsement of frontiering as a way of life" (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 34), Wilder's novels bring to life the pioneer spirit of betting one's energy and time against the prairie elements and a distant government . Wilder believed that a family living on the plains had a fair fight against nature whereas modern man had become too dependent upon his neighbors and government . She defended her account of the frontier experience by saying, " 'Every story in this novel, all the circumstances, each incident are true. All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth,' and she acknowledged that parts were omitted because they were unsuitable" (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 34) in a book for children, "even though I knew them as a child" (Wilder, "Notes From the Real Little House" 104). Wilder's historically accurate portrayal of the American frontier experience and detailed accounts of daily frontier activity such as making butter, stitching sheets, butchering hogs, and building log cabins and doors clearly support her historical reality. Critics, tending to view this cataloging as creating a suitable atmosphere for juvenile readers who wonder "how things used to be," focus instead on Wilder's inaccuracies. Too few scholars, though, have approached the psychological reality of Wilder's work.

Because Wilder believed her audience to be children, and because the main character is the child "Laura," her work is most often classified as juvenile literature. Approaching Wilder's works in this way has limited serious critical analysis. However, the "Little House books are unique in the scope of adult or children's literature, for they provide a look at [a young girl's] growth, from the dual viewpoint of the child (Laura) and the adult (Wilder)" (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 47). On the surface Laura seems ideal, especially after Mary's blindness, as Laura assumes the dutiful role of "seeing" for Mary through word

picture descriptions. Yet, beneath the surface a careful reader spots strong emotions of dependency, fear, rivalry, hatred, independence, guilt, escapism, and love, many of which emanate from the reality of sibling, particularly sister - sister, behavior. These are real girls facing very real, feminine problems.

Although many Wilder enthusiasts have added their voices to her praise, only two biographies exist. However, both Donald Zochart and William Anderson blend to a confusing extent the fictionalized Laura with the real Wilder. Zochart's Laura : The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder, a simplified biography intended for young readers, is too fanciful and vague (i.e., in dates) to be a scholarly tool. In fact, it has neither index nor bibliography, although it is often cited by Wilder critics because it was the only existing biography until 1992. Anderson's 1992 Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography uses dates more precisely, yet is much the same as Zochart's text.

The Modern Language Association's Index cites only eleven articles on Wilder and/or the Little House series in the last ten years, and "Only recently has Wilder's work come to be examined as regional literature" (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 96). In the last five years, the seven articles cited have dealt with Wilder's work through regional topics such as treatment of the frontier, emigration, women in the Western United States, and women teachers in the Western United States. Charles Frey, in "Laura and Pa: Family and Landscape in Little House on the Prairie," treats family relations and landscape, especially Laura and Pa's portrayal through landscape. Three articles provide psychoanalytical approaches. Sarah Gilead compares relationship to the self in the Little House series (Laura Ingalls Wilder), Out of Africa (Isak Dinesen), and The Woman Warrior (Maxine Hong Kingston); Anita Claire Fellman

discusses the mother-daughter relationship of Wilder and Lane (biographical criticism). Janet Spaeth provides the most encompassing critical approach to Wilder in her 1987 Laura Ingalls Wilder, including chapters on Wilder's biography, art, and style as well as studies of family folklore and women.

Wilder is thus more than the romantic she is purported to be. The realistic portrayal of sister-sister relationships within the Ingalls family, most clearly shown between Mary and Laura, adds complexity to what is typically considered simplistic, "juvenile" literature. In this thesis I explore sister as mirror or reflection of self, sister as opposite or rival, and sister as caretaker or mother. Using feminist theory of sisterhood, I consider Laura's sibling relationships, particularly the Mary-Laura relationship, as portrayed in Wilder's semi-fictionalized autobiographical work.

Applying a feminist psychoanalytic theory of sisterhood to the work of Wilder is appropriate because sisterhood is central to the Bildüngsroman tradition of which the Little House series is a part. David McClelland states that "psychologists have tended to regard male behavior as the 'norm' and female behavior as some kind of deviation from that norm" (Gilligan 81). Yet, in works like Wilder's wherein female behavior is central, the norm shifts, and comparison to male patterns of behavior become unnecessary. Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice reminds us that without such antithesis, "the problem of interpretation that shadows the understanding of women's development arises" (Gilligan 24):

> In this way, women's development points toward a different history of human attachment, stressing continuity and change in configuration, rather than replacement and separation, elucidating a

different response to loss and changing the metaphor of growth. (Gilligan 48)

However, many of the critics who have studied Wilder's work within a context of the Bildüngsroman tradition have assumed an androcentric bias. Analyzed this way, Wilder's Little House series appears deficient in its portrayal of human growth, offering a sentimental facade. On the other hand, applying a theory of sisterhood reveals an alternate understanding, offering a realistic portrayal of the Laura-Mary, sister-sister relationship. Voiced through Laura, Wilder herself acknowledged that "there were . . . many ways of seeing things and . . . many ways of saying them" (BSSL 58).

Within a group which considers the Little House series basically romantic, critics offer a range of approaches. Oddly enough, some critics refer to Wilder as a romantic because Laura is too connected to her family; she identifies self as same as others (e.g., Anderson, Bosmajian, Moore, Wolf). Then, when Laura begins to identify self as opposite from others, through rivalry, critics condemn Wilder's artistic skill, claiming she could not maintain her original, sentimentalized image (e.g., Holtz, Wolf). Finally, others see Laura's caretaking of her blind sister Mary as absolute self-sacrifice (Bosmajian). Wilder is also criticized for being too ideal because she espouses the optimism of a pioneer era (e.g., Anderson, Holtz). All of this is a direct result of Wilder's being judged by male norms, by failure to recognize a reality of female experience shared through a woman's voice, a reality that does not fit the male expectations. Because Wilder's tale does not record a male experience, she must be some other--a romantic or a juvenilist. An androcentric reading thus invalidates the text. According to Anne Wilson Schaef, Women's Reality, "the White-Male

System is the only thing that exists. . . . The beliefs and perceptions of other systems--especially the Female System--are [as a result] seen as sick, bad, crazy, stupid, ugly, and incompetent" (8).

Whereas the male sense of self is either stranded, isolated, screaming for help, or lost in fusion with the world as a whole, the female mode of relationship establishes self in an indissoluble bond to others; a bond which is "observably different but hard to describe. Demonstrating a continued sense of connection in the face of separation and loss, women illuminate an [alternate] experience of self" (Gilligan 47).

Applying a feminist concept of sisterhood to the work of Laura Ingalls Wilder is appropriate because Laura's psychological development is most clearly confirmed through analysis of her closest relationship--her relationship with Mary. Basic theory regarding sister-sister relationships, as presented by Elizabeth Fishel in Sisters: In the Family Crucible and Beyond and Toni A. H. McNaron's Sister Bond: A Feminist View of a Timeless Connection, among others, emphasizes the importance and development of sister-sister relationships. Although the dynamics of sister-sister relationships fluctuate throughout life, sisters progress through several basic stages including mirroring, rivaling, caretaking, and sexual and artistic influencing.

Elizabeth Fishel's research into sister-sister relationships assimilates Gilligan's ideas to the stages of growth in such relationships. Nowhere could Fishel find information about sisters, as she notes: "Not until I turned to literature did I find stories and themes that reinforced my own thinking about sisters" (21). In Sisters: Love and Rivalry Inside the Family and Beyond, Fishel approaches her discussion of typical sister-sister relationship through

Little Women, "Cinderella," "Snow-White and Rose-Red," Middlemarch by George Eliot, Fear of Flying by Erica Jong, The Odd Woman by Gail Godwin, and Looking for Mr. Goodbar by Judith Rossner:

> Beyond the Bible and fairy tales, permutations of these themes are also commonplaces in the development of the novel. Women novelists especially use these themes both to weave the fabric of family life and to probe the polarities between sisters as kind of dialectic of women's choices, women's roles and destinies. (183)

A similar approach is applicable to Wilder. "Because the Little House books are written for children, it is tempting to restrict any literary comparisons to the canon of children's literature" (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 94). Notably, "the prevailing theories of human development are strangely silent about siblings where they readily acknowledge parental and spousal influence" (Bank and Kahn 5). "Questions about . . . sibling influence on one another have either been left unanswered or discussed in professional journals and books not addressed to the general public" (Leder 53). These omissions are unfortunate because the early research establishes the sibling connection as one of importance:

> Siblings are a separate group within the family. The "sibling underworld" has its own code of behavior, its own loyalty bonds, and its own history and hierarchy. Because much of what goes on between siblings takes place behind closed doors, what parents see is form, not substance. (Leder 62-3)

Focusing particularly on the sister-sister sibling relationship, Dale Atkins asserts that it is "no wonder we feel so close to this other woman in our lives. No one

knows better than a sister how we grew up. . . . No one knows better the inner workings of our family, our parents' private and public selves" (16). She contends that "although sisters may eventually live far apart, they share a "strong bond: the source from which [they] have learned about life" (16). According to Bank and Kahn, "a 'bond' can be many things: uniting tie, obligation/agreement, system of connections, bondage/ enslavement" (15). And, exploration of this bond in Wilder's series is essential to moving her works out of the genre of children's literature into the genre of women's literature that portrays realistically sister-sister relationships.

Following the pattern begun by other critics of Wilder, I deal with her works thematically, not individually, because, as Janet Spaeth reminds us, "Wilder wished that the Little House books be considered as a multivolume historical novel" (Preface). I have normalized all references to the Little House series, using a consistent format to replace the varied forms. I separate the author from the character by referring to the author as Wilder and to the character as Laura. In my textual citations, I use the following system of abbreviations in referring to her works.

LHBW	Little House in the Big Woods
LHP	Little House on the Prairie
OBPC	On the Banks of Plum Creek
BSSL	By the Shores of Silver Lake
LW	The Long Winter
LTP	Little Town on the Prairie
THGY	These Happy Golden Years

CHAPTER 2
SISTER AS SAME:
MARY AND LAURA AS MIRRORS

Although critical approaches to Laura Ingalls Wilder's works traditionally classify the Little House books as sentimentalized or juvenile literature, especially Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie, a careful reader discovers in these texts a realistic portrayal of sister-sister relationships. Rather than being romantic, as assumed by William Anderson, William Holtz, and Virginia Wolf, Wilder's fusion of identity and intimacy, which Carol Gilligan "note[s] repeatedly in women's development" (159), supports the realism of the texts. In describing themselves, women, including Wilder in her fictionalized and actual roles, depict their identity through connecting roles with others.

To establish Wilder's realistic portrayal of sister-sister relationships, the typical patterns of female development, as presented by feminists, and their differences from the accepted "male-centric" norm or masculine bias must be explored. Here, then, "we begin to notice how accustomed we have become to seeing life through men's eyes" (Gilligan 6). Whereas Freud created a theory of female psychology negatively derived from his male psychology, feminists like Gilligan avoid "implicitly adopting the male life as the norm" (6) and female as the other. Instead, psychoanalytic feminist criticism seeks a theory of women's development separate from yet complementary to male development, one which more closely resembles women's actual experience. Because

phallocentric theory measures development by separation, women seem never to fully develop. Feminist theory, however, establishes a new measurement of development--connection. The "problem in [male-based] theory became cast as a problem in women's development, and the problem in women's development was located in their experience of relationships," Gilligan argues (7). Wolf claims, for example, that because Little House in the Big Woods "embodies an ideal of harmony within the individual, the family, the community, and nature," the novel "conveys a vision rather than a plot centered on a conflict and its resolution" ("The Symbolic Center" 107). And, Holtz actually compares Wilder's "literary failure to adapt the [American] myth to reality" (89) to other "children's books that carry their heroine to the verge of maturity but fail to allow her to enter it" (80).

Nancy Chodorow, however, argues "against the masculine bias of psychoanalytic theory" to clarify the difference between men's and women's development, beginning "in the early experiences of individuation and relationship" (qtd. in Gilligan 8). Although multiple views of human development exist, and although men may develop differently than women, many feminists believe that the "differing dynamics of separation and attachment [play a vital role] in their gender identity formation": "Men and women typically express different truths./For men, separation defines and empowers the self. For women, continued attachment creates and sustains both the self and community" (Gilligan 156). Whereas Freud identifies maturity in separation from parents and family relationship, feminists identify maturity in connection, integration, and continuing relationship as experienced in early childhood:

> From very early, then, because they are parented by a person of the same gender . . . girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well.
>
> Consequently, relationships, and particularly issues of dependency, are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. . . . Women's failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop. (Gilligan 8-9)

This apparent fault with attachment is precisely why some critics describe the Little House series as romanticized and juvenile. Because Wilder establishes value and safety in connection and danger in separation, Laura is denounced as immature, not fully developed. Maybe this is the "truth of women's experience" (Gilligan 62), including Wilder's/Laura's, an experience where violence exists outside of relationships which appear safe. "Attachment and separation anchor the cycle of human life, describing the . . . psychology of human development. The concepts of attachment and separation that depict the nature and sequence of infant development appear in adolescence as identity and intimacy and then in adulthood as love and work" (Gilligan 152). Such is the case in the Little House series. Because Freudian theory, which

has long dominated even literary criticism, never discussed sister-sister relationships, voices representing women's experiences are missing from the "narrative of adult development" (Gilligan 156), and this silence distorts our conception of the stages and sequence of human growth, expecially as they appear in works like Wilder's.

Chodorow clarifies the pattern of separation and identity in "Family Structure and Feminine Personality." After a state of infantile dependence, during which the infant experiences a sense of oneness with (attachment to and dependence upon) whoever cares for him/her, a child begins to develop a concept of self. A male child must begin to see himself as different from his caretaker, "to reject his mother and deny his attachment to her" whereas a female child's "gender identity does not involve a rejection of this early identity; . . . it is continuous with her early childhood identifications and attachments" (50-1). Hence, the female ego has more flexible boundaries (than the male ego), has "less insistent self-other distinctions" (56). Thus intimacy connects to women's identity, and the female comes to know herself as she is known, through her relationship with others (44).

The intimacy that characterizes women's connection is particularly crucial to understanding sister-sister bonding as Wilder presents it. "Many of us have learned more about life from our sisters than from anyone else. As we grow up, sisters can serve as teachers, models, problem solvers, confidantes, catalysts, challengers, socializers, protectors, and caregivers" (Atkins 15). Elizabeth Fishel's research, compiled in Sisters: Love and Rivalry Inside the Family and Beyond, focuses on all-female families "in order to study the sister bond isolated and at its most intense" (36). Nowhere in mainstream material on human

development had Fishel found information regarding the role of sisters on female development at multiple stages. The influence of siblings is discussed, yet noticeably absent is exploration of the sister-sister relationship which, incidentally, appears frequently in literature.

In her research of sistering, both among living sisters and among literary portrayal of sisters, Fishel identifies "patterns of multiple roles of rivalry, of opposites, and of the shared and inspiring language of sexuality and art" (307). My interest here lies primarily within the first three stages including sister as same, a mirror of self; sister as different, a rival of self; and sister as caretaker, a mother of self, both intimately connected and yet independent. Constantly ambivalent, sister-sister relationships fluctuate through "closeness and distance over time" as sisters gradually recognize their simultaneous similarity and difference, connectedness and independence (Fishel 306). "With a sister you learn to love and argue, to share and to spar. You can learn about closeness, friendship, and making compromises" (Atkins 16).

Having established a child's early sense of oneness with a nurturing mother and a girl's experience of self as connected with a surrounding female community, the next variable affecting sisters occurs within the context of family. One's role in the family is an amalgamation of parental influences and expectations, one's assigned role in the family (usually perceived until adulthood as one's identity), and one's birth order. Each sister is assigned various roles by the parents, either consciously or not. This assignment often occurs even before the birth of a child and carries parental expectations regarding gender, behavior, and role. For example, the oldest child is most

likely expected to be responsible, a model, and/or caretaker to younger siblings. Often an oldest child carries out parental wishes and desires.

The second child in a family must create a niche for herself, grab some of the attention from the older sibling, and establish territory. Second girl in an all-female family faces special problems. Typically, the parents desired a male child, so the child faces the disappointment of her parents and attempts to fill the role of pseudo-son to the father. According to Elizabeth Douvan's and Joseph Adelson's The Adolescent Experience, the second female child "seems to have greater problems with feminine integration," often wishes she were a boy, rejects the idea of marriage, ranks "low on the index of traditional femininity and the narcissism index," and is more likely to choose masculine models (290).

Moreover, both parents and siblings play multiple roles in the development of a child's personality:

> The quality of a girl's relationship with her parents, how useful that relationship is as a model for what happens with her sisters, and how parents encourage or discourage closeness between sisters--in these ways, parents help shape the quality, intensity, and patterns of life between sisters. (Fishel 103)

Although parental influences and expectations may set the tone of sister-sister relationships, "sisters may still remain deeply emotionally available to each other long after they separate from Mother" because of the sister-knot, as Fishel calls it (110). "From birth to death, sisters model their scripts on each other's. They take cues from each other about the way life is or might be." Sisters share an incredible "dimension of influence inside the family crucible and way beyond: the direct and indirect influences of sisters on each other at every twist

and turn in the life-cycle" (Fishel 112-3). Consequently, daughters are socialized not only by parents, but by sisters as well:

> While parents play an offstage or backstage role, sisters have the dramatic and constant visibility of peers. At play, at school, at dances --even and especially at home in the shared rooms of growing up-- who could be more influential than the girl who sees her every day dressing and undressing, laughing and crying, bickering and making up? And what could be more powerful than the last voice she hears before sleep? (Fishel 115)

The communication of sisters is less guarded, more open, than than that between parent and child. A sister is the single person in the whole world with a history and perception most like one's own, despite individual differences. This "solidarity and bond between sisters" initiates the eventual separation from parents and "becomes a force in [sisters'] independence" (Fishel 115).

Attesting to the natural fluctuations in the female web of relationships, "academics floundered" by trying to reduce sisterhood to theory (Fishel 21). But where academics fail, novelists often find success. Searching for information to reinforce her thoughts about sisters proved fruitless until Fishel turned to stories and themes in literature. She found that novelists fearlessly "pierced to the heart of the matter" of "specific and unique" sister-sister relationships (21). Among the novelists who found success in realistically portraying such sister-sister relationships was Laura Ingalls Wilder.

More than the rest of the series, Wilder's Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie most clearly portray the early, sister-as-mirror stage of sister-sister relationship. Mary and Laura are high-access siblings, according

to The Sibling Bond. Stephen P. Bank and Michael D. Kahn define high-access siblings as those siblings who "have often had intense involvement with one another and have played an important role in the formation of [one another]" (11-2). "Similarity in age and sex" intensifies the sibling bond, increasing "access to common life events" (10). The isolation of the Ingalls family throughout Mary's and Laura's childhood draws the sisters close together. Mary and Laura act as mirrors for one another in everything from problem solving to socializing, from sharing to protecting. Fullest appreciation of the Mary-Laura relationship comes first from understanding the context in which it is played out, a context which is created by family roles, birth order, and parental expectations and behaviors.

Wilder places Laura within the prototypical frontier family wherein Pa is the external protector, breadwinner, provider, father, and husband. Ma is the internal protector, homemaker, manager, mother, and wife. Because Laura knew, among other things, "that wolves would eat little girls" (LHBW 3), security and survival are her main concerns in Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie, evidenced through continual repetition of "snug," "safe," "cozy," "warm," and "comfortable" in these texts (e.g., LHBW 3, 38, 44, 130, 175, 238). The efforts of both Pa and Ma help to shape Laura's sense of security but that sense is not totally sufficient. The presence of Jack, Carrie, and especially Mary are necessary, too. The sister bond, emulative of parental behaviors, provides another dimension of protection and security beyond that offered by parents.

Although "champions of security, Pa and Jack protect Laura from the outside and act as intermediaries between the outer world (unknown and unsafe) and the inner world (known and safe)" (Spaeth, "Language" 20), Laura frequently comforts herself with physical proximity to Mary. For example, when Pa remarks, "Go to sleep Laura. Jack won't let the wolves in," Laura "snuggled under the covers of the trundle bed, close beside Mary, and went to sleep" (LHBW 3). Logically assured of her father's protection, it is Mary's closeness which comforts her back to sleep. Whenever Laura wakes in the night, both Ma and Pa reinforce Laura's natural bond to her sister for protection, saying "snuggle close to Mary, . . . and you'll get warm" (LHBW 118). Similarly, "in the attic Laura and Mary played house with the squashes and the pumpkins, and everything was snug and cosy [sic]" even though "the wind howled outside with a cold and lonely sound" (LHBW 20). Although the family food supply, which Pa and Ma have carefully stored, is visibly tangible to Laura and assures safety through a Wisconsin winter, Mary's presence and activity with Laura validate the "snug and cosy" home. Laura is neither cold nor lonely, as is the wind, because she has Mary to play with and to "snuggle . . . close beside." Later, after a year in Indian Territory, Kansas, the family moves again and Laura assures herself that "everything was just as it used to be before they built the house. Pa and Ma and Carrie were on the wagon-seat, Laura and Mary sat on the wagon tongue. They ate the good supper" (LHP 332). All are well and accounted for, in Laura's estimation. Gradually, such sentiments occur with less frequency throughout the remainder on the series as Laura's concept of self strengthens. As age and experience expand her knowledge of human fragility, Laura's reliance on sister as self naturally decreases, although in times of crisis

she finds psychological comfort in both actual sister-sister bonding and memories of such.

While Pa is at ease outside, Ma, "the keeper of the inner security of the little house" (Spaeth, "Language" 20), is at ease in her element and efficiently teaches these skills to Mary. Mary, in turn, teaches these skills to Laura. At one point Wilder clearly shows this hierarchy of housework, as Ma "helped them put on their best dresses--Mary's china-blue calico and Laura's dark red calico. Mary buttoned Laura up the back, then Ma buttoned Mary" (LHBW 101). By chapter 4 of Little House on the Prairie, "Mary could dress herself, all but the middle button. Laura buttoned that one for her, then Mary buttoned Laura all the way up the back" (39). Modeling behavior of mothering, Laura engages in activities which foreshadow the caretaking roles that the sisters will later assume. Notably, Laura does not compare her housekeeping skills to Ma's, but to Mary's, logically because they are most alike in age and capability. The principal aspect of mirroring as it occurs for the the Ingalls sisters, then, revolves about the concepts of teaching and modeling so that in many instances it is the younger who models herself on the elder, becoming the reflection of her.

Since Mary does what Ma and Pa ask, thus satisfying their expectations of her, she becomes the secondary model for Laura. Laura wants to be like Mary. For example, "Laura and Mary helped Ma with the work. Every morning there were the dishes to wipe. Mary wiped more of them than Laura because she was bigger, but Laura always wiped carefully her own little cup and plate" (LHBW 27-8). In trying to be like Mary, Laura must acknowledge obvious variations in skills due to age differences; nonetheless, she wipes her share of the dishes as carefully as does Mary because Mary is the ideal young girl (and

reciepient of parental affirmation); the girl who Laura would like to be. More than modeling, she creates another self.

Throughout the series, Ma and Pa serve as social models to their daughters. Through all of their modeling behavior Mary and Laura first learn how to behave toward parents, siblings, and strangers. Counter to Charles Ingalls' wander-lust, Caroline is the protector of "civilization" within the family, demanding lady-like behavior of and an education for her daughters. Despite having lived on the frontier, education would serve as the mark of civilization and social capability for the Ingalls daughters. Once again, the sister bond, emulative of parental behaviors, provides another dimension of socialization beyond that offered by parents. Illustrating this is Laura's resistance to wearing a her sunbonnet, despite Ma's frequent insistence. But when the girls first go to school, Mary chastises Laura, "For pity's sake, Laura, keep your her sunbonnet on! You'll be brown as an Indian, and what will the town girls think of us?" (OBPC 143). Of course, Laura refuses, at first. Mary then establishes a team mentality of "us-against-them" which successfully convinces Laura to join Mary in appropriate behavior as a defense against the unknown:

> "You're just as scared of town as I am," said Mary.
>
> Laura did not answer. After a while she took hold of her sunbonnet strings and pulled the bonnet up over her head.
>
> "Anyway, there's two of us," Mary said. (OBPC 143).

As is frequently the case, Mary's socialization of Laura is ultimately more influential than that of Ma and Pa due to the power of the sister-sister bond. Laura, in her search for physical and emotional protection, needs and wants to be as much like Mary as possible.

Ma and Pa Ingalls also teach their daughters to share what they have. This is fortunate for "parental influence plays a crucial role in whether sisters grow up feeling rivalries or a sense of cooperation" (McNaron 126). Clearly, Ma and Pa Ingalls teach the value of cooperation to Mary and Laura by treating their daughters equally. When this is not possible, they teach their daughters to value the good fortunes of another, and to share. For example, when Ma colors butter in winter,

> Laura and Mary were allowed to eat the carrot after the milk had been squeezed out. Mary thought she ought to have the larger share because she was older, and Laura said she should have it because she was littler. But Ma said they must divide it evenly. It was very good. (LHBW 30)

Although this may be read as rivalry, a careful reader notes that Ma teaches the sisters to share evenly, and Wilder's assessment of "It was very good" validates both sisterly sharing and the carrot's nourishment.

Similarly, Wilder's frequent emphasis on the sameness of Mary and Laura's material possessions reflects the careful efforts of Ma and Pa to unify their daughters. If any difference in the possessions exists, this difference is carefully justified. For example, at Christmas each child receives red mittens and "a long, flat stick of red-and-white-striped peppermint candy, all beautifully notched along each side" (LHBW 74), but Laura's stocking has something extra--a rag doll. However, "the other girls were not jealous, . . . because Laura was the littlest girl, except Baby Carrie and Eliza's little baby" (76). Likewise, when the shopkeeper in Pepin gives them candy, Wilder carefully compares Laura's to Mary's: "Both pieces of candy were white, and flat and thin and

heart-shaped. There was printing on them, in red letters." Although Mary's candy had a poem on it, Laura's printing was larger. But, "the pieces of candy were exactly the same size" (LHBW 171). At Christmas in Kansas, when Laura receives a glittering new tin cup, Wilder emphasizes that "Mary had one exactly like it" in her stocking (LHP 248). Oddly enough, while the tin cups make Mary and Laura similar, they now have a new sense of separation as they no longer need share a cup, as they have done previously.

In the same way that Wilder equates sameness of Laura and Mary through their possessions, she parallels their emotions. Thus Laura envisions self as not distinct from, but a reflection of, Mary. Shortly after Christmas, Pa presents the girls with hair combs which, of course, "were exactly alike" except that the "ribbon in Mary's comb was blue, and the ribbon in Laura's comb was red" (LHP 270-71). Mary and Laura are united even in their joy: "Laura looked at Mary's star, and Mary looked at Laura's, and they laughed with joy. They had never seen anything so pretty" (LHP 271). It is noteworthy that Mary does not laugh first; rather, the sisters laugh together. In the case of sisters, the teaching and modeling reinforce one another.

As oldest child, Mary Ingalls is no exception to parental expectations, as Douvan and Adelson note. Typical of an eldest female sibling, Mary identifies the most with Ma. Mary, as oldest child, has more deeply internalized adult (parental) standards, and, simply, has had two years more practice with such behavior (Fishel 54). Each of these characteristics contributes to the deep sense of responsibility to please parents through one's behavior and achievement, which is typical of an oldest child. Laura, typical of second siblings, attempts to gain parental attention equal to Mary's by behaving like

Mary in an "if it works for her it should work for me" mentality. Laura experiences a typical second sibling reaction, feeling as though she will "never catch up" with Mary (Fishel 71). For example, when Mary and Laura go to town for the first time, the storekeeper gives candy to the girls. Mary quickly says thank you, but "Laura could not speak. Everybody was waiting, and she could not make a sound. Ma had to ask her: 'What do you say, Laura?' " (LHBW 171). That same day, Laura accidentally rips her dress, cries, and is reprimanded by Ma: "And another time don't be so greedy."

> Nothing like that ever happened to Mary. Mary was a good little girl who always kept her dress clean and neat and minded her manners. Mary had lovely golden curls, and her candy heart had a poem on it.
>
> Mary looked very good and sweet, unrumpled and clean, sitting on the board beside Laura. (LHBW 174-5)

This scene might be read as Laura resenting the model set before her; however, Toni McNaron reminds us that, naturally, "we all need to be reflected by others, and a sister offers the closest image of oneself that life is apt to give" (125). For Laura this holds true; she would like to be the sister sitting beside her. Laura attempts to emulate Mary because, from Laura's perspective, Mary has a unique privilege to parental affection. Try as she may, Laura does not possess the same skills as a child Mary's age, though she will in two short years. Although attempts to emulate Mary are also undergirded by jealousies and resentment, still Laura sets Mary up as the image she wishes to portray. Yet, near the close of Little House in the Big Woods, Pa acknowledges them both with "You're my good girls" (236). Thus, through emulation of sister, Laura

succeeds in gaining Pa's approbation in spite of feelings of inadequacy.

Within the described framework of their larger family roles, birth order, and parental expectations, readers must also address Mary and Laura within the context of their sibling sub-culture, which exists separately from the larger family. Because most sibling interaction is beyond parental observation, the sibling "underworld has its own code of behavior, its own loyalty bonds, and its own history and hierarchy" (Leder 62-3). So, besides emulating parental behavior and expectations in some ways, the sibling subculture establishes sibling emulation. Within this underworld, Laura is as important to Mary as Mary is to Laura, although the third person narrative voice and style of the Little House series masks much of Mary's mirroring of Laura. Of course, we see less of Mary reflective of Laura partly because of age difference and birth order and partly because Laura's is the main narrative perspective.

Mary and Laura are intimately bonded to one another, largely due to the vast amount of time and activity which they share. Given the historical era, though, they are not exceptional. According to Lee N. McLaird's essay "Frontier Experience: The Child's Eye View" in Growing up in Sioux Land, children traveling west with their families usually "entertained themselves" during the "long periods of great boredom and some discomfort" which were "interspersed with moments of terror" (30, 22). Like most pioneer children, Mary and Laura

> had to look out for themselves because for the adults, the work was back-breaking and required all their attention. The strain of crossing the unsettled country was psychological as well as physical: there were no "civilized" rest stops to look forward to . . . ; there was the weather, illness and death, and fear of Indian attack. (22)

Mary and Laura act as models for one another. Mary is part of the same group as Laura herself (adults and babies constitute other, non-child groups). Wilder easily creates this differentiation, frequently referring to the family, "Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura and Baby Carrie . . ." (LHBW 38 and LHP 1), by their relationship to Laura. Note that Pa and Ma are not proper names, but roles, as is Baby (Frey, "Regionalism" 125). Only Laura and Mary are intimate enough not to need role names. High access siblings, Laura and Mary spend virtually all of their time in one another's company; they sleep, wake, dress, eat, and play almost exclusively with one another. Everything which they do and which they have is the same, thus the sisters easily envision self as a reflection of sister. Mary is as near the center of Laura's psyche as Laura herself is. As Leder notes, "Siblings are our first partners in life; . . . it is from our siblings that many people discover some of the basics about who they are--or dare not to be" (38). Laura's association with Mary confirms this.

Laura and Mary do everything together in the early texts. The repetition almost becomes monotonous: Laura and Mary, they, Laura . . . Mary, they, Laura and Mary. Beginning in Little House in the Big Woods, "Laura and Mary ran to lean on his knees and hear the rest" of the story (22). Continuing with "Pa . . . hugged them both together. . . When Laura and Mary had said their prayers and were tucked safely under the trundle bed's covers . . ." (236), Wilder strictly adheres to their togetherness, even emotionally: "Laura and Mary were horrified. They were often naughty, themselves, but they had never imagined that anyone could be as naughty as [cousin] Charley had been" (210). The physical and emotional bond of Mary and Laura persists into Little House on

the Prairie, and even in to On the Banks of Plum Creek, though incidents of differentiation and rivalry begin to interrupt the modeling behavior with more frequency.

Because the siblings are frequently together, physically and emotionally, the bond becomes reciprocal and, then, the sibling sub-culture values become somewhat different than those of the extended family. Ma and Pa have taught Mary and Laura equality, despite differences in age; yet, within their peer group, age values establish hierarchy. For example, Mary can churn butter, "but the dash was too heavy for Laura" (LHBW 31). Mary is good, and Laura wants to be like Mary. Mary churns butter, so churning butter now has qualitative value. Despite wanting to churn butter like good Mary, Laura is physically incapable of such, due to her age. However Wilder says no more once the tally has been marked, so to speak. And, "Laura was bathed first, because she was littler than Mary. She had to go to bed early on Saturday nights" while the rest of the family took their baths (LHBW 84). Laura's aspirations to be like Mary are thwarted every Saturday. If Mary takes a later bath than Laura, certainly it must be better.

Unfortunately, Laura's quest to fully mirror Mary remains elusive since Mary will always be older. Occasionally, Laura achieves oneness. In the "Harvest" chapter of Little House in the Big Woods when the cousins visit, they all play in the yard, and "even Laura, who was littlest, could do this easily in the places where the smallest trees had grown close together" (200). This is a bonus for Laura. During the afternoon Charley must help the men work in the field. "Now Mary was the oldest, and she wanted to play a quiet, ladylike play," so, the children "made a playhouse in the yard" (204). Emulating Mary's behavior, the children place a qualitiative value upon their one difference

(advantage)--age. What Mary does is worth doing too, because Mary is older, and must be doing it right. A telling example of the sisters' valuing age is reflected in their doll play. Finally old enough to go to town, Mary and Laura

> were very much excited, and next day they tried to play going to town. They could not do it very well, because they were not quite sure what a town was like. They knew there was a store in town, but they had never seen a store.
>
> Nearly every day after that, Charlotte and Nettie would ask if they could go to town. But Laura and Mary always said: "No, dear, you can't go this year. Perhaps next year . . . ." (LHBW 160).

Almost the only distinction between Laura and Mary at this point in their sister-sister relationship, difference in their age holds a special power beyond that delineated by hierarchy of age within the larger family. Actually, this regard for age only mirrors a social reality wherein a woman's "age rather than her abilities or achievement is likely to define her status" (Rosaldo 25).

Where Ma and Pa have taught Laura and Mary to care for family members, the sibling sub-culture extends this care to inanimate objects as well:

> Mary was bigger than Laura, and she had a rag doll named Nettie. Laura had only a corncob wrapped in a handkerchief, but it was a good doll. It was named Susan. It wasn't Susan's fault that she was only a corncob. Sometimes Mary let Laura hold Nettie, but she did it only when Susan couldn't see. (LHBW 20)

Here, Mary and Laura share the doll and care for Susan's feelings by not making her jealous. If she witnessed it, Ma might find this behavior odd, saying "it is only a doll," but within the sister-sister underworld, Mary and Laura have

established the value of such behavior and will maintain the ritual. Similarly, Laura does not want other things to be hurt, partly as an extension of concern for her own protection and partly as an honest extension of care. When Grandpa Ingalls collects sap from maple trees, for instance, Laura asks "Oh, didn't it hurt the poor tree?" (LHBW 123). And when Pa tenderly describes having seen a doe and fawn during a spring day of hunting, Laura questions, "You wouldn't shoot a little baby deer, would you, Pa?" He must assure her, "No, never!" (159). This is yet another example of the sibling subculture's unique altering of a parentally taught behavior or expectation.

In "Language of Vision and Growth," Spaeth confirms the value of seemingly meaningless details, saying that, to be believable, Laura's "growth must be consistent and motivated within the actuality of real life" (20). It follows that, to be believable, Laura's growth must be assesed through the motivations of a realistically portrayed sister-sister relationship. What we have then seen is but a realistic view of child's efforts to become sister, not romanticized writing.

Seeking oneness with Mary for parental affection and for protection, Laura has little awareness of self as separate from Mary or the family unit. Only when outside forces, such as visiting relatives and friends, strangers, or new experiences break through Laura's mirror, is she aware of a larger world and its differing value systems. Such awareness conflicts with, and eventually destroys, Laura's concept of self as Mary. As the Ingalls family traverses the plains in search of the Little House on the Prairie, frightened and awestruck Laura comes to understand a self in opposition to others, especially Mary. Spaeth clarifies the transition from mirroring to rivaling as caused by some new experience, external to the mirroring sister-sister relationship:

> Growing up involves a realization of the world outside the child's experience. Sometimes this realization results from the world's being brought to the child, and at other times it results from the child's being brought to the world, as in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books. Either way, the realization of a world larger than previously recognized is a shock, but from this shock comes growth--and survival. ("Language" 20)

CHAPTER THREE

SISTER AS OTHER:

MARY AND LAURA AS ANTAGONISTS

Contrary to the traditional critical approach which establishes the Mary-Laura relationship as idyllic in Wilder's Little House series, the realism of the sister-sister relationship in these novels cannot be dismissed. Closer textual examination of Little House in the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie, and On the Banks of Plum Creek indicates that Wilder was conscious of, and responded to, the subtle antagonisms which necessarily and naturally occur between sisters. These rivalrous behaviors are typically misread, ignored, or overlooked by androcentric critics, who do not recognize as valid the connectedness between sisters and instead view such relationships as sentimental, fragmentary, or some form of "marginalized other." For example, Virginia L. Wolf insists: "Nothing is quite right in On the Banks of Plum Creek"; the images of disorder and formlessness "introducing the demonic side of existence . . . distort and fragment the ideal image of the first two books" ("Plenary Papaer" 168). Such a negative assumption of sibling rivalry as "disorderly" denies a natural occurrence among siblings, as described by Jane Mersky Leder. She notes that

> one of the most surprising discoveries about siblings is that they tend to see themselves as different from each other as though they were children from different families. Despite their shared genes

> and their shared home and community environments, [siblings] easily describe their differences but have a harder time recognizing their similarities. (53)

Thus, Laura's experience is often not accepted as realistic because it does not fit the male norm. According to Carol Gilligan's interpretation of Freudian theory, infant male assertion of self through aggression forms the basis for all male-other relationships, whereas feminists link female differentiation to a later stage in life and a feeling of responsible connection (46). A story of male growth toward maturity involves an external quest during/through which a boy fully separates from home (mentally, physically, and emotionally), becomes a man through a grand adventure, and returns to society a changed individual, entirely different from the person who left. Often, he can now heal the community with his new gifts or knowledge. The female Bildüngsroman sharply differs from this tradition. Because Laura does not quest from home, she cannot be a fully developed character/human being by male standards. William Holtz denounces Wilder's success, claiming that because the Ingalls family "failed . . . in history" but not in Wilder's books, her writing "is the world of romance" and "incurable optimism" (84). Consequently, if one applies the standards of the male Bildüngsroman tradition (as does Holtz), Wilder must be creating a sentimentalized tale. But, she is not.

In depicting the adversarial roles between sisters, Wilder departs from male tradition but, nonetheless, realistically defines her protagonists' relationships. Gilligan reminds readers that "once again, women appear as the exception to the rule of relationships, by demonstrating a love not admixed with anger, . . . but rather from a feeling of connection, a primary bond between

other and self" (46-7), even within context of sister-sister rivalry. This alternate experience of self demonstrates "a continued sense of connection in the face of separation and loss" (Gilligan 47).

Feminists often use the image of a web when discussing women's interconnected, "indissoluble mode of relationship," as opposed to the male, hierarchical model. Web imagery stresses that connection is not a romanticized illusion but a vital component/ factor/ feature of human life, especially for women. An image of relationship of self with other in a web establishes the concept of continuity yet allows for change in configuration through time and growth. Given their primary identification of self in connection to others, "women portray autonomy rather than attachment as the illusory and dangerous quest" (Gilligan 48). "The imagery of hierarchy and web, drawn from the texts of men's and women's fantasies and thoughts, convey different ways of structuring relationships and are associated with different views of morality and self" (Gilligan 62).

After initially identifying closely with one another, young sisters fluctuate naturally into a mode of relationship, which does not end or replace connection but establishes a new sense of connection. Thus a new sense of self evolves. Often a conflict or crisis initiates and reveals this process of development. Having grown thus far with a sense of self in intimate similarity to others, a young girl "begins to explore the parameters of separation," which leads to an alternate image of a self in opposition to others (Gilligan 37). This separation need not be the "grand adventure" of a male protagonist and, in fact, rarely is. The crisis the female faces is within self, regardless of place, though commensurate with puberty. Sisters begin to feel antagonistic toward one

another, especially during preteen years as they seek individually differentiated identities separate from sister and family. Such differentiation through antagonistic rivalry is evident in Little House on the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie, and On the Banks of Plum Creek, shattering the myth of romanticism as the basic mood in these novels.

Although sisters may feel rivalrous toward one another for a period, they are still intimately connected through a shared history. The experience of rivalry then becomes a necessary step toward a mature morality, an "ethic of care," as Gilligan calls it, the ultimate mode of adult female relationship. "Continuation through time of an ethic of responsibility is the center of women's moral concerns, anchoring the self in a world of relationship and giving rise to activities of care" (132). A mature ethic of care is not self sacrifice; that is why a sense of self independent from others is necessary. Consequently, "for women, identity has as much to do with intimacy as with separation" (Erickson qtd. in Gilligan 98).

As Laura grows, this period of separation is empowering, liberating, and self-expressive, while attachment is paralyzing entrapment (Gilligan 157). Although natural and realistic, Wilder may depict this stage as somewhat jarred or selfish because from an adult moral perspective, the behavior of Laura fails within the context of relationship. Wilder judges Laura by a standard of responsibility and care, which Laura will later develop, but which Wilder possesses at the time of the writing. Assessing Wilder's art, Rosa Ann Moore observes that Wilder's revisions further stack the (alleged) deck of romanticism:

> Frequently when Laura and Mary appear together, a change takes from one and gives to the other. Readers think of Mary as being the good, patient, literal child, and of Laura as the reckless, restless, metaphoric one. The image is made carefully consistent. But they were not always thus. (114)

Moore interprets the alterations as the "mystery of what transforms [Wilder's] memory of facts and events into fiction" (111); indeed, such revision to create consistent portrayal of literary character is typical, not exceptional, mythical, "obviously designed" (Wolf, "Plenary Paper" 112), or juvenile.

As a girl grows, she faces a conflict between integrity and care. "This dilemma generates the recognition of opposite truths. These differing perspectives are reflected in opposing moral ideologies, since separation is justified by a [male] ethic of rights while attachment is supported by an ethic of care" (Gilligan 164). Laura's dilemma, likewise, involves her need to reconcile her rivalous feelings toward Mary with an intimate sense of connection to her. Paralleled on a broader scale, Laura must reconcile her family's attitudes and behavior toward the Native Americans (most notably as they live in Kansas Indian Territory in Little House on the Prairie) to an ethic of care which she had learned from her family. Everyone to whom she is intimately connected--Ma, Pa, especially Mary--has initiated her into a secure web of relationship, but these same people do not extend that web to include Native Americans. Laura comes to recognize "opposite truths." Wilder further demonstrates Laura's inner struggle between integrity and care in a third dynamic--Laura's rejection of gender-specific behavior. More than a conventional tomboy, Laura resists "taming" because Ma's standards of femininity restrict her freedom and because

"with child's strong sense of justice, she grasps, though she cannot fully articulate, the injustices that stem from her culture's rigid gender and racial definitions" (Segal 66). Laura finally resolves these gender issues in The Long Winter.

The "tension between responsibilities [taught by Ma and Mary] and rights [taught by Pa and Mary] sustains the dialectic . . . of two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected. While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality--that everyone should be treated the same--an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence--that no one should be hurt" (Gilligan 174). This tension affects Laura deeply, altering her thoughts and behaviors. It disrupts her sense of self as same, inviting a sense of self as other because she now has difficulty identifying with Ma and Mary, her teachers, models, protectors, and, socializers.

According to Fishel's research, all sister-sister relationships feel the sting of antagonistic rivalry sooner or later (152), yet sisters' "lifelong rivalry is intrinsic to their chiseling of separate identities and, paradoxically, the fuel to their individuality" (154):

> For just as the central tug between mothers and daughters is the need for dependence versus the pull toward independence, the pull between sisters is the realization of similarity versus difference. On the one hand is the comfort and familiarity of being similar; looking the same, speaking with the same voices, liking the same things. On the other hand--and partly in defense against the sameness . . . --is a deep-rooted need to be different; developing different values and styles, talents and friends, strengths and foibles. So the rivalry

> enhances the process of differentiation and individuation, and in a profound sense is therefore not a barrier to friendship, but in many cases, a necessary and natural part of it. (154-3)

As already indicated, Fishel, citing Bruno Bettelheim, connects sibling rivalry to the Oedipal triangle, "at least in part, [as] an expression of the rivalry girls experience with their mothers, in a more manageable, less threatening form" (156). Bettelheim, among others, parallels the Cinderella story to the Oedipal development of a girl. After an initial attachment to an undemanding, nurturing mother, a

> girl's primary attachment turns to her father, [then] her mother and siblings, particulary female ones, are perceived as rivals for her father's affection. . . . As the Oedipal period ends, the girl feels isolated, . . . but if all goes well during puberty, . . . the girl once again establishes a relationship with her mother and begins to identify with her. . . . By the time the story ends, [the girl] has broken free of the Oedipal triangle in time to fall in love and marry. (Fishel 160-1)

Besides managing Oedipal conflict "in a less threatening" manner, same-sex sibling rivalry also enacts familial roles, which often establish polarities, the identity of "the good one" in opposition to "the bad one" (relative, adult value-oriented assignments). Psychologist Robert White believes that informal family roles "come into existence because they serve some purpose in the family social system, helping at least to describe the members, define their relations, and make things somewhat more predictable" (qtd. in Fishel 184-5). Depending how parents handle the polarized identities, the "good" and "bad" labels may have either supportive or crippling influence in development of

sibling relationships and individual growth. Parents may either establish "separate but equal identities" for their children, or "the family roles, which [originate] to give order, shading, and distinction to family life, eventually cramp the children's growth" (Fishel 185). As Dale V. Atkins charges, "there is a [resultant] tendency to focus on the label instead of the whole person" (51).

Toni McNaron's "LittleWomen and 'Cinderella': Sisters and Competition," discusses "three specific patterns" of sisterly competition:

> (1) sisters deciding, albiet unconsciously, not to develop all of their potential, letting one sister have the field in certain respects, minimizing competition; (2) sisters bonding strongly at an early age in order to resist family or outside pressures toward competition; (3) sisters simply competing, openly or indirectly, for parental affection, peer approval, and wordly recognition. (121)

Shattering the misconception of non-competitive women, McNaron shows that women, especially sisters, compete, but sometimes in ways which seems non-competitive in phallocentric terms. "Girls growing up in the same house are presented with ample opportunites to compete. Sometimes these are quite overt . . . more often, the lures toward competition rather than cooperation are covert, even invisible" (122).

Parental behaviors and expectations "play a crucial role" in how the sisters experience rivalry (McNaron 126). As a coping mechanism, female siblings learn early how to divide the family's "psychological goodies" by maintaining "territorial labels" (Fishel 186), thereby lessening direct competitive threats. Sisters, then, maintain separate psychological spheres within the family framework. This overt or tacit agreement to limit self to certain spheres of

activity limits sisters in some ways (possibly impeding individual development), while freeing them in others (lessening the guilt of competition by maintaining close bonds). "Women's subordination of [phallocentric types of] achievement to an interdependent ethic of care" (Gilligan 171), then, appears non-competitive in comparison to masculine standards. Actually, the dual benefits of such an agreement allow a woman to "cultivate more fully" those skills allotted to her, "thereby relieving [her] sister from having to do so" (McNaron 124), while still enjoying, vicariously, a full range of life experience through her sister. Leder notes that differences between two sisters gives them a sense of wholeness and helps them to recognize the infinite possibilities in their own lives" (14). Vicarious fulfillment, invalid in a masculine world, further bonds the sisters as neither is a "whole" person without the other. This deep desire and need to be together are mistaken as immaturity by literary critics whose view are androcentric.

Continuing her analysis of literature, Fishel points to the sisterly rivalry of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia in Shakespeare's King Lear; Biblical Leah and Rachel (Jacob's wives), and Mary and Martha (Lazarus' sisters); and the Grimm's "Snow-White and Rose-Red" as "proto-types of the patterns of sibling rivalry most commonly found in families" (163-82):

> Beyond the Bible and fairy tales, permutations of these [rivalry] themes are also commonplaces in the development of the novel. Women novelists especially use [themes of rivalry and opposition] both to weave the fabric of family life and to probe the polarities between sisters as kind of dialectic of women's choices, women's roles and destinies. (Fishel 183)

Fishel (aided by Ellen Moers' Literary Women) probes such novels as diverse as Eliot's Middlemarch and Rossner's Looking for Mr. Goodbar as examples of the pervasiveness the sister-in-opposition theme.

"Beneath the analysis, the inner debate continues to sizzle: the pervasiveness of similarity versus the deep need for difference, the passion to separate versus the deep need for closeness" (Fishel 189). The romanticism commonly accepted by critics as Wilder's principal approach to the relationship of Mary and Laura is, in fact, not supported by the texts themselves. Specifically, the texts Little House in the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie, and On the Banks of Plum Creek point to particular aspects of adversarial relationships between real sisters.

Evidence of rivalry in Little House in the Big Woods may surprise the reader because of Laura's age (six)--an age at which rivalry is not the predominant relationship. As I have noted previously, at this stage sister is principally treated as self. Interestingly, though, fewer examples of rivalry occur in Little House on the Prairie than in Little House in the Big Woods, in which Laura has arrived at the age in which sisters' rivalry should be most evident. An investigative study of this apparent discrepancy is accounted for in that the incidents in Wilder's childhood which are recorded in Little House in the Big Woods postdated the events of Little House on the Prairie (Anderson, Biography 40). Thus, an inversion of actual experience is played out in the fictional setting in which ages do not necessarily correspond to the sister relationships which are most dominant.

In Little House in the Big Woods, Laura had not yet left her wooded homeland; her concept of the world remained unchallenged. Early in Little House on the Prairie, however, Laura is "forced to examine a larger part of the world than she has before acknowledged as being part of her own," notes Janet Spaeth ("Language" 21):

> The enormous lake stretched flat and smooth and white all the way to the edge of the gray sky. Wagon tracks went away across it, so far that you could not see where they went; they ended in nothing at all. . . . All around the wagon there was nothing but empty and silent space. Laura didn't like it. (7)

As they first travel into the prairie, the Ingalls family members retain their same relationship to Laura. Pa and Jack protect Laura, Ma socializes Laura, and Mary continues to model parental behavior, which Laura's seeks to reflect. However, Laura's formerly dichotomous view of the natural world must undergo a change.

While living in the Big Woods, Laura perceived the outside as cold, lonely, and unsafe and the inside as snug, cosy, and safe. In her new prairie perspective, the sky seems bigger, the land larger, and "suddenly Laura and her family seem smaller" (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 56): "And on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there. In all that space of land and sky stood the lonely, small, covered wagon. And close to it sat Pa and Ma and Laura and Mary and Baby Carrie, eating their breakfasts" (LHP 40-41). Laura finds consolation in the face of the awesomeness of the prairie by assuring herself that all the securities of home are present and that life continues as usual. However, as she reconciles herself

to the prairie through her daily adventures within it, Laura's sense of "self emerges from the sheltered security that dominated" Little House in the Big Woods (Gilead 47): "All around them, to the very edge of the world, there was nothing but grasses waving in the wind. . . . Laura was very happy. The wind sang a low, rustling song in the grass. . . . Laura had never seen a place she liked so much as this place" (LHP 48-9). With the prairie as the catalyst for her new growth, Laura experiences a self fused with nature, rather than solely with her sister Mary. Annis Pratt has observed that, in the fictions of female adolescence, "taking possession of nature" equates with "possess[ing] herself" (qtd. in Romines 38-9). This new sense of self does not abolish all connection with Mary; rather Laura establishes a new sense of connection, perceiving self in opposition to Mary.

Shattering the myth of romanticism in Little House on the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie, and On the Banks of Plum Creek, "the disagreements between the two sisters are a major motif in the Little House series," even after Mary's much romanticized blindness (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 84). Fullest understanding the antagonistic aspects of the Mary-Laura relationship comes from understanding the context in which the rivalry is played out, a context created by family roles, birth order, parental expectations and behaviors, and the influences of the sibling sub culture.

As McNaron argues, "Parental influence plays a crucial role" in whether sisters grow up feeling a sense of hurtful or helpful rivalries (126):

> If one or both adults encourage bonding between sisters, then the sisters are much more likely to find ways around or through the temptations to rival each other. But if these same adults discourage,

> however subtly, real connection between children, then the girls succumb all too easily to the readily available invitations to compete. An obvious extension of this pattern occurs when parents themselves model competitive behavior in their own interactions within the home or in the outside world. (McNaron 128)

Although Ma and Pa model competitiveness by competing in the arena of providing for their daughters (OBPC 242; LTP 102-6; LW 29-30) and Ma insists that blondes must wear blue ribbons and brunettes must wear pink (OBPC 179-80), for the most part Laura and Mary are encouraged to bond. The parental expectation of friendliness and cooperation poses a problem, though, as Laura and Mary naturally move into an antagonistic relationship. The conflicting desires of being good (and receiving parental favor) and of being true to self pose a dilemma for Laura and Mary. To manage feelings of rivalry, they consequently establish polarized personalities and split-parent identification.

Despite parental influences, sooner or later any sister-sister relationship is bound to feel the sting of jealousy, resentment, unfairness, and difference. Laura and Mary are no exception. Pa, Jack, and Ma protect Laura from the external world, but "within the little house, her security is somewhat threatened because her sister Mary is so much better than she, i.e., neat, ladylike, and blonde" (Wolf, "Symbolic Center" 111). Laura perceives herself as having none of these traits. Michael E. Lamb and Brian Sutton-Smith argue that sibling deidentification, or polarization, is a method of reducing sibling rivalry, and that high-access siblings such as Laura and Mary "deidentified significantly more

than" other sibling pairs (371). Their deidentification, then, becomes a coping mechanism for maintaining a sense of self without destroying a sense of connectedness.

Typical of any sibling pairs, obvious physical comparisons begin the process of natural differentiation. Despite enjoying their deep similarity, Laura and Mary need to recognize and differentiate self from other--"anything to secure the sense of a separate and valued identity" (Bank and Kahn 53). Frequently, sibling comparisons, "whether made by others or the self, were not merely descriptive but evaluative--they translated qualitative statements into value judgments. . . . 'Better' may be defined by the standards of a significant other or those internalized by the self" (Lamb and Sutton-Smith 237). Such evaluative differentiation occurs when Ma fosters Laura's envy of Mary's golden curls by sending Laura and Mary to meet Aunt Lotty, whom Mary smugly questions:

> "Which do you like best, Aunt Lotty," Mary asked, "brown curls or golden curls?" Ma had told them to ask that, and Mary was a very good little girl who always did exactly as she was told.
>
> Laura waited to hear what Aunt Lotty would say, and she felt miserable.
>
> "I like both kinds best," Aunt Lotty said, smiling.
>
> (LHBW 181-2)

Ma places Aunt Lotty in an unfavorable position, but the aunt handled the problem gracefully. Nonetheless, Mary brags to Laura later that day that "Aunt Lotty likes my hair best, anyway. Golden hair is lots prettier than brown." Then, because Laura has been taught, tacitly, that golden curls are qualitatively more

worthy than brown, "she reached out quickly and slapped Mary's face" (183). After Pa punishes her, he points out that his own hair is brown: "She had not thought of that. Pa's hair was brown, and his whiskers were brown, and she thought brown was a lovely color" (184). Such identification with Pa bears significance. As Laura deidentifies self from Mary, she identifies more frequently with Pa.

"The trouble between Laura and Mary goes deeper than just hair color, however, for theirs is a basic opposition of character" charges Spaeth (Laura Ingalls Wilder 84). Mary is always obedient, never naughty. She identifies more with Ma, prefers indoors, likes to sew, wears her sunbonnet, likes to study, dislikes prairie travel and life, and freezes in a crisis. Contrary to Mary, Laura is impulsive, which frequently leads her to disobedience and naughtiness. She identifies more with Pa, prefers outdoors, hates to sew, resists wearing her sunbonnet, dislikes studying, relishes prairie travel and life, and acts quickly in a crisis. Wolf gently describes such opposites in Little House in the Big Woods as "carefully balanced; polarities . . . suspended in harmony" ("Symbolic Center" 108). Acknowledging psychologically realistic behavior, Lamb and Sutton-Smith describe such sibling polarization as a defense to the "Cain Complex" and suggest that by polarizing, "unconventional" Laura can feel superior to Mary "in originality or spontaneity," while secretly viewing Mary as too good, and confined. "Conventional" Mary, on the other hand "can feel superior in responsibility or dependability, secretly viewing [Laura] as wild or explosive" (129-130). For example, In On the Banks of Plum Creek when Mary must venture outdoors to pick plums, Mary accuses Laura:

> "I declare, you eat more plums than you pick up," . . .
>
> "I don't any such thing," Laura contradicted. "I pick up every plum I eat."
>
> "You know very well what I mean," Mary said, crossly. "You just play around while I work."
>
> But Laura filled her pail as quickly as Mary filled hers. Mary was cross because she would rather sew or read than pick plums. But Laura hated to sit still; she liked picking plums. (64)

Because Laura completes as much work as does Mary, she need not feel inadequate for her plum-picking skills. In fact, Laura can smugly revel in working outdoors, which she enjoys, as she comes to understand that Mary is as miserable outdoors as Laura is indoors. Similarly, we see the contrasting reactions of Mary and Laura to the adventures of traveling across the prairie. As the family crosses a creek, "Mary huddled down on the bed. She did not like fords; and she was afraid of the rushing water. But Laura was excited; she liked the splashing" (LHP 20). As the creek rises, endangering the family, "Mary hid her face in the blanket again, but Laura rose up further" (21). Skillfully, Wilder uses "but" in the descriptions of Mary's and Laura's opposite behaviors while using "and" within descriptions of their mirroring behavior.

Moreover, Laura's behavior is typical of second daughter behavior. As described by Elizabeth Douvan's and Joseph Adelson's The Adolescent Experience, the second female child "seems to have greater problems with feminine integration," often wishes she were a boy, ranks "low on the index of traditional femininity and the narcissism index," and is more likely to choose masculine models (290). It is realistic, then, that "Wilder portrayed herself with

some consistency as the family rebel," contrasting Laura unfavorably "with her sister Mary, who was temperamentally calm and quiet" (Adam 102).

Mary has more deeply internalized parental standards than Laura. Feeling as though she will "never catch up" with Mary (Fishel 71), young Laura often experiences herself as "naughty," and any comparison with Mary intensifies this. Ma and Pa Ingalls are, however, aware of the temperamental differences between the sisters. Before Mary and Laura receive a gift in Little House on the Prairie, Laura beats Pa with her fists, begging for her present, while Mary sits with her hands folded in her lap. Pa slowly opens the package, commenting, "You first, Mary, . . . because you are so patient" (270). Similarly, while traveling to Kansas, Laura is tired of riding in the wagon and wants to set camp for the night, even after Pa says no:

> "I want to camp, now! I'm so tired," Laura said.
>
> Then Ma said, "Laura." That was all, but it meant that Laura must not complain any more out loud, but she was still naughty, inside. She sat and thought complaints to herself. (14)

Unlike Mary, quietly enduring covered wagon travel, Laura's usually active body dislikes remaining in the cramped confines. Pa's nickname for Laura, "flutterbudget," reflects his acknowledgement of Laura's active personality.

Another "naughty" rivalry scene occurs after searching the Indian camp for colored beads, Mary generously offers her beads to Carrie.

> Ma waited to hear what Laura would say. Laura didn't want to say anything. She wanted to keep those pretty beads. Her chest felt all hot inside, and she wished with all her might that Mary wouldn't

> always be such a good little girl. But she couldn't let Mary be better than she was. (LHP 179)

As the girls string the beads, Laura thinks to herself that

> perhaps Mary felt sweet and good inside, but Laura didn't. When she looked at Mary she wanted to slap her. So she dared not look at Mary again. . . . And often after that Laura thought of those pretty beads and she was still naughty enough to want her beads for herself. (LHP 180-1)

Laura resents Mary's apparent unselfishness, and she resents having to behave like Mary. But, this alone is not a problem. Laura's dilemma is rooted in guilt over her lack of care for Mary, the sister who is so like herself--yet so different. The dilemma between passion and duty makes Laura feel naughty as in "The Indians Ride Away":

> Laura looked and looked at the Indian children, and they looked at her. She had a naughty wish to be a little Indian girl. Of course she didn't really mean it. She only wanted to be bare in the wind and the sunshine, and riding one of those gay little ponies. (LHP 307)

In On the Banks of Plum Creek, Laura, secretly disobeying Pa, goes to the swimming hole in Plum Creek and runs home after confronting a badger. "All that time, Mary had been sitting like a little lady, spelling out words in the book that Ma was teaching her to read. Mary was a good little girl. Laura had been bad and she knew it. . . . But no one had seen her." Laura feels "worse and worse" with her secret. "Everything was beautiful and good, except Laura" (32-3). Kathryn Adam reveals that

> Laura realized that there were additional behavioral expectations placed on her because she was a girl. . . . Throughout the books we find Laura chafing mildly against those restraints, wishing occasionally that she could do some of the things Pa did. But growing up among sisters, who were expected to behave as she did, may have neutralized the more intense feelings she might have had about these issues if she had had brothers, who surely would have known more opportunity for adventure and freedom than she. (103)

Wilder demonstrates Adam's assertion in describing the sisters' behaviors with their peers. During summer visit from neighbors, "Laura and Clarence ran and shouted and climbed trees, while Mary and Eva walked nicely together and talked," and "Laura wished she were a boy" (LHBW 180). But, Ma and her daughters must acquiesce to the standards of femininity, including maintaining fair skin, despite living and working in the frontier sunshine. Laura, however, "waged a childhood-long battle against wearing sunbonnets," and as Laura entered her teens, the same battle extended to corsets, bustles, hoops, and knee-length hair--more infringements upon her freedom (LTP 93-4). Note that Laura's rebellious questioning of such gender restrictions in dress and behavior directly opposes Mary's unquestioning acceptance. Wilder uses the sunbonnet, especially, as a "deft shorthand" for this restriction (Adam 103):

> Laura's sunbonnet hung down her back. She pulled it by her strings, and its sides came past her cheeks. When her sunbonnet was on she could only see what was in front of her, and that was why

> she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by its strings tied around her throat. She put her sunbonnet on when Ma told her to. (LHP 123)

In contrast to Mary, Laura enjoys the scenery and life of the plains too much to restrict her view or her behavior.

Wilder shows that other articles of feminine clothing and standards of feminine behavior also restrict Laura; the sunbonnet blocks her view, corsets restrict her breathing; sewing restricts her activity; the rigid social definitions, which Ma espouses, restrict her freedom by demanding passivity and submissiveness. Laura thus frequently steps beyond her gender bounds, of necessity and desire, something Mary does not do and something which increases the subtle antipathy between the sisters. "Mary's helplessness as the most civilized and ladylike character in the family" (Bosmajian 203) comes to the fore several times throughout the series when juxtaposed to Laura's ability to act in a crisis (e.g. LHBW 36; LHP 188; LHP 203; OBPC 47; OBPC 274).

In "Laura Ingalls Wilder's America: An Unflinching Assessment," Elizabeth Segel charges that Laura is "good" as she learns "proper survival behavior. Yet certain prescriptions and values of nineteenth-century American culture do not 'take' on Laura Ingalls. The values most obviously challenged by Laura, as she dares to be 'naughty,' in spite of her strong need for her parents' approval, are those that stem from the accepted definition of appropriate feminine behavior," a definition Mary clearly personifies (65). Laura begins to view the polarities between herself and Mary and to resist the social and gender constraints for which Mary's (and Ma's) behavior stands. In separating self from sister, Laura also separates herself from her gender.

Adam reminds us that "in spite of the constraints of feminine dress . . . Laura was active and adventurous. She helped Pa in building the claim shanty, took care of chores for chickens and cattle, and carried water and wood for Ma" (103). In The Long Winter Laura even helps Pa harvest the hay fields, despite Ma's reservations: "[Ma] did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that. Ma and her girls were Americans, above doing men's work. But Laura's helping with the hay would solve the problem" (4). Interestingly, Mary and Carrie offer to perform Laura's normal chores so that she may help Pa. After a back-breaking day of field work, "Laura was proud" (9) even though her arms, back, and legs ached. The last time Laura "was proud to be helping Ma" was in Little House in the Big Woods. Pa had gone to town, so Laura helped by holding the lantern while Ma completed the chores--still man's work. One scene in On the Banks of Plum Creek is rather telling. Pa is about to fix the dugout roof.

> Laura ran at his heels. "Let me help, Pa!" she panted. "I can carry some."
>
> "Why, so you can," said Pa, looking down at her with his eyes twinkling. "There's nothing like help when a man has a big job to do."
>
> Pa often said he did not know how he could manage without Laura. She had helped him make the doors for the log house in Indian Territory. Now she helped him carry the leafy willow boughs and spread them in the dugout. (14)

According to Adam,

> In a family of sisters, [Laura] functioned by necessity (and often by preference) as her father's "right-hand-man" in the arduous tasks

> of homesteading. The family's history and Laura's role in it meant that she lived a life typical, and in a few ways unique, to western pioneer women. (96)

In helping Pa, Laura learns of her own strength, and human potential; she can contribute significantly in ways other than housekeeping, valuable as that may be. "Laura's identification with her adventurous and creative father, and his mutually high regard for her and her abilities was one source of her confidence and self-esteem" (Adam 106). At the same time, Laura's emergent and masculine individualism reflects her purposeful separation from a sister who embodies all she is not, the epitome of femaleness.

Laura's identification with Pa is not unusual. Lamb and Sutton-Smith go on to "suggest that split-parent identification, like sibling deidentification, is a defense against sibling rivalry. . . . With each sibling in the pair identified with a different parent, neither child need feel that the other is favored by a special relationship to the parents" (148). Or, split-parent identification may result from a "complimentary 'split the children' defense on the part of the parents. . . . Each parent can have one child who seems to prefer him or her when competition arises" (149). Typical of the constellation of female sibling identification patterns, Mary identifies mostly with Ma, and Laura identifies mostly with Pa. Establishing "favorites" of this sort reduces the stress of sister-sister rivalry by carving equal territory for each sister, allowing for relative friendship within the framework of rivalry.

Each of these rivalry coping mechanisms, deidentification/polarization and split-parent identification, may hinder the full development of siblings. Such a pattern is especially acute for females, and since rivalry is socially less

acceptable between sisters than between brothers, sisters are more likely to utilize these coping mechanisms. McNaron stresses that "one way for two or more persons not to compete is for them to agree, albeit unconsciously, that no one of them will try to do or be everything. By facilitating such a complementarity, sisters often sustain very close bonds. Each becomes terribly important to the other, since with their tacit agreement" neither is complete (124). Such closeness may be mistaken as incomplete separation, although McNaron believes it is an effective mode of interaction as sisters find managed rivalry freeing, whereas unbridled opposition can be stifling (125). Polarized identities, for example, free Laura and Mary from the burden of having to do and be everything, while allowing them to enjoy a full range of life experience, vicariously, as do many sisters, comfortably (124). For example, Laura never graduates from high school, but this does not bother her, knowing that she worked hard so that Mary could go to college. Mary's degree is enough for both of them. As Wilder said, "I wanted an education so much myself that I was very happy in thinking that Mary was getting one" (qtd. in Anderson, Biography 110). Because Laura had grown in a sense of connection with Mary (sister as self), her need to acknowledge self has long been suppressed. Laura's dilemma between separation and connection, self and other, passion and duty, stems directly from her former mirroring of Mary. Returning from town in Little House in the Big Woods, after misbehaving and ripping her dress, Laura compares herself to Mary. Even as she was looking at Mary as the girl she would like to emulate with the clean dress and nice manners, Laura is resentful; she "did not think it was fair" (175). Now, as Laura has grown in a sense of self in opposition

to Mary, her need for connection has been denied. This crisis of conscience is not fair; she wants and needs both separation and connection without feeling selfish or naughty.[1]

Gilligan notes that images of drifting along, riding it out, much like Laura's hallucinations in the "Fever 'N' Ague" chapter, recur throughout women's experiences of being caught in the opposition between selfishness and responsibility (LHP 143). Pa expresses aggression toward the government, Ma toward Indians, and the Indians toward whites. Hermida Bosmajian notes that "Laura, too, can feel deeply aggressive, mainly toward her sister [Mary] who has already internalized all the values society associates with a 'proper young lady' " (56). For example, even as early as Little House in the Big Woods, after Laura is punished for slapping Mary during their hair color argument, Laura declared that "the only thing in the whole world to be glad about was that Mary had to [do chores] all by herself" (184). Despite her humiliation in physical punishment and loss of parental esteem, she can still enjoy a secret grudge. Feeling natural aggression toward Mary and sensing unfairness in not recognizing her own needs perplex Laura. "Between sister and sister, the central struggle is the comforting yet threatening realization of similarity versus the threatening yet comforting need for difference, the fascination with the mirror versus the lure of the opposite, adventurous unknown" (Fishel 217).

Indeed, Laura has grown; her last perception of the little house on the prairie ("The snug log house looked just as it always had. It did not seem to know they were going away" (LHP 324)) is more mature than her preception of the little house in the big woods ("The shutters were over the windows, so the little house could not see them go" (LHP 6)). Her sense of familial connection

has matured; she now understands that love and security exist within (and travel with) the web of family and does not reside solely within the little houses. Realizing that her security stems principally from the familial bond and not from a sense of place, geography, or locale, Laura is freed to express self in open defiance of sister as self. She then moves toward differentiation. Thus, On the Banks of Plum Creek, the subsequent novel, most fully demonstrates a realistic view of sister as rival.

While Wolf accurately asserts that in On the Banks of Plum Creek "experience replaces vision as Laura's actions rather than her view of the landscape occupy Wilder's attention," she inaccurately labels this as a shift "from the myth to the adventure story" ("Magic Circle" 168). An "adventure story" implies that Wilder is writing romance. She is not. Laura's anger and naughtiness are not "experiences of disorder and formlessness," as Wolf contends (169) but are psychologically complex and realistic emotions experienced by a growing female child as she struggles to expand sense of self without destroying a sense of connection to others, especially her sister. Sarah Gilead indicates that in On the Banks of Plum Creek Laura begins "consciously to recognize both her desire to exceed boundaries and her need to remain within them" (47). As already noted, Laura challenges both physical and gender-imposed boundaries: Laura "remembered with all her might that she must not go near that deep, shady swimming-pool, and suddenly she turned around and hurried toward it. She thought she would only look at it. Just looking at it would make her feel better. Then she thought she might wade in the edge of it but she would not go into the deep water" (OBPC 30). Despite parental mandate and regard for personal safety, Laura cannot stop herself.

Similarly devoid of practicality during the family's first night in the dugout, "Laura lay in bed and listened to the water talking and the willows whispering. She would rather sleep outdoors, even if she heard wolves, than be so safe in the house dug under the ground" for "nothing [could] happen [there]" (17). Laura's disregard for common prairie sense is symptomatic of her desire to exceed boundaries.

That "nothing is quite right in On the Banks of Plum Creek," as Wolf states, is correct, but not because "the circle does not structure the novel" as she charges ("Magic Circle" 168-9). Rather, Laura's disorientation from sister as same to a reorientation of sister as opposite portrays a realistic feminine dilemma concerning issues of connection and separation. Laura has fully separated self from other in On the Banks of Plum Creek, hence her lack of concern for safety. For example, Laura learns what fun jumping on and sliding down a straw stack can be, yet destroying the straw threatens the family economy. Only hours after an initial reprimand, Laura returns directly to the straw stack where the lure of nature supersedes reprimands from Pa and Mary. In fact, Mary's assertion of moral superiority challenges Laura to climb the stack; equally, Laura's assertion of freedom challenges Mary to do the same:

> "Laura! What are you doing!" said Mary.
>
> "I'm not doing anything!" said Laura. "I'm not even hardly touching [the straw-stack]."
>
> "You come right away from there, or I'll tell Ma!" said Mary.
>
> "Pa didn't say I couldn't smell it," said Laura. . . .
>
> Laura looked up at the glistening, prickly, golden stack. She had never seen the sky so blue as it was above that gold. She could not

stay on the ground. She had to be high up in that blue sky.

"Laura!" Mary cried. "Pa said we musn't!"

Laura was climbing. "He did not, either!" she contradicted. "He said we must not slide down it. I'm only climbing."

"You come right down from there," said Mary.

Laura was on top of the stack. She looked down at Mary and said, like a very good little girl, "I am not going to slide down. Pa said not to." (OBPC 55-7)

Mary joins Laura hesitantly. Eventually, Laura rolls down the stack: "Laura!" Mary screamed. "Pa said--." Laura urges Mary to join her, arguing that "Pa didn't say we can't roll!" Eventually Mary rolls: "They waded in it and rolled each other in it and climbed and rolled down again, till there was hardly anything left to climb." Later, when Pa came home, "he sat down and he stood them before him, side by side. But it was Laura he looked at" (OBPC 56-9). Pa is well aware of Laura's growth; he even finds humor in her new understanding of language manipulation, though such growth pushes her to challenge the bounds of his authority and patience.

As a child, Laura attempted to emulate Mary's behavior. But Laura gained little satisfaction from such behavior because Mary was too good. So when Mary's goodness weakens, Laura steals Mary's show, so to speak. For instance when the family needs a team of horses but cannot afford both Christmas gifts and horses, Ma suggests that the girls give up their gifts so that Pa can buy a team. Laura notices that "even Mary, who was always so good, did not say a word." Later that evening, Laura expresses her wish that Pa buy horses as the family Christmas present. " 'So do I!' said Mary. But Laura had said it first."

(OBPC 86-7). The next Christmas, Reverend Alden suprises the entire parish with gifts donated from his more wealthy parish. Laura responds, "Thank you, sir," but immediately compares herself to Mary. "For when she could speak, her manners were as nice as Mary's" (257).

Emulative of parental behavior to a tiring point, Mary continually seeks favor from Ma by chastising Laura's behavior. During a spring rainshower Laura runs outdoors in her nightgown, thoroughly enjoying her view of the "roaring," "swirling," "fearful and fascinating" creek. "Suddenly Ma jerked Laura into the dugout, asking her 'Didn't you hear me call you?' " And Mary exclaims, "I'm surprised at you, Laura. I wouldn't go out in the rain and get all wet like that." Unhampered, "Laura was glowing warm. She had never felt so fine and frisky," and responds "Oh, Mary, you just ought to see the creek!" (OBPC 98-9). Another time, Mary and Laura are left alone while Pa and Ma go to town. Mary attempts to curb Laura's behavior: "When Ma's not here, you have to do as I say because I'm older." Laura's responds that "Ma can make me, but you can't" and darts outdoors (OBPC 69). Mary's smug responses to Laura's unbounded behavior could be interpreted as mothering (Ma probably views them this way), but these remarks are more likely a vehicle for enacting her antagonism toward Laura's self-assertive freedom.

Laura's rejection of Mary's opinions as valuable criticism is apparent elsewhere in On the Banks of Plum Creek. For instance, when Laura and Mary begin school, Laura becomes friends with Christy, another girl who dislikes sunbonnets. After Nellie Oleson's rude behavior at a birthday party, Christy says to Laura; "I wish you'd slapped that Nellie Oleson," and Laura shares her plans: "But I'm going to get even with her. Sh! Don't let Mary know I said that"

(168). Keeping a secret from Mary is new assertion of self for Laura. Rejecting Mary's code of behavior, Laura seeks a more satisfying justice, of which Mary would clearly disapprove. After the revenge (Laura leads Nellie into a leech-ridden stream), "Nellie was still mad. Laura did not care. Christy squeezed her and said in her ear, 'I never had such a good time! And it just served Nellie right!' Deep down inside her Laura felt satisfied when she thought of Nellie" (176). Laura's sense of right and wrong has exceeded the boundaries of Mary's morality. Laura does not feel "naughty," as she used to when she failed to meet Mary's standards. Rather, she is content, satisfied with herself, and assured that justice has been served.

Their antagonism continues even after Mary's blindness. Interestingly, blind Mary spurs the opposition more often than not. Probably seeking Ma's affirmation or attempting to avoid her sisters' sympathy for her illness, Mary denounces even Carrie's behavior:

> "Don't fidget, Carrie, you'll muss your dress."
>
> . . . [Carrie] flushed miserably because Mary had found fault with her, and Laura was going to say, "You come over by me, Carrie, and fidget all you want to!"
>
> Just then Mary's face lighted up with joy and she said, "Ma, Laura's fidgeting, too! I can tell she is, without seeing!"
>
> "So she is Mary," Ma said, and Mary smiled in satisfaction. (BSSL 17)

Laura feels the keen sting of Mary's indictment, then quickly feels "ashamed that in her thoughts she had been cross with Mary." However, she mildly asserts

her own antagonistic response by moving her seat next to Carrie's (BSSL 17-8).

Because "Pa had said that she must be eyes for Mary" (BSSL 2), Laura sees out loud for Mary, describing the activity and landscape about them. Yet, even this role becomes a stage for demonstrating sister rivalry. Usually Mary appreciates Laura's efforts; however, she engages any opportunity to contradict, correct, or otherwise counsel Laura:

> "The road pushes against the grassy land and breaks off short. And that's the end of it," said Laura.
>
> "It can't be," Mary objected. "The road goes all the way to Silver Lake."
>
> "I know it does," Laura answered.
>
> "Well, then I don't think you ought to say things like that," Mary told her gently. "We should always be careful to say exactly what we mean."
>
> "I was saying what I meant," Laura protested. But she could not explain. There were so many ways of seeing things and so many ways of saying them. (BSSL 58)

Walking freely on a prairie evening, Laura, no doubt, revels in her unrestricted view as she draws word pictures for Mary. Possibly envious, Mary attempts to curb Laura's pleasure through admonishing her to wear her sunbonnet, and Mary seemingly enjoys arousing Laura's sense of guilt after playing-up to Laura's love of the prairie:

> "Oh, what a wild, beautiful prairie!" Mary sighed with happiness. "Laura, have you got your sunbonnet on?"

Guiltily Laura pulled up her sunbonnet from where it hung by its strings down her neck. "Yes, Mary," she said.

Mary laughed. "You just now put it on. I heard you!" (BSSL 79). Another time, Pa takes Laura to the railroad worksite so that Laura can see for herself how the road is built. She is impressed with the "movement of men and horses in such perfect time that she could almost sing the tune to which they moved." Laura "did her best" to tell Mary about everything she had seen, but Mary only said, "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" (BSSL 107). Mary's accusation is quite uncalled for considering that Laura's outing was parentally sanctioned and supervised.

Mary's smug gratification with her behavior, especially when compared to Laura's, continues even into The Long Winter. As Laura prepares to help Pa harvest hay, Mary and Carrie offer to complete Laura's chores for her: "Mary offered happily. She was proud that she could wash dishes and make beds as well as Laura, though she was blind" (LW 4-5). As a young adult, Mary confesses that always behaving was her way of "showing off. I wasn't really wanting to be good" (LTP 12). Here the realism is perhaps more noticeable to the reader, since rivalry is considered less romantic in the first place, but this realism is precisely what some critics overlook.

Spaeth, discussing the temperamental differences of Laura and Mary, identifies the source of critical error which mistakes the Little House series for sentimentalized literature: "Mary, always the practical one, sees what is, not what could be, whereas Laura's eyes are constantly turned to the metaphorical

West, to the future" (Laura Ingalls Wilder 56). Because Laura reveals a gift for optimism and metaphor, critics overlook her practicality and attach romantic sentiments to Wilder as an artist, rather than maintaining an appropriate separation of Wilder, her work, and the character Laura. Spaeth declares that "intensely alert, Laura is always listening, watching, absorbing. The reader knows how she feels, which is frequently not the way good little girls are 'supposed' to feel. She is spirited and can be angry, naughty, envious--all very real emotions, thus making her character multifaceted or multidimensional and always interesting" (Laura Ingalls Wilder 65).

The myth of romanticism is established because Wilder communicates "the complexities of personal, [sororal], familial, and national life . . . in such a way as to never gain dominance over the image of the nurturing mother, the protective father, the shared meals and special occasions, and most of all, the little house. . . . Though the text itself shatters the myth by giving to the house as many ambiguities as it gives to the prairie" (Bosmajian 58). Other opposed pairs are as ambiguously portrayed. Spaeth agrees and emphasizes that "Wilder's work . . . presents a balanced vision of homesteading life; it is neither sentimentally joyous nor literally negativistic" (Laura Ingalls Wilder 96). Opposing Wilder enthusiasts, such as Doris K. Eddins, who flaunt the Little House series for its positive modeling of unselfish family values (3), Spaeth alone recognizes the sibling rivalry of Laura and Mary:

> . . . [M]any children found that they could identify with the sibling rivalry between Laura and Mary, . . . having experienced it themselves. Children appreciated that Wilder seemed to recognize that being a child is not easy; Laura's flaws, such as her jealousy of

Mary's golden hair, indicated that Wilder understood how difficult and unfair life could be for a child, and also proved that Laura was not a character given to them by an adult as a role model for better behavior, but as a comforting and perhaps cathartic companion, a true peer. (Laura Ingalls Wilder 92)

[1] According to Hermida Bosmajian, Laura's internal struggle with the fairness of distributing care equally between herself and Mary is directly paralleled in her dilemma with issues of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream. Laura's malarial fever hallucinations of ego threatening vastness (absolute selfishness) and contraction (stifling care) in the "Fever 'N' Ague" chapter radically express her inner struggle for growth and understanding as they apply to both the "typography of the little house and the prairie as well as to the tensions within and between characters" (52).

Similar experiences of sleeping, dreaming, drifting helplessly, and etc. occur again in The Long Winter as Laura again struggles with issues of distributing care.

CHAPTER FOUR

SISTER AS MOTHER:

MARY AND LAURA AS CARETAKERS

Just as young readers respond, perhaps unconsciously, to the catharsis resulting from the roles which Laura plays out in the novels, the later novels in the series appeal to readers in their realistic development of sisters as caretakers. Elizabeth Fishel asserts that

> from the psychological jousting between sisters in the early family arena [novels like Little House on the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie, and On the Banks of Plum Creek] emerge the first tentative boundaries of [Mary's and Laura's] personalities. As these personalities become less tentative, more clearly separate and settled, the threat of acknowledging the common bond lessens, and the potential for friendship blossoms. (155)

By the Shores of Silver Lake, The Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, and These Happy Golden Years, the last four texts of the Little House series demonstrate well Fishel's thesis. The potential of friendship most clearly manifests itself in a caretaker role for Laura, accompanied by a less defensive attitude toward Mary's behavior. Assuming that role is a difficult struggle, as Laura progresses from the limitations of the rivalry that she has experienced and reconciles herself to accepting Mary as both separate from and yet connected to herself in a new, caretaking role. "The contrast between a self defined through separation and a self delineated through connection, between

a self measured against an abstract ideal of perfection and a self asserted through particular activities of care, becomes clearer and the implications of this contrast extend by considering ways [Laura] resolves a conflict between responsibility to others and responsibility to self" (Gilligan 35). Closer textual and feminist examination of By the Shores of Silver Lake, The Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, and These Happy Golden Years reveals not idyllic, unchanging, immature, self-sacrificing sisterly love, but a realistic, changing, mature, self-inclusive ethos of sisterly care.

After having viewed sister as self and sister as other, yet another shift in the dynamics of sisterly relations brings female siblings into the third, caretaking stage of sister-sister relationship. Caretaking, or mothering, is a two-part sequence, according to Gilligan. Other approaches may recognize caretaking only in its early, self-sacrificing stage, if at all. Acknowledging caretaking in its more mature stage as a self-inclusive ethic of care is vital to establishing the fully adult development of women. Without self-inclusion in an ethic of care, self is denied. At such a stage, Kohlberg's 1958 (androcentric) scale of development ranks women's development at only a three, of six levels (Gilligan 18). Such discrepancy stems from male and female developmental differences. Whereas (male) adulthood and maturity is equated with personal autonomy and individual achievement, female concern with relationships appears as a weakness (Gilligan 17). However, because women "not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care" (Gilligan 17), maintaining an intimate web of relationship and extending care to others and self is the "high water mark" for women. Thus any judgment of women must be based on women's own standard; judgment by

any other standard provides inaccurate results and calls into question "the discrepancy between womanhood and adulthood" (Gilligan 17).

Much of caretaking is mothering. Because Mother is obviously very busy with house and family management Fishel indicates that

> [e]ven in families where Mother is an involved and definite presence, sisters may still look to each other to provide what Mother may not be able to offer (or Daughter unable to accept): approval where Mother is disapproving, interest where Mother does not have the patience, laughter where Mother takes life too seriously. Like other surrogates . . . , sisters may provide an alternative to mother love or an embellishment of it. (110)

"Sisters may often share mothering each other in a reciprocal way" (Fishel 110); hence we see the "ingenious socialization of sisters by sisters" (213), particularly when high accessibility increases the influence each sister has on the other (Leder 14).

During the stage of sister-sister relationship characterized by patterns of opposition and rivalry, "separation seemed the empowering condition of free and full self-expression, while attachment appeared the paralyzing entrapment and caring an inevitable prelude to compromise" (Gilligan 157). As sisters fluctuate into a connection characterized by mothering, we recognize "divergent constructions of identity" (157) for men and women:

> To [a male], responsibility means <u>not doing</u> what he wants because he is thinking of others; to [a female], it means <u>doing</u> what others are counting on her to do regardless of what she herself wants. Both are concerned with avoiding hurt, but construe the

> problem in different ways--he seeing hurt to arise from the expression of aggression, she from a failure of response. (Gilligan 38)

Here we have an "ethic of care" concerned with avoiding dangerous separation, as opposed to the "logic of justice" approach concerned with avoiding explosive connection.

Gilligan notes that when women describe themselves, "identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care. Similarly, morality is seen by these women as arising from the experience of connection rather than one of balancing claims." She goes on to assert that when men describe themselves, "individual achievement rivets the imagination, and great ideas or distinctive activity define the standard of self-assessment and success" (160, 163). Because women live, exist, and grow in a patriarchal world, what women see as reality (a web of connection) is frequently distorted, dissolved, and destroyed by the male hierarchy of relations. Women must then question themselves, and "personal doubts invade women's sense of themselves" (Gilligan 49), especially during the adolescent years. Clearly then, judging women's maturity by an androcentric scale of achievement is inappropriate. Rather, women's sense of continuing connection signals a new awareness of self and other joined in a mature ethic of care.

Gilligan cautions that an underdeveloped perception of caretaking sacrifices the needs of self to the needs of others, in which case women equate their "goodness" with pleasing others. Unfortunately, the notion that virtue lies in "self-sacrifice has complicated the course of women's development by pitting the moral issue of goodness against the adult questions of responsibility and

choice" (130). Seeing that in doing what is right for others she is not automatically doing what is right for herself, she incorporates response to others with responsibility to self. "The conflict between self and others thus constitutes the central moral problem for women, posing a dilemma whose resolution requires a reconciliation between femininity and adulthood" (70-1). Once Laura extends her sense of obligation to include herself as well as Mary, her disparity between selfishness and responsibility dissolves (94). "In this way she ties a new sense of separation to a new experience of connection, a way of being with others that allows her also to be with herself" (52).

Little Town on the Prairie and These Happy Golden Years portray Laura's renewed experience of self and other, this mature ethic of care. As Gilligan describes it, Laura recognizes the social embeddedness of individual lives and she "expands her moral perspective to encompass a notion of 'collective life.' Responsibility now includes both self and other, viewed as different but connected rather than as separate and opposed" (146). She replaces the "stoicism of self-denial" and the "illusion of innocence with an awareness of choice" (149). Such a change in Laura's perspective enables her "to consider it moral" to care not only for Mary but for herself, as well, and to acknowledge conflict "as a part of rather than a threat to relationships" (149, 146).

According to the research on sibling relationships, this renewed understanding often takes place after adult siblings talk through their childhood experiences of rivalry (Leder 15). They discover what each sibling has thought and felt over the years by revealing secret longings, jealousies, and expectations--usually to one another's surprise. Jane Mersky Leder emphasizes that, at this point, "siblings either learn to accept one another as

independent individuals with their own sets of values and behaviors or cling to the shadow of the brother and sister they once knew" (68). Laura and Mary share this typical sibling experience. They often walk the prairie together in the evenings, Laura seeing out loud for Mary. "It was during these walks that Laura and Mary, as they reached womanhood, reconciled their childhood grievances against one another and developed an enduring sisterly love" (Adam 107). Fishel judges that here begins "the real responsibility of a freely chosen bond as sisters" (71), separate from parental expectations, physical proximity, and other external influences. Following this is a "general improvement, mellowing, easing of tension between sisters that comes with age and time" (97), allowing, of course, for the pervasive "pattern of fluctuation in the quality of relationships between sisters . . . over time, alternating closeness and distance, rivalry and solidarity, enmity and friendship" (99).

Between the events closing On the Banks of Plum Creek and those opening By the Shores of Silver Lake, Laura's "mimicking and pattern[ing] of youth give way to the give-and-take intimacy of adulthood" (Fishel 121). Of the last four texts in the series, By the Shores of Silver Lake and The Long Winter best reveal Laura's self-sacrificing stage of mothering, similar to mirroring in the disintegration of self and in recognition of both integrity and care. Disintegration of self leads to total self-sacrifice, to a recovery in which there is an equitable balance between care of self and care of other, but this step is particularly acute for female siblings as they reconcile womanhood and adulthood. Little Town on the Prairie and These Happy Golden Years portray a mature, self-inclusive ethic of sisterly care.

In By the Shores of Silver Lake Laura experiences great changes:

> . . . the entire family structure has been disrupted: Mary is blind. This forces additional maturation upon Laura. As Wilder wrote to her daughter [Rose], "Mary's blindness added to Laura's age. Not only was Mary's sight gone, but with it has vanished [our] ability to communicate nonverbally." (Spaeth, Laura Ingalls Wilder 54).

Laura quickly realizes, too, the extent to which "communication is not reliant upon words but is expressed through the eyes" (54). Mary's "blue eyes were still beautiful, but they did not know what was before them, and Mary herself could never look through them again to tell Laura what she was thinking without saying a word" (BSSL 2). Laura's most intimate means of communication with her most intimate life-peer is cut off and her subsequent attempts to relay the same messages verbally lead only to frustration and failure, as already noted. "Laura knew that she was not a little girl anymore. Now she was alone; she must take care of herself" (BSSL 14).

"The family's economic circumstances, plus the blow of Mary's blindness thrust Laura into . . . Mary's role as 'responsible oldest daughter' " (Adam 104). Laura shoulders much of the responsibility for Mary. Besides dutifully "seeing out loud" for her, Laura assumes any housekeeping chores which Mary cannot complete. She must always thread Mary's sewing needle--a demanding task considering Mary sews continuously now that she is blind (BSSL 159). Laura even cuts Mary's meat into small pieces for her at one point (34). In addition to physical compensations for Mary's handicap, Laura cares for Mary's emotional state as well. That is, when the family waits for Pa to pick them up in Tracy, "trembling" Mary questions: "Oh, Laura, does it look like it sounds? . . . It sounds

so rough" and Laura pacifies her, responding: "No, it looks all right. It's just a town, and they're just [working] men" (32). When traveling to Silver Lake, Laura must lead Mary safely around the train stations at Plum Creek and Tracy. She does so "anxiously" (19) as Ma repeats: "You and Mary must be careful" (27). At fourteen, with very mixed emotions, she began sewing for the town merchant:

> Quickly Laura multiplied in her head. That was a dollar and a half a week, a little more than six dollars a month. If she worked hard and pleased Mrs. White, maybe she could work all summer. She might earn fifteen dollars, maybe even twenty, to help send Mary to college.
>
> She did not want to work in town, among strangers. But she couldn't refuse a chance to earn maybe fifteen dollars, or ten, or five. She swallowed, and asked, "May I go, Ma? . . . . I don't want to leave you all the work to do," Laura faltered.
>
> Carrie eagerly offered to help. . . . Ma said that Mary was a great help in the house, too. . . . She said, "We'll miss you, Laura, but we can manage." (LTP 37-38)

Laura is torn between various duties: to help send Mary to college, to assist Ma with the housework, and to satisfy herself--especially since she dislikes sewing and finds the long hours painful: "Her shoulders began to ache, and the back of her neck. Her chest was cramped and her legs felt tired and heavy. The loud machine buzzed in her head" (LTP 42).

Likewise, Laura hated the idea of being a teacher, but she felt that duty dictated her choice, and she wanted to earn as much money as she could to

help send Mary to college. After Pa passes the teacher "sentence" on Laura (". . . and I guess it will have to be you"),

> Laura's heart jerked, and then she seemed to feel it falling, far, far down. She did not say anything. She knew that Pa and Ma, and Mary too, had thought that Mary would be a teacher. Now Mary couldn't teach, and--'Oh, I won't! I won't!" Laura thought. "I don't want to! I can't!" Then she said to herself, "You must."
>
> She could not disappoint Ma. She must do as Pa said. So she had to be a school teacher when she grew up. Besides, there was nothing else she could do to earn money. (BSSL 127)

Similar scenes recur in these last novels (BSSL 240, 242; LTP 111, 122, 301, 307; THGY 3, 49, 99). Adam proposes that Laura's decision reveals a great deal about "our foremothers and how they survived psychologically in this world of limited options" (105). Just as Laura was determined to be successful as a teacher in spite of her being coerced into the profession, similarly, she so hated making buttonholes that she learned to stitch them quickly. Dutifully, Laura has chosen the feminine roles which she has so frequently opposed. Interestingly, though, once Laura has reconciled herself to such roles, she views Ma in a new light. Besides maintaining her femininity within rigid gender constraints, Caroline Ingalls aptly manages to more than "make-do" with whatever Pa provides. In a scene in The Long Winter we learn that the first year sod garden has been unsuccessful, but Ma thriftily invented and baked a green pumpkin pie. Laura notes that it "was such a happy supper that [she] wanted it never to end. When she was in bed with Mary and Carrie, she stayed awake to keep on being happy" (36). Later, as the family resources continue to dwindle, Ma's

capability and creativity become even more noticeable and essential. Ma's "domestic magic" ensures the family's physical and psychological survival during The Long Winter blizzards (Romines 41). Ma's successful caretaking offers a model and incentive to Laura's acceptance of caring for Mary.

Further indicative of Laura's new, responsible caretaking role, "we find Ma and Pa consulting Laura and planning the future with her as though she were much older" in the later books (Adam 104). For example, it is Laura who creatively arranges the family furniture in the claim shanty, subsequently winning Ma's approval: "That's my smart girl!" (BSSL 268).

Laura's caretaking demands that she fulfill her duty to Mary, so, despite her distaste for these gender-bound activities (teaching and sewing), they offer the only opportunity for her to help her family. Laura curbs her behavior to please others and satisfy their demands and expectations of her. She becomes fully conscious of this change in Little Town on the Prairie at the Fourth of July celebration:

> Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), 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. I will have to make myself be good.
>
> Her whole mind seemed to be lighted up by that thought. This is what it means to be free. It means you have to be good. (76)

Here Laura actively denies duty to self to maintain duty to others, by equating womanhood with a submission and self effacement, laced with notions of "should," "ought," "better," "right," and "good."

Wolf correctly notes that "Laura's nearly constant desire 'to fly like the birds' (BSSL 126) exists in counterpoint to her desire to help Mary see," although she falsely asserts that Mary's "blindness [is] another form of formlessness" which "horrifies Laura" ("Magic Circle" 169). Rather, recognizing Mary's need Laura dutifully offers her care.

The "Shanty on the Claim," chapter of By the Shores of Silver Lake, offers an example of Laura's conflict of values: "An older Laura experiences a revised version" (Gilead 47) of the "Laura was happy" scene in Little House on the Prairie. Alone again on "the whole enormous prairie," Laura now senses a guilty "inappropriateness in such a loss of self in nature" (Gilead 47):

> Big girl as she was, Laura spread her arms wide to the wind and ran against it. She flung herself on the flowery grass and rolled like a colt. She lay in the soft, sweet grasses and looked at the great blueness above her and the high, pearly clouds sailing in it. She was so happy that tears came into her eyes.
>
> Suddenly she thought, "Have I got a stain on my dress?" She stood up and anxiously looked, and there was a green stain on the calico. Soberly she knew that she should be helping Ma, and she hurried to the dark tar-paper shanty. (BSSL 271)

For a male, "leaving childhood means renouncing relationships in order to protect his freedom of self-expression." For a female, " 'farewell to childhood' means relinquishing the freedom of self-expression in order to protect others

and preserve relationships" (Gilligan 157). But, Gilligan reminds us that

> if this turning inward is construed against a background of continuing connection, it signals a new responsiveness to the self, an expansion of care rather than a failure of relationship. In this way girls, seen not to fit the categories of relationships derived from male experience, call attention to the assumptions about relationships that have informed the account of human development by replacing the imagery of explosive connection with images of dangerous separation. (39)

Oddly, amidst Laura's excessive self-sacrifice, Wolf stipulates that "By the Shores of Silver Lake is a joyful, vibrant book about adolescent Laura's gusto for life. It is full of images of unrestrained action" ("Magic Circle" 169). Likewise, Wolf contends that in The Long Winter is the "darkest book of the series" for "Laura herself is immersed in formlessness" (169). On the other hand, she recognizes that "The Long Winter is a pivotal book. It marks the transition from adventure story to psychological realism" (169). Although Wolf may find the transition from "childhood to adulthood" too darkly realistic, feminists, such as Gilligan, Fishel, and McNaron define Laura's growth as liberating. As Laura progresses from a self-sacrificing caretaking to a mature, self-inclusive ethic of care she resolves her crisis of conscience--she can, and must, care for self as well as other.

Laura faces this crisis in The Long Winter. Ann Romines calls this novel a "sober and disquieting crash course in what it can mean to live out a female life on the Western prairie" (36). "[S]haped by female realities" (Romines 38), here the reader envisions "a reduced world, shorn of its masculine strength and

vision"and thus experiences the "redemptive promise of womanly strength" (Bell 477). In the end, indeed, it is Ma's "kitchen magic" and control of the domestic realm which bring the family to physical and psychological safety through The Long Winter. "Ma's housekeeping is an enormous and life-enhancing power, yet its cost is the confinement and circumscription of her own life" (Romines 41). As the winter progresses, and "female realities" invade her sense of self, Laura's dream-like state intensifies. Romines asserts that, typical of novels of female adolescence, The Long Winter "foregrounds the hidden agenda of gender norms." As Annis Pratt describes: "For a young girl, learning to be "adult" means learning to be dependent, submissive, or 'non-adult.' As a result of this conflict, an imagery of invasion introduces a nightmare element into texts" (qtd. in Romines 38). When the first blizzard comes up while the children are at the school, outside of town, Laura feels that "there was nothing to go by--no sun, no sky, no direction . . . There was nothing but the dizzy whirling and the cold" (LW 90). Romines asserts that "Laura's situation is a paradigm of what she fears she will find when she ventures outside the sheltering walls of Ma's kitchen: nightmare of obliterating storm, where all signs and all authority are swallowed up and her only protection is her own intuition, which she fears to trust" (42). To escape from the domestic realm, Laura must attend school and become a teacher, yet the blizzards thwart these efforts, offering instead Ma's domesticity as her example, though Laura values it little, as yet. Laura wails, "Oh Ma! How can I ever teach school and help send Mary to college? How can I ever amount to anything when I can only get one day of school at a time?" (139).

The endless blizzard sends Laura's senses reeling. Facing conflict on every side, Laura feels "dull and stupid" (228). Another time, as Pa reads to entertain his family,

> Laura tried to listen but she felt stupid and numb. Pa's voice slid away into the ceaseless noises of the storm. She felt that the blizzard must stop before she could do anything, before she could even listen or think, but it would never stop. It had been blowing forever.
>
> She was tired. She was tired of the cold and the dark . . . of going to sleep and waking up. She was tired of blizzard winds. there was no tune in them any more, only a confusion of sound beating on her ears. (239)

The noise of the storm has invaded Laura's self, and continues to do so, exemplifying, as such, Pratt's earlier mentioned nightmare imagery. As the blizzard rages on, the descriptions reach a "terrifying pitch" (Romines 43):

> The coffee mill's handle ground round and round, it must not stop. It seemed to make her part of the whirling winds driving the snow round and round over the earth and in the air, whirling and beating at Pa on his way to the stable, whirling and shrieking at the lonely houses, whirling snow between them and the sky and far away, whirling forever on the endless prairie. (254)

Interpreting this passage, Romines states that "The peculiar horror of this passage is that the howling whirl of the storm is not distinguishable from the saving sound of the domestic routine" (43). The wind has got inside the protective walls of the house, and inside Laura. According to Pratt, this signals

the peak of Laura's gender dilemma, her crisis of conscience over conflicting types of care (for self and for other). Note the parallels between Laura's experience here and her previous crisis of conscience depicted in the "Indian War-Cry" chapter of Little House on the Prairie (286).

As the food supply diminishes and disappears, Laura is helpless--trapped indoors with her female counterparts--while males such as Almanzo Wilder and Cap Garland are free to roam the prairie in search of wheat. Although Pa is not free to risk such an adventure, he can still move outside the home (which has shrunk to one room, to conserve heat) to visit and gather news while Laura and the other women remain by the fire. "They all sat still in the dark and, as if in a dream, they heard Pa's steps coming heavily, the length of the front room, and the kitchen door was opening. . . . 'The boys got back. Here's some of the wheat they brought, Caroline!' Winter had lasted so long that it seemed it would never end. It seemed as if they would never really wake up" (308-9). "Only the blizzard and the coffee mill's grinding, the cold and the dusk gathering into night again, were real" (311).

Finally, ending disintegration of self which Laura has endured in her selfless caretaking, Pa says: "It can't beat us!" Laura asked stupidly, "Can't it, Pa?" Pa responds, "No. It's got to quit sometime and we don't. It can't lick us. We won't give up." Interestingly, it is Pa who rescues Laura's sense of self, for after this speech, "then Laura felt a warmth inside her. It was very small but it was strong. It was steady, like a tiny light in the dark, and it burned very low but no winds could make it flicker because it would not give up" (311). That very night, as though melted by Laura's new strength of self, the Chinook begins to blow and Laura cries "Pa! Pa! The Chinook is blowing!" Pa responds, "I hear it,

Laura. Spring has come" (312), signaling Laura's sense of independent, not entirely submissive self in combination with an ethic of care. Teased for waking the family in the night, Laura responds, "It was the Chinook. That makes all the difference" (313). According to Gilligan, Laura has come to understand that mature responsibility to others is more than pleasing them by being good, which "impedes a recognition of self." She rediscovers connection, with Pa's help, "in the realization that self and other are interdependent and that life, however valuable in itself, can only be sustained by care in relationships" (127).

This new phase of self-inclusive caretaking is most clearly portrayed in the last two texts of the series, Little Town on the Prairie and These Happy Golden Years. Here a mature sense of "dependence is characterized by full differentiation of ego and object (emergence from primary identification) and therewith a capacity for valuing the object for its own sake and for giving as well as receiving; a condition which should be described not as independence but as mature dependence" (Guntrip qtd. in Chodorow 62). This kind of mature dependence differs from the forced independence and denial of need for relationship which characterizes the masculine personality (Chodorow 62). Within this new understanding of self, Laura's efforts to help Mary attend college take on a new dimension.

Still understanding Mary's need for her help and still wanting to help her, Laura's employment is less forced, more enjoyable. For example, she knows that she will never teach at a place like Brewster again. Before Mary leaves for college, early in Little Town on the Prairie, she and Laura go for a walk. Mary thanks Laura for working to make this possible. Laura meekly responds, "It wasn't much" but Mary assures her of the value of her efforts: "It was a lot!"

(111). However, she later adds, "I wish you didn't have to" teach school just for me (112). Although Laura insists that "Well, I do have to," her tone implies thankfulness for Mary's recognition and a realization that while she has not chosen this path she still has a choice of attitude, reflecting Ma's encouraging phrase of completing necessary work as cheerfully as possible. As such, "[s]he does not abdicate responsibility for choice but rather claims the right to include herself among the people whom she considers it moral not to hurt. Her more inclusive morality now contains the injunction to be true to herself" (Gilligan 165), even if only in her attitude. After that special walk, Laura "renewed her vow to study hard, though she didn't like to, and to get a teacher's certificate as soon as she was sixteen, so that she could earn the money to keep Mary in college" (LTP 122).

Once Mary leaves for college, direct interaction between Mary and Laura ends except for a few brief visits, during one of which the sisters review their childhood behaviors and jealousies, as already mentioned. Such intimacy marks their remaining visits, though their lives are separated by time and distance. After Mary leaves, the house seems "empty and still" to Laura and her family (LTP 116), and Laura "stood looking around the room as though searching for something she had lost" (LTP 298), however, "Laura was so glad for Mary that she could almost forget the lonesome ache of missing her. Mary had always so loved to study. Now she could revel in studying" (121). Although Laura's behavior is still somewhat in response to Mary's needs, once Mary is directly beyond contact, Laura's work becomes as much for herself as for Mary, thus combining care of self and other and establishing the lifelong relationship of the sisters.

Although she is a schoolteacher because Ma wanted her to be, and gives most of her money to funding Mary's college, Laura establishes a self confidence with Pa's encouragement: "That's the way to tackle things! Have confidence in yourself, and you can lick anything," just like his response to the blizzards (THGY 3). Besides paying for tuition, Laura purchases an organ for Mary. After that, though, Laura begins to buy clothes, hats, and other goods for herself with her teaching money. Such items prepare her, materially and mentally, for her eventual separation from home. Even when Mary is home for a summer visit, Laura works as a dressmaker. Pa comments: "That is the way it is, once you begin to earn" (THGY 134). Laura takes pleasure in knowing that she has helped both her sister and herself. "Tied to this recognition is an acknowledgement of her own power and worth, both of which were excluded from the image she previously projected" (Gilligan 93).

Finally, as Laura's crisis of conscience has been resolved by a self-inclusive ethic of care, McNaron reminds us that "in our own quest to know ourselves, we seek mirrors in others. . . . When a girl or young woman looks at her blood sister, she comes very close to seeing herself. Yet her sister is also inescapably other. I believe paradox lies at the heart of the intensity that usually accompanies relationships between sisters. The bond carries the illusion of total connection at the same time that it painfully reinforces the truth that each of us is finally separate from everyone else" (129).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the traditional critical approach which establishes the Mary-Laura relationship as idyllic in Wilder's Little House series, the realism of the sister-sister relationship in these novels cannot be dismissed. Closer textual examination of the Little House series within a feminist psychoanalytical framework, focused on the sister-sister relationship of Mary and Laura, reveals that Wilder belongs to a "tradition other than [romanticism] and that this tradition surfaces in her work precisely in those places where criticism had hitherto found obscurities, evasions, implausibilities, and imperfections" (Showalter 264).

Fred Erisman warns us that on the surface, the Little House series seems "little more than an anecdotal, third person account of . . . the life of a frontier family" ("Laura Ingalls Wilder" 618). In agreement, Elizabeth Segel bemoans that "there are still many adults who dismiss as worthless the books and experiences of childhood" but ventures that "Wilder's books can go far toward breaking down . . . immature attitudes" (63-4). These "deceptively simple" narratives, "concretely depict the activities necessary to survival on the American frontier." In detailing the "day-in, day-out demands made upon the family by the exigencies of frontier life" Wilder both suggests and celebrates "her frontier experience as essentially positive and intended her writing to convey a sense that her experience, though 'hard' by some standards, was valuable, meaningful, and in some respects personally liberating" (Adam 97). Yet, in paying attention only to the positive pioneer ideals in the books, many

readers overlook the "sober critique" of certain American (racist and sexist) attitudes in this era. Such oversight inevitably occurs when reading with an androcentric bias because nothing seems to happen (except in Pa's tales); Ma and Pa cycle through their daily, weekly, and seasonal chores while the young Mary and Laura play quietly.

According to Lee McLaird, "the first three Little House books are little more than descriptions . . . with very little left over for plot or character development" (31). As such, they do not satisfy the male quest motif, and thus cannot be valuable literature; they must be some "marginalized other" such as juvenile literature or American myth. However, in the context of a feminist psychoanalytical reading, particularly as applied to the sister-sister relationship of Mary and Laura, Little House in the Big Woods "describes the scenery," the backdrop, the context, of the family which embeds the Mary-Laura relationship. We survey the family's emotional terrain as well as the big woods' physical terrain. We come to understand the attitudes, expectations, and daily activities of Ma, Pa, Mary, Laura, and Carrie. We learn about the roles Mary and Laura play to the Ingalls family and to each other. All of this contextualizes the plot of the narrative: the growth of a young girl.

However, Millicent Bell cautions us that "stories that tell of such developments will seem devoid of incident to our minds, nourished as they have been by the reading of traditional fiction or biography. They will lack 'plot' " (474). Because Laura apparently shows little aggression toward her world and does not separate self from other (especially family) to a "normal" (male) degree, the Little House series fails the expectations of the male quest motif (separation, initiation, return). Instead, a radically different reading is

needed. When looked at in the context of the female quest (initiation through continued connection) toward meaningful sisterhood, Wilder succeeds.

In terms of a feminine perspective, the Little House series realistically portrays a young girl's sense of self in connection with her world, and her sister Mary in particular. Josephine Donovan, utilizing Kathryn Rabuzzi's theory, proposes that "out of their housebound experience women have developed a 'mode of being' that is quite different from the masculine mode of questing, conquering, and imposing one's will" (214). Traditional female experience of self in connection to others "points to the inherently different psychological features of women's maturation" (Donovan 218). An initial psychological standpoint of connection helps "explain some of the apparent incongruities embedded in female plots, . . . feminist theories of gender difference enable new readings of female fictions of development" (Abel, et al. 9).

Elizabeth Fishel, furthermore, asserts that we are closest to those who are most like us--our sisters. Sisters teach one another all about life, friendship, fighting, and intimacy. This most intense of all relationships naturally fluctuates over time through three stages which Fishel identifies: sister as same, a mirror of self; sister as different, a rival of self; and sister as caretaker, a mother of self. In time, sisters come to understand that they are both intimately connected and yet independent within their sister-sister bond.

The early novels in the Little House series seem to smack of idealized relationship within the Ingalls household; yet in these very novels that one sees Wilder's careful, if unconscious, attention to the reality of sister-sister relationships as they develop from early childhood. In Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie one discovers a realistic portrayal of

sister-sister relationships in Laura's estimation of sister as self. She defines her identity through similarities which connect her with Mary. Laura and Mary emulate one another's behavior, acting as teachers, peers, models, and socializers. Their constant interaction intensifies mirroring behaviors, reinforcing their bond, a bond typical of female siblings at their ages and in their situations. These mirroring behaviors are those which critics most frequently misinterpret as sentimentalized.

The next stage of sister-sister relationships--rivalry--is evident in both Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie and in a subsequent text, On the Banks of Plum Creek. Laura and Mary's intense mirroring relationship swings them directly and naturally into a new relationship of connection in which each sees self in opposition to sister via polarized identities, deidentification, and split-parent identification. Recognizing and asserting a new sense of self in contrast to Mary, Laura struggles to reconcile her need for connection with her need to acknowledge self. The pervasive sibling rivalry of Mary and Laura is seldom acknowledged, recognized, or discussed among critical reviews of Wilder's work. Instead it is misread as some literary weakness ("formlessness" or "failed myth") or is merely overlooked.

In By the Shores of Silver Lake, The Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, and These Happy Golden Years, the late texts of the Little House series, the sister-sister relationship moves into the last stage, mothering. After Mary's blindness, Laura recognizes an intimate, caretaking connection to her sister. In the first two books of this group, the sister-sister mothering relationship assumes some aspects of self-denial. Affectionate, but limiting, this immature level of

mothering submerges the needs of self (as does mirroring). But, Laura recaptures a sense of self during The Long Winter blizzards and demonstrates a mature ethic of sisterly care in the final two texts. This stage of the sister-sister relationship recognizes the needs of both Mary and Laura as worthy of care, at last reconciling them in a balance which assumes both separation and connection.

In works such as Wilder's Little House series,

> we see reflected the same themes that color life between sisters throughout the sweep of the life cycle: the fluctuations of closeness and distance over time, and always the constancy of ambivalence; the gradual recognition of similarity with the simultaneous awareness of difference; and the urge for connectedness mingled with the need for independence and the haunting knowledge of aloneness. These are the themes first discovered in the family crucible which circumscribes the quest outside the family. (Fishel 306)

This approach to Wilder criticism can, of course, extend to other works as well, opening a whole new range of critical analysis.

Although Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn believe that "being of the same sex appears to foster loyalty, as children have a common ground and can identify with each other more easily than they can if one is of the opposite sex" (125), feminist psychoanalysts contend that the easy identification stems not from shared biology but from shared psychology. Thankfully, according to this approach, the psychological differences between males and females should lessen as more males become involved in primary childcare. And, as males and females compete more frequently in the same arena, the shared

experiences of female siblings may become less unique. Certainly, we could all benefit from such integration of "genderless" human qualities.

Women's plots, as those of Wilder, need not belong to the realm of romantic literature, need not be relegated to artistic imperfection or implausibility. Such readings expect t that we view stories with patriarchal eyes, that we invalidate the female literary tradition. Instead, we must "forge our own criteria for success and failure in the female novel of development" (Baer 133). Wilder's works call for an adjusted view of her as a romantic writer. She as easily fits into a realistic and psychoanalytic school, and her carefully wrought portrayal of sister-sister bonding throughout the lifespan of her characters confirms such a consideration of her texts.

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