

Liminality and Nature: Shifting Children's Relationships in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Pastoral World

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving relationship between children and nature as depicted in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, with a special focus on the liminality of the pastoral experience. It examines the interplay between pastoral and technological elements in Laura Ingalls Wilder's novels, highlighting how her portrayal of children reflects a transitional element in American cultural and environmental consciousness. Although the harsh realities of pioneer life necessitate technological advancements, nature remains a crucial and nurturing force in her work. Hence, the narrative challenges traditional binaries of subordination and supremacy as the pastoral ideals coexist with practical necessities in her work. The children in the series especially embody this liminality as they balance their innate affinity for nature with the demands of a changing world. In a larger context, this interdependence underscores a broader American cultural narrative where nature and technology are not antagonistic but mutually influential.

Keywords: Liminality, pastoral fiction, nature-child relationship, ecocriticism, American fiction

Introduction

This article does an in-depth analysis of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* Series (1932-1943) through the concept of liminality as a broader theoretical lens developed through Leo Marx's theory of American pastoralism, Lawrence Buell's ecocritical perspective, and Greg Garrard's ecocritical framework. The series, told through a child's point of view, offers itself to be processed as a depiction of pioneer life foregrounding the complex relationship between nature, family, settlement, and technological change.

The term 'liminality' comes from sociologist Bruno Latour's studies of tribes. The word 'limina' is the Latin word for threshold. The concept of liminal space may be used to define the intersection of garden and technology: the beginning of an agrarian form of pastoral. Penny Wilson says, 'Liminal Space is an ideal play-space because of the loose parts to be discovered' (p.12). The theologian Richard Rohr describes liminal space in these words, "It is when you have left the tried and true but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer" (pp. 155-156). The frontier spaces in Wilder's work are liminal as they are neither fully wild nor fully civilized.

Liminality as a concept offers culturally and politically rich spaces where the ideology of the American garden ideal can be explored. Laura Ingalls Wilder's novels offer themselves as ideal texts in this regard. As Leo Marx puts it, the image of America as nature's garden, a new paradise of abundance, invests "the ancient ideal with new vitality" (p. 75). Robert Beverley, in his book *The History and Present State of Virginia*, admires the primitive pastoral landscape of America, which he claims was occupied by the natives. He, however, extends his belief in the American garden to the idea of reconciling the pure land with the economic needs which turn the virgin land into an agricultural one, "creating the new Eden" (p. 78). This transitional period along with its effects on children in Wilder's novels is something this article processes in detail. Liminal space is a transitional state between two phenomena i.e. two opposing events. However, liminality also creates spaces for fusion. This leads to an investigative study into the kind of blend of technology and garden form: is it a fusion or is it contradictory? Leo Marx raises the question of whether technology is working against pastoral fulfillment. He writes, "The aspiration of ideal pastoral have not been met. An individual is left powerless by society and tries to retreat to Pastoral so the reconciliation between the two is

an obsolete idea" (p. 364). This leads to another query: if pastoral and technology are dichotomous, which category do children fall into: sentimental pastoral or complex pastoral? Laura Ingalls Wilder's novels are set in the late nineteenth century, which marks the beginning of the modern era. Laura finds pleasure in nature but tries to integrate into the survival mode of existence, which depends on capitalistic means. The problematics involved in the middle landscape determine the status of children in the changing times. For Greg Garrard, this fusion of science and pastoral has "progressive potential" (p. 42). Leo Marx says "It is a moral position perfectly represented by the image of a rural order, neither wild nor urban, as the setting of man's best hope" (p. 64).

Literature Review

In terms of liminality, a very pertinent issue of differentiation between adult and child fiction emerges. Zoe Jacques in *Children's Literature and the Posthuman* explains, "At the heart of the field of children's literary studies..., lies an obsession, or at the very least a long-running fascination, with boundaries and particularly those which concern the intersections between the child and the adult, and the mysterious "defining lines" which delineate children's fiction itself" (p. 7). Mahar Gubar in his book *Children's Literature and the Posthuman* writes that children are simultaneously 'us' and 'other', "alike but different" (p. 9). The difference between children and adults is often taken to be their naivety/vulnerability that children are not to be trusted and are always in need of guidance and direction. Jacques further writes, "For Gubar, insistence on the 'radical alterity or otherness of children' is both 'dehumanizing' and 'demeaning'" (p. 9). For Mahar Gubar, the children owing to their still developing minds are taken as inferior beings. What is dehumanizing for Gubar is the adult's failure to recognize that it is not immaturity but it is the process of reaching maturity that makes children seem more gullible than adults. Laura Ingalls Wilder's depiction of children in *The Long Winter*, aesthetically illustrates Mahar Gubar's concern that children's difference is not their weakness. Children seem to be making an effort to support and adjust to the environment chosen and provided by their parents. All through her novels, she depicts her child protagonist Laura taking part in the activities her parents are involved in. Pa asks Laura to help him in piling the hay as he mows the machine for cutting the hay all by himself with no helper around. Laura gets up early the next morning to go to the fields with Pa. She sits and observes the garter snake and gophers in the field where her father is cutting the hay. She does not delve into any idealization of

nature; instead she thinks of helping her father. Laura and Mary take many trips to the town to bring their father work tools. They also help their mother in tending the cattle and the garden for their livelihood. Not once in the novel *The Long Winter* does Laura indulge in elaborate reveries about nature. Their curiosity about and pursuit of different animals are always interrupted by the call from their parents. This call takes them back to the world of work and struggle.

The Romantic Movement started in 1798 as a reaction to Industrialization which brought in its wake the rise of the middle class. The modern idea of childhood dates back to the early Romantic period in the eighteenth century and regards children as separate entities, rather only to be educated and prepared for adulthood. The Russian philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau differentiates children from adults on the basis of their closeness to nature. He gives a detailed account of his theory on education in his novel *Emile*. Rousseau believes that a child loses his goodness when he comes in contact with society. He argues that though it is difficult to achieve, natural education is the best guide for children. He is a firm believer in the Romantic constructions of childhood that stress its defining and most cherished characteristic is that of a natural innocence. The Romantic poets William Blake and William Wordsworth are the pioneers of Romantic conceptualization of Childhood. For Wordsworth, the first thing that separates a child from an adult is that divinity resides in a child as he says in his "Ode to Immortality", "Heaven lies us upon our infancy" (p. 66). Wordsworth even considers children wiser than adults. In his poem "The Rainbow", he calls the child the "father of the man" (p. 6). Wordsworth goes so far in his poem "Ode to Immortality" that he finds divinity in the child. While addressing the child, he writes "to me did seem /Apparelled in celestial light" (pp. 3-4). In his poem "The Prelude" he comes out as a nature worshipper and thinks that the moral and spiritual development of a child comes by living in close proximity with nature. For him nature is a guide to children. He also believes that childhood cannot survive in the materialistic world. He registers this transition from innocence to experience in "The Prelude" as a change from positivity to negativity. Wordsworth feels that from "the simple ways in which my childhood walked; that first led me to the love of rivers, woods and field" (book.ii pp, 3-4) he enters into the "The surfaces of artificial life /And manners finely wrought.....I neither knew nor cared for" (book.iii, pp. 80-85). Peter V. Marinelli considers Wordsworth's Prelude as an example that unites the pastoral of rural life with the pastoral of childhood" (p. 78). Laura Ingalls imbibes Wordsworth's philosophy about nature's transcendental significance for children but ties it to the changing landscape of the American pastoral.

Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* writes "Nature has long been reckoned a crucial ingredient of the American national ego" (p. 33). Laura Ingalls Wilder herself considers her novels as a record of American pastoral history. On October 16, 1937 Wilder while addressing a crowd of her readers gathered for a book fair at the J. L. Hudson department store in Detroit, Michigan gave her reasons for writing the Little House books. Thinking about her father's stories and her childhood, Wilder explained, "I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history . . . It seemed to me that my childhood had been much richer and more interesting than that of children today even with all the modern inventions and improvements" (as cited in Romines, p. 47).

Agrarian land offers the settlers a semblance of pastoral living with the touch of civilization and city. It is interesting to note however, that it is the liminal status of the land that prevents the settlers from feeling frustrated. Sigmund Freud investigates the desperate need to escape from civilization back to nature. He thinks of this impulse to retreat as part of fantasy-making, which shows man's hostility towards civilization. He writes in *General Introduction to Psycho analysis*, "The creation of the mental domain of phantasy has a complete counterpart in the establishment of reservations and nature-parks in places where the inroads of agriculture, traffic or industry threaten to change ...the earth rapidly into something unrecognizable. The reservation is to maintain the old condition of things which has been regrettably sacrificed to necessity everywhere else" (p. 114). Leo Marx seconds Freud's idea believing that it is civilization that makes men idealize the simple. Leo Marx rephrases it in these words, "This impulse gives rise to a symbolic motion away from centers of civilization toward their opposite, nature, away from sophistication towards simplicity" (p. 19). The aspect of nostalgia is central to much of children's literature. In her book *Aspects and Issues in the History of Children's Literature*, Maria Nikolajeva defines nostalgia as "homesickness" or "a painful yearning to return home" (p. 168). She maintains that it is associated with "the loss of rural simplicity, traditional stability and cultural integration following the impact of industrial, urban capitalist culture or feudal social organization" (p. 169). The child protagonist of *The Little House Series*, Laura does experience the construction of shops, shanties and the railway track on the prairies but the overall mood is not of nostalgia. Ma's constant insistence that Pa file a claim for a shanty and her eagerness to put the girls in a school in the town reflect the change in the thinking pattern of the settlers who now try to come to terms with the changing environment that has emerged with the intersection of pastoral and civilization. The Agrarian living is fulfilling for the settlers. On the one hand, it provides basic needs and institutions for material well-being and stability and at the same time, people stay close to nature and get all the adventures from it. Technology is their need but nature is their inspiration. Deep fascination for nature is shown through their adventures in the pastoral setting which serves as the revival of humanity's deepest innate connection with nature. In almost all the novels of the series, specifically of the beginning years, every chapter ends with Pa playing his fiddle and singing rustic songs to the girls. This adds to the enchanting atmosphere surrounding the prairies. Moreover, the decoration piece which is Ma's favourite, is a "pretty china shepherdess" (*On the Banks of Plum Creek* 103) which is an emblem of the family's inherent association with the traditional romantic character of the pastoral.

What appeals to the adults, is what influences the children. The pure delight and transcendental tranquility that nature offers is spiritually gratifying for the pioneer families, which directly affects and influences the thinking pattern and consequently the behavior of the children. In *The Long Winter*, Laura and Carrie, then ten years of age, go to the Fuller's hardware store in the town to get a tooth for Pa's machine. On their way back on Carrie's insistence, they "did not follow the road .They went straight on into the tall slough grass. It was rather like going into the jungle – picture in Pa's big green book" (p. 20). Early in October, the first snow blizzard hits the prairie. Laura as a child still admires the beauty of the frost, though it would be devastating for their wheat and vegetable produce. "She (Laura) knew that the bitter frost had killed the hay and the

garden. It would leave every green thing dead. But the frost was beautiful" (p. 28). This shows a shift in the way children process the role and influence of nature in their life.

Early theories of children's relationship with nature focus on the affinity between the two while later theories are more about the tension between the pastoral and the natural world. The interaction of these two strands is understudied in Wilder's fiction. This is exactly what this article proposes to do: to see if technological advancement weakens children's relationship with nature or simply transforms it into a more complex relationship combining emotional attachment with practical necessity.

Methodology

This article does a qualitative analysis of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series. The article uses the series as its primary text and processes it in the light of liminality. The primary theoretical framework of the article is Leo Marx's theory of American pastoralism, particularly his concept of the machine in the garden, while also drawing on ecocritical ideas of Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard. These theorists are bound together by the underlying concept of liminality that informs the major analytical thrust of the article. Laura Ingalls' works present a slightly extended and different concept of the organic relations between children and nature as developed by William Wordsworth. With the change in economics and institutions, even children's response to their natural environment undergoes change. Laura Ingalls makes the child-nature connection much stronger and lasting. For her the use of modern tools gives children a chance to enjoy and utilize the potential of nature to the maximum level, in order to have a better life while retaining their close contact with their pastoral surroundings. Laura Wilder's concept of childhood is full of optimism. She does not seem to lament over the fact that children are involved in farm labour as it does not dampen their spirits to find pleasure in nature. She never lets her child characters lose the transcendental delight in pastoral activities.

Discussion

The novel *The Long Winter* holds great significance as it shows Laura herself at the crossroads of childhood and adolescence. Laura, at a liminal age, looks at nature with a desire to feel pure pleasure under the stress of life. The protagonist Laura's personality comes through as an epitome of the agrarian integration of machine and garden. In *The Long Winter*, she shows childlike pleasure in pastoral excursions as well as an adult-like practical approach towards the physical environment. During the hard frost in October, the land is all covered with snow. When the weather is fine one morning, Laura wishes for a landscape without houses, "...the whole world is sparkling white....Only the houses spoil it. I wish we were where there aren't any houses" (p. 115). As pastoral presumably inhabits the world of happy and hearty sentiments, Laura feels more drawn towards it. The next episode showcases her worry over the delay of the locomotive which is expected to bring kerosene and meat for the town dwellers. This shows that as Laura nears her early adolescence and gets more involved in adult issues and responsibilities, she thinks and responds to the pastoral landscape more practically and less emotionally. Interestingly Laura's adjustment and acceptance to this new mode of living where innocent delight in nature gives way to a pragmatic use of the natural environment simultaneously brings out the essential difference between children's and adults' connection to nature.

In lieu of analyzing nature –child dynamics, it is imperative to take into account adults' connection to nature as the child-nature relationship gains importance in relation to the adult-nature connection. When the family finds a new town home, children like the furniture and the setting but wish for the same out in the claim. "I wish we had a place like this out on the claim, Laura said" (p. 73). However, Ma prefers home in the town as it is near the school. Even Pa believes that here in the town, there would be no shortage of supplies like coal or lumber to outlast the blizzards. Both Ma and Pa prefer the town as it ensures the supply of essential items of everyday living. Even Laura's perspective shifts as she steps into early adulthood in the novel *These Happy Golden Years*. At the age of fifteen, she is motivated to teach in a school to support her family. At one point she discloses to Almanza Wilder that farm work is difficult. This shows that as she experiences the world other than the land, she seems to be less excited about the farm work. This shows that an adult's affiliation with nature is not reciprocal, therefore not sustainable.

Laura's growing awareness of the family's financial problems in making both ends meet on the prairies makes her a responsible child. Her concern for her family's well-being is an outcome of the conventional ideology about family as a unit which is central to an individual's life. Laura Ingalls still maintains the traditional belief in parental authority. No change occurs in the constitution of the family's dreams and values. It's a middle-class family which attaches great importance to the conventional family set up. The family ideal remains as influential as ever. Laura's family, like the other families of the late nineteenth century children's literature, shows solidarity and keeps up their tradition. The ideal of a family as center, be it obtainable or not, remains intrinsic to children's literature. Both children and adults internalize the ideology of the ideal family. It is the inadvertent influence of the adults, of Ma and Pa, that Laura, despite being a child not only derives innocent pleasure from nature, she is also trained to use it for existence and subsistence. This is one of the reasons that, like adults, Laura shows eagerness and excitement about the railway line and locomotive that were to be introduced to their prairie very soon. In *The Long Winter* when Pa returns from the lumberyard after making a sled during the oppressive winter, Laura "wanted to ask him if he had any news of the train....if sunny weather lasted for a while, the train would come and there would be nothing to worry about" (p. 152). Laura waits patiently for the train to arrive with the expectation that it would bring all that is needed at home.

Thoreau's book *Walden* is the "report of an experiment in transcendental pastoralism" as Leo Marx puts it (p. 243). The book starts with the hero's withdrawal from the urban setting in the direction of nature. Thoreau juxtaposes the light blue pellucid water of the Walden Pond with the power of the machine, the train with its fire and smoke. At first this contrasts fear with hope with nature's first encounter with technology. Later in the book Thoreau has a more reconciling tone. He writes "...when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder...it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends" (p. 246). Leo Marx writes, "The sudden appearance of a machine in the garden is an arresting, endlessly evocative image. It causes the instantaneous clash of opposed states of mind; a strong urge to believe in the rural myth along with an awareness of industrialization as counterforce to the myth ... It is a complex, distinctively American form of romantic pastoralism" (p. 229).

Deborah Chambers argues that the period between the 1780s and 1840s was a key area of change from which the modern era of family emerged. The phenomenon of eventual acceptance of Industrialization occurred worldwide. The children's literature from around the world bears testimony to this fact. Sofia Fedorchenko is a Russian short story writer. She had been a volunteer nurse during the Imperialistic war. She started writing stories and tales for children in 1924, which mainly involved animals. Her story *How the machine Alarmed the Wild Animals*, showcases the animals that ultimately accept the invention of trains and acclimatize themselves to this change. The story draws a parallel to the acceptance of the engine by the settlers on the prairie. When the train passes through the forest the first time, the animals are greatly perturbed and frightened. The fox and the rodents run away and the rabbit hides itself in the thick bushes. However, gradually the animals resign themselves to the change to the extent that the bear becomes desirous of possessing the power of the machine. Another short story writer Marguerita Rudolph published his story *How a Shirt Grew in the Field* in 1930. The story is about a little Ukrainian boy Vasya who is taught by his family how a shirt is made by sowing flax. The flax is processed by cleaning, weaving and dyeing it in the sun. In the following December, Vasya and his sister Tania receive shirts which are "as white as snow" (Husband, p. 307).

Interestingly, in Laura's novels, though the traditional family still forms the ideological basis, the focus is expanded to the material aspect as well which is because of the Midwest pioneer experience that she went through as a child. "The modern family, which we generally recognize today as being nuclear, began to slowly emerge in the eighteenth century, and this family model was later almost sanctified, placed as it was on an ideological pedestal in the nineteenth century" (Alston, p. 117). The new economic climate out of which the American Pastoral ideal emerged, makes children resourceful instead of weak and vulnerable. The presumed traditional boundaries of childhood are dissolved to a great extent and the complexity of a child's relation with nature is because of the demands of the industrial age on the families. While a distinct parent/child divide remains in the texts of this turn-of-the-century period, the children are portrayed as freer to converse with adults. Relationships become increasingly flexible as siblings negotiate and even help to alleviate their parents' awkward situations. "The family at the turn of the century, and indeed in our contemporary texts, is a location in which adults as well as children grow emotionally" (Alston 110). Because of rising industrial capitalism, "the value of children" (p. 273) as Nancy D Chase puts it, was redefined. The cultural milieu set the precedent for children to get involved in farm labour. In Laura Ingalls' novel *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the third of the series, the family travels across Kansas and Missouri into Minnesota. Pa ploughs the big wheat field on the prairie at Plum creek. Laura, who is eight years old, thinks that once the harvest is ready "they would have a house, and candy everyday" (p. 53). As adult attitudes determine and influence the mindset and behavior of the children, the idea of a better living becomes akin to material security and stability for these settlers' children. The pioneer experience could only be successful if the settlers were to gain material benefit out of the wilderness. The changing idea of pastoral changes the responsibilities associated with childhood. Now Laura helps in labour work as a child. She drives the cattle away that get into the haystack. In *The Long Winter*, Pa goes into the lean-to to twist hay to be used for warming the house. Even Laura's little sister Carrie is grinding hay at the

coffee mill. "It worried her (Laura) to see how Carrie was so exhausted from grinding....and the whirling winds driving the snow , whirling and beating Pa...whirling forever on the endless prairie" (p. 254) . In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, when Pa goes out to get a new job and their pet dog Jack dies, Laura feels the absence of male protection. "Laura knew that she was not a girl anymore. Now she was alone: she must take care of herself. When you must do that, then you do it and you are grown up" (p.14). Later in the novel, their little house on the prairie becomes like a motel where the preacher, homesteaders, and railroaders come and lodge for a while. In this novel, the family moves to five different places in one year. In the novel *These Happy Golden Years*, Laura is fifteen years old. At this young age, she has to take up a teaching job in a school to support her family.

The idea of children becoming more responsible with the onset of capitalism and industrialization has been an important subject matter in American fiction. Another American juvenile novel *Little Women* written by Louisa May Alcott, is set against the background of the war. The setting is American, with a family of four daughters. Realizing the distressful time the family is going through , the eldest three daughters Meg who is sixteen, Jo, fifteen and Beth who is only thirteen years of age are working to help the family make both ends meet since the father is fighting at the front. Meg expresses her resentment to her daughters on the subject of spending money on themselves in these words "...teaching those tiresome children nearly all day when I am longing to enjoy myself at home" (p. 8). John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* shows a mass-scale migration from rural to urban cities in search of material security. Thousands of men and women undertake this migration in the 1930's from their homestead to the promised land of California but the movement turns out to be a catastrophic experience for the people. Through this migration, John Steinbeck shows his trust in the young generation that seems to take charge and becomes resourceful. When the Joad family, like other migrants, is faced with fretful floods on their way, they see a dying man in a rain-soaked barn. Rose of Sharon, the eighteen-year-old Joad daughter, kneels down and lets the dying man feed off her. "Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You Got To." She said" (p.455).

What makes child-nature connection so complex as compared to its Romantic perspective, is the period that marks American farming history. Many American books were selected by Japanese GHQ for the postwar public. One of the books chosen is *The Long Winter*. The local newspaper explains the relevance of the novel with postwar Japan in these words "The traditional great American spirit illuminated in this book teaches us that we need the most to overcome hardships and each bliss is not a splendid act of heroism but a little honesty, diligence, creation and courage in our daily life" (as cited.in Lucas, p. 34). The shortage of basic resources, starvation and an uncertain future give a distressed childhood to the girls. From very early in life, the girls develop a knack for substituting hunger for food with hunger for adventure. For them, it's an immigrant life, in which uncertainty prevails all the time. Bich Nguyen writes "Every time the Ingallses move, they have to break new sod and start a new farm from scratch" (Lucas, 32). The outlook and expectations from nature and pastoral living of these children belonging to the industrial age are different. *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, since the wheat is growing abundantly, Pa shifts the family to a house, for the first time in their lives, with glass windows and a cookstove. Pa's words sketch the perfect picture of an

agrarian rather than a romantic pastoral when he tells Ma "don't worry about the expense. Just look through that glass at the wheat field" (p. 103). Nature is still a source of pleasure for Laura but as a child of an upcoming industrialized land, she learns to meet the demands of her time. Nature, instead of losing its fascination for the children, takes on an additional importance and meaning for them, ensuring a more fulfilling contact, spiritually as well as materially. In *On the Shores of Silver Lake*, when the family is eventually able to file a homestead for themselves, Laura with her family enjoys the happiest days ever. New Year is celebrated with a sumptuous dinner like never before with homemade oyster crackers with honey, and hot biscuits with raspberry sauce and in the mornings, Laura together with her sisters play in the deep snow and slide on the ice of the Silver Lake. "Laura had never laughed so much" (p. 206). What completes Laura's happiness is neither the pure wilderness, nor the promising town settlements, rather the balance and the simultaneous presence of the two: nature and technology.

Laura Ingalls's narrative never insists upon the supremacy of man over nature. The status of nature is not undermined. Though Laura Ingalls, the writer, successively portrays the importance of pioneer experience and post-industrial existence, she simultaneously reinforces the idea of nature as continuously nurturing for humans in many ways. If animals are saved by men, the settlers are also nurtured by nature on different occasions. Pa thinks of killing Ellen, the calf and a heifer Calf if there is a shortage of wheat during the cold month of February. Moreover when the snow blizzards hit the town for seven months, the settlers starve for food. Wilder boys, the only farmers who are living in the lap of luxury, haul hay and supply it to the town on their horses at a cheaper price. During the hard frost for several months, the most awaited train that was to bring meat and other eatables and essentials for the settlers could not run through the prairie till Springtime and the only thing that Laura could see through the window is the "horses' hoofs trotting rapidly before her eyes. Eight grey hoofs, with slender brown ankles swiftly bending and straightening" (Wilder, p. 233). Even when Almanzo Wilder and Cap go to the town in the East, only their horse Prince is able to cross treacherous sloughs in the windy cold weather. Nature compensates for and fills the gap left by the machine. The whirling snow and wild storms bring in their wake scarcity of coal, kerosene and meat which add to the difficulties of the pioneer farmers. It is only the pastoral surroundings that could provide them with food: potatoes, beans, stacks and tomatoes. Nature by turns becomes hostile and a provider, posing challenges and also offering solutions.

In postindustrial living, nature and technology become interdependent. Pa needs the mowing machine to make wheat cutting less time consuming and more efficient. *The Long Winter* opens with the "mowing machine's whirring sounded cheerfully from the old buffalo wallow south of the claim shanty" (p. 1). However, it is noteworthy that the mowing machine is drawn by the horses Sam and David. Despite their hunger being satiated with the supply of the wheat on the horses, Laura and her younger sister Carrie long for the train to come through as "there was no more coal or kerosene and no meat until a train could come....and if sunny weather lasted, the train would come" (p. 152). This interdependence dissolves the binaries of subordination and supremacy. Lawrence Buell affirms this phenomenon in these words "If culture goes, so to speak, all the way 'down' into nature, nature must likewise come all the way 'up' into human existence"

(p. 158). Agrarian children live in surroundings where the natural process is visible at every moment. For them, like Laura and Carrie, nature is neither subservient to humans nor is technology all-encompassing. Both are needed for human existence, particularly for the people living at the transitional phase of primitivism and material progress.

The confrontation of two opposing forces of garden and machine makes the division between nature and culture more precise. Wilder's novels serve to comment on the interplay of nature and culture in a subtle manner. Laura's unsettling nature that switches between pastoral activities and education at home reflects the division in her own personality. She feels herself bound to nature. Her constant delight in identifying herself with her father constantly comes into direct conflict with her efforts at learning household fineness and civilized manners from her mother. Jameson writes in his article "In Search of the Great Man," "Laura identifies with Pa. She likes to work outdoors with him; like him, she wants to keep moving" (as cited in Lucas, p. 50). The representation of intergenerational conflict which showcases mother's longing for luxuries and institutions of the modern period and their daughters rejecting these imports from the civilized world is very common in pioneer literature. Maher in her book *Laura Ingalls and Caddie Woodland* views such mothers "as conveyors of Eastern manners and fashions, of domestic protocol, modify, even hinder, the girls' attachment to the native soil." Ma's housekeeping is considered akin to culture i.e., moving away from nature. Thoreau objects and mocks at the housewife's domestic interests in cooking and fashion. observes that "To Thoreau woman signifies "social", which signifies "culture, interfering with the mind, the self and nature." (p.174.) In one of the chapters titled, "Economy" in *Walden*, Thoreau criticizes the aesthetics shown by the nineteenth century women in housekeeping and dressing. Thoreau believes that such indulgence distracts the individual from the spiritual simplicity and purity one finds in nature. In Laura Ingalls's third novel *Big Woods*, Ma styles her daughters' hair with ribbons and curls. She constantly makes her daughters conscious of the artistic skills and expertise in household chores. In the first novel of the series *The Little house on a Prairie*, the family travels in a wagon to Kansas. After Pa leaves the family on the open land, Ma takes out her iron and starts ironing clothes in the wagon, while the children lie on the grass. Ma's ironing symbolizes order and creating something out of nothing. "Ma hummed softly to herself while the iron smoothed all the wrinkles out of the little dresses. All around them, to the very edge of the world, there was nothing but grasses waving in the wind" (p. 14).

Laura, the protagonist, stands at the crossroads of nature and culture. She, being a child, has to learn ways of living. Ma is her mentor, the model whose footsteps she is to follow. But the new standards and ways of survival make her realize her deep attachment with nature more acutely. Instinctively Laura feels more drawn towards nature and feels excited in being part of it. *On the Shores Of Silver Lake* gives glimpses into this untainted and almost complete connection of the child to nature through Laura's excursions into the natural world. While being exhilarated at the sight of the radiant snowy paths and a glittering lake in the moonlit night, "Laura's heart swelled. She felt herself a part of the wide land, of the far deep sky and the brilliant moon-light. She wanted to fly" (p. 165). Interestingly the binary opposition of nature and culture is reconciled in her personality like Ma and Pa. In her person, the ideals espoused by the pioneer pastoral living do not

leave out or abandon nature. Laura, the heroine of the series, transcends social pretensions and importations in her naivety and innocence of childhood. She stays attached to her father and finds his work more fascinating than household chores. While lodging in a dugout at Plum Creek in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Pa "often said he did not know how he could manage without Laura. She helped him to make the door for the log house in Indian Territory...she helped him carry the leafy boughs and went with him to the stable" (p. 12). However, at the same time during her early years, Laura is constantly being instructed and involved in household chores by Ma. As Laura grows and reaches adolescence in *These Happy Golden Years*, she is very much like her mother. She teaches in a school and is considered to be a fine, young lady who is conscious of the proprieties of a civilized setup. This shows that as Laura's age is drawing near adulthood, she is trained to adopt the culture of community and social institutions. As she is leaving her early years behind, she is also moving away from deriving pleasure only from pastoral land. At one point in *These Happy Golden Years*, after becoming a teacher, she discloses to Almanzo Wilder that she finds farm work difficult.

Peter V. Merinelli believes "The emphasis on childhood is basically a Romantic innovation based on the notion that the clear natural vision of the child is somehow superior to that of the man.... the innocence attributed to the child may be only the projection of the author's imaginings about that earlier state of life, and they are bound to be coloured by his experience and by his nostalgia." (p. 77). Wilder's account of pastoral setup considers nature and farm living favourable to children. Laura Ingalls, the writer, seems to advocate the educational theory much favoured by the American public that "nature was the best teacher." (*Ecocriticism*, p. 157). The belief of American public in the didactic and sincerely moral aspect of agrarian life is evidenced by the fact that during Laura Ingalls Wilder's life, the activists for child labour reform, exempted farm work. Viviana Zelizer shares the information that by 1900 in America, about sixty percent of all child labourers (ten to fifteen years old) were working on farms. She writes "If defending factory work was unusual, farm labour, on the other hand, was almost blindly and romantically categorized as good work" (as cited in Blackford, p. 177). Blackford further writes, "Wilder continually wrote about country life as the epitome of goodness" (p.177).

Conclusion

The *Little House Series* falls into many genres: children's fiction, historical fiction, travelogue, and an autobiography. The feelings and emotions aroused by the author in an autobiography are more trustworthy and reliable since the author and the character are one person. Peter V. Marinelli further writes in *Pastoral*, "It becomes a matter of real difficulty to disentangle the art of the adult author from the supposed naturalness of the child of whom he writes" (p. 78). The *Little House Series* is an autobiography written in retrospect. Memory plays a great role in bringing back glimpses of the past. It works in such a manner that it amplifies the important events from the past and obliterates the unimportant ones from the mind. The narrative of this series never deviates from describing scenes from nature. The pastoral imagery is extremely vivid and abundant. These long descriptive passages of scenic beauty bear testimony to the author's vivid recollections of the prairies, revealing her heartfelt attachment to natural surroundings. Though Laura starts living in a more comfortable house on the Plum Creek, still "she missed the sound of the creek singing to her in her sleep" (p. 27). During the harvesting season,

while stacking up the wheat, "Laura burrowed her face in it, smelling deeper and deeper....and she had never seen the sky so blue" (p. 47). Through her novels, it is manifested that children are more in harmony with nature. In fact, aligning with town and community seems vexing though necessary to Laura. As children rely more on their senses than understanding and derive pleasure from these senses, this establishes their natural affinity with nature. The above analysis of Laura Ingalls's pastoral work, *The Long Winter*, elucidates that in the American pastoral ideal, nature coexists and is part of the world infused with technology; therefore, for children, pastoral still retains its quality of being plentiful, easy, and instructive. The pastoral landscape presented by Laura Ingalls is not as perfect and peaceful as that of antiquity, but it preserves some distant gleams of the golden age when wilderness and innocence were synonymous. The study also brings to light that since the inclusion of modern tools for production on the untamed land is promising for the settlers' community, the children brought up in the transitional phase of development get involved and accept the new dynamics of engaging with and harmonizing with nature, which encompasses pure joy as well as material well-being.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Sarah Abdullah: conceptualization, theoretical refinement, critical analysis, manuscript revision, restructuring, editing, proofreading; **Sadaf Javed:** conceptualization, theoretical framework, research, literature review, textual analysis, critical analysis, interpretation

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