

PLAYING PIONEER: IMAGINATION, MYTHOLOGY, ARTISTRY AND PLAY IN
LAURA INGALLS WILDER'S LITTLE HOUSE

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THESIS ABSTRACT

“Playing Pioneer: Imagination, Mythology, Artistry and Play in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s
Little House”

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Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* series is a fictionalized account of Wilder’s childhood growing up in a family settling the American frontier in the late nineteenth-century. As much as the series is about childhood and the idyllic space of the blank, uncultivated frontier, it is about a girl growing into a woman, replacing childhood play and dreams with an occupation, sense of meaning, and location as an adult, woman, citizen, and artist. In this essay, I explore the depictions of play in the series as their various iterations show Laura’s departure from childhood and mirror the cultivation and development of the frontier itself. In my reading, I locate four distinct elements of play to answer these questions: Laura’s interactions and negotiations with various doll figures; her use of play as a tool to explore and bend boundaries and gender prescriptions; play as an industrious act intermingled with work; and her play with words, which allows her to transition out of childhood into a meaningful role as artist, playing an important role in the mythologizing and narration of the American frontier story.

In the third book in the Little House series, Laura nearly drowns. *On the Banks of Plum Creek* finds the Ingalls living in an underground sod shanty, and Laura and Mary play in the nearby Plum Creek every day in the summer. Forbidden by her parents from going near the “deep, dark water” at one end of the creek (“even to look at it”), Laura still sneaks away alone twice to swim and play. The second time she goes, just after a rain storm, the high, rushing water takes hold of her. Trapped in its stronghold, clinging to a log, “Laura knew the creek was not playing.” The creek “was strong and terrible. . . . It was not laughing now.” Laura escapes alive, shaken, but emerges with a lesson. “The creek would go down,” she reasons. “It would be a gentle, pleasant place to play again. But nobody could make it do that. Nobody could make it do anything. Laura knew now that there were things stronger than anybody. But the creek had not got her. It had not made her scream and it could not make her cry” (Plum Creek 106). What began as innocent, mischievous play has become a life-or-death situation. Significant in this scene is that Laura is by herself. She does not even scream or cry. When she confesses her misdeed to her parents, her only punishment is the knowledge that she could have been killed. The scene is titillating. Laura learns a lesson, yes. But the drama of the scene is more affecting. It shows the unique setting of the pioneer landscape that afforded such thrilling misadventures for Laura to play. It is titillating in the same way it excited me to read, in *Little House in the Big Woods*, about Laura and her sister bopping around a pig’s bladder like a beach ball, the organ I imagined still warm from the wild boar Pa has just slaughtered on butchering day. Dissecting each part of the pig for the family’s winter sustenance is, Laura declares, “Great fun.” Or the corn cob wrapped in a handkerchief that Laura names Susan, without a real rag doll to play with.

The Little House series, often remembered, as if from the name only, as a story of coziness, domesticity and wholesomeness actually contains quite a lot of grit and frightening experiences for its girl narrator. Jerry Griswold, in outlining the five major elements of children's literature (snugness, scariness, smallness, lightness and aliveness), connects the series with two contrasting traits: snug and scary (Griswold 23-34). The "little house" on the various landscapes, actually, in the only shelter against a litany of threats: nearly drowning the family while fording a creek in their covered wagon (nearly killing the dog), devastating illness, near starvation, blizzards, drought, and the constant threat of displacement. Perhaps this is why the series is appealing the children. In its realness and grit, it presents an exciting account of a time in history when things were uncertain, but grownups and kids worked together to prevail. The child protagonist, Laura, does all the things a normal child would, except under rather extraordinary circumstances. This is why I look to play to study the books. As a children's text, the books provide an idyllic narrative of an actual child's life, coupled with a charged, disputed, and mythologized historical context.

The Little House series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, nine semi-autobiographical fictional accounts that span publication from 1932 to 1943 (1971 if you count the last book), tells two stories. First, it tells the story of a young girl growing up. Second, it tells a story of American westward expansion in the late nineteenth century, the background and setting that is inherently a character itself. Examining the way that Laura as a child character participates in various and shifting forms of play throughout the series, I map her development into an adult

against the particular backdrop of the American frontier. As Laura negotiates gender roles, participates in the settlement and industry of Westward expansion, she uses play as a tool for discovery and rebellion. Ultimately, I argue that the ways that she “plays” with words is instrumental in her emergence as an artist of words – one who both participates in and complicates the mythology of the frontier. I will look first at the tools of play, closely reading various doll figures presented in the books, as they present ideas of femininity, domesticity, capitalism, and self-image. Next, I turn to the various ways that Wilder presents play as a transcendent tool that allows her to rebel against prescriptions and blur boundaries. I look at the particular way that industry and play are intertwined in the series, and the way that Laura finds an identity in the work of play. Finally, her childhood play is transformed into a playful and creative attitude toward language, which allows her not only to narrate her childhood and life, but also the storied history of the frontier.

From infancy, children play in order to learn about the world around them, and to define themselves, to, as Anna Stetsenko and Pi-Chun Grace Ho write, “create novelty, transcend the given, and project into the future” (Stetsenko 2). In its essence, play is paradoxical: it can be constructive, informing who the child will be, but it is an act outside of constructive work, solely for joy and pleasure. In Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932), Laura and her sister play ball with a pig’s bladder their father blows up for them, an exciting part of the butchering of his wild boar. Everyone plays a role in “Butchering Day,” the bounty of the meat and the interworking parts of the butchering a delight even to the young Laura. The combination of resource, food, survival and pleasure is fascinating to the modern reader because of its rawness, and

crucial to the series because of its ostensible accuracy. Everything Wilder recounts, it is emphasized, really happened. It is a true depiction of life, toil, and childhood during the tumultuous – and mythologized – expansion of the American west during the 19th century. Wilder seemed to be keenly aware of her story's placement in the historical retelling of this time in history. Throughout the series, she presents to readers a fictionalized picture of what she termed her “wonderful childhood,” which spanned the uncertain, wild and romantic coming-of-age of the American frontier in the late 19th century following the Homestead Act of 1862, from when Laura was a toddler to when she married and started a family of her own. The books present Wilder's recollection of her youth as she had, as Wilder later said, “seen and lived it all – all the successive phases of the frontier, first the frontiersmen, then the pioneer, then the farmers and the town. . . . Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history” (Fellman 66). What began as a single book memorializing her father's stories became a series about the development of a young girl as she discovered her own voice and identity and a landscape being broken, cultivated and defined by settlers. The story would become, as Elizabeth Jameson writes, “Probably our best-known story of a mythic female frontier” (Jameson 42). As a story about a girl growing into a woman, as well as an artist and storyteller (making the series a *bildungsroman*), the ways that Laura as a child character plays in various roles show a pathway to her ultimate destination. Viewing it through the lens of play, we see the way that play reflects her development, and further, that she uses play

as a tool to transgress boundaries, to define herself, and to ultimately define herself as an artist and a writer.

The story of the American frontier is embedded in our collective memories, a creation story recited and retold in exuberant versions of fiction and history, intermingled, sometimes indistinguishable. Frederick Jackson Turner wrote of it as “the true point of view in the history,” that the viewpoint of the American future was not the Atlantic coast, the looking back toward Europe that had once characterized the nation, but the “great West” – the one period of history that pushed America to cultivate its own culture, separate from Europe, and define the “peculiarly American tendencies” that arose from this movement: a “restless, nervous energy” that filled the restless frontier, an enthusiasm and idealism that was, arguably, childlike in its vitality (Turner 3,6). The relentless energy and spirit of the frontiersman came to be ascribed to the frontier’s success. But the story of the West is also a myth, its history blurred so often with fiction that it is hard to distinguish between the two. We love telling and retelling the stories of the West, so much so that David Hamilton Murdoch has written that, “No other nation has taken a time and place from its past and produced a construct of the imagination equal to America’s creation of the West” (Murdoch vii). Our accounts of the frontier, Murdoch argues, are fabricated with fictional characters and glossy, attractive versions of the landscape that were carefully orchestrated (mostly by people in the East, away from the actual activity) to create an American mythology of independence and self-sufficiency. Theodore Roosevelt drew on his time on Montana on a cattle ranch to win the vote for presidency in 1933; James Fennimore Cooper sold hundreds of dime novels filled with formulaic pulp stories about the landscape; Frederic Remington painted

portraits of brave cowboys and romantic vistas; Buffalo Bill's Wild West reenacted the events almost as soon as the West was "won." The American spirit as we conceptualize and romanticize it today can be traced back to the narrative of the American frontier spirit, cultivated in the years after the frontier closed. It is, perhaps, why Wilder (and her business savvy daughter) found it a worthy venture to retell the story. Depression-era readers, weary of their difficult present, wanted to lose themselves in an idyllic and heroic past – a fun and adventurous past. Wilder's story was compelling enough to do this. Anita Clair Fellman posits that Wilder's historical fiction series itself is so embedded in our nation's identity that its mythology and presentation of a particular time in history have even seeped into our politics. Wilder's story has spawned a television show, musicals, product franchises, countless reprints, and a stamp in our collective knowledge of the frontier. Fellman writes:

If the myth of the West is the main source of American individualism, then the Little House books have helped strengthen that link. The books found ready acceptance as realistic portrayal of the frontier and as true Americana because their version of the nation's past was in accord with many popular conceptions of the day, posing no real challenges to the stories of themselves that Americans liked to tell (Fellman 76).

There is an element of creative play in our retelling of the frontier story. The push westward might have been, in actuality, a political and economic imperialistic move, but those outside of the experiment saw it as a grand experience, an unruly landscape that housed unbridled desires and corruption. Roosevelt, writing on his brief time in Montana, wrote that the West was a land "to make a man's blood leap with sheer buoyant light-heartedness and eager, exultant pleasure in the boldness and freedom of the life he is leading" (Murdoch

68). The east created the west, gleaned from its Arthurian tradition a resolution and answer for the state of the present nation, and, as Murdoch writes, “wallowed in nostalgia – for a world which had of course never existed” (Murdoch 65).

The cowboys, Indians, and heroes of Western dime novels made the grueling reality look fun. The mythic West is an imaginary game peopled with characters, high stakes, imaginary, infused with pretend, with clear good guys and villains. The wild popularity of the lo-fi computer video game “The Oregon Trail,” created in 1977, is a testament to our love of reliving this period of history. The raw survival required of the pioneers fascinates us. In retelling it, we step into the role of these heroic characters, and allow ourselves to play. I see an important connection between the child-like approach we have to the frontier and the success and appeal of this story, told through the eyes of a child as she grows up with the frontier. The frontier itself is a *tabula rasa*, its narrative continually unfolding for Laura through the eyes of the reader, who gazes at it through the lens of the past. Laura ultimately develops into the author who would record this period of history, and this is a crucial point of the series. Wilder authors her childhood, and also provides a vital portion of the narrative and myth of the West as we know it.

As a story about a girl growing into a woman, as well as an artist and storyteller (*bildungsroman*), the ways that Laura as a child character plays in various roles show a pathway to her ultimate destination. Viewing it through the lens of play, we see the way that play reflects Laura’s development, and further, that she uses play as a tool to transgress boundaries, to define herself, and to ultimately define herself as an artist and a writer. What makes this time period, and Wilder’s recollection of a child growing up amongst it, so compelling? Because, as the frontier historian Elliot West writes, “Like all

children, those in the West were both changing and being changed by what was around them. Of all the pioneers, they felt the frontier's shaping force most of all" (West xix). Children born on the frontier were dropped in the middle of the chaos of a grand experiment, forced to toil and eke out an identity in the liminal space provided for them. For children on the frontier – in fact, one in five pioneers were children until the California Gold Rush – the serious work of creating the frontier landscape was blurred with their childhood, play as their "work" mingled with very real survival. The pioneer himself was a child, defining himself, playing house, building space. The child figure on the frontier, then, is also self-constructed, constantly being revised and redefined.

How is play presented in the Little House series, and what does it present to us about the condition and realities of childhood during nineteenth-century Westward expansion? The frontier lifestyle created a particular culture and presented a particular set of challenges to the families raising children, and to children themselves. To begin to look at play in these books, it is important to situate them in historical context in regards to childhood and play. The real-life Ingalls' family was part of the movement of hundreds of settlers who took advantage of the 1862 Homestead Act that opened up the Western frontier to settlers and farmers. As young Laura's family was helping to cultivate and define the land and culture of the frontier, notions of childhood and play were undergoing a shift in the American mind as well. Many scholars argue (Philippe Aries in his *Centuries of Childhood* among the most predominant) that childhood is a cultural construct that did not emerge as an idea until around the 16th century.

Until then, children were seen as miniature adults. Until the eighteenth century, a child born into a rural family would have been a welcome member of the labor force of the family unit, employed to help with the family's industry and upkeep as soon as they were physically able. Play was something children did, but it was not necessarily encouraged. In fact, too much leisure was discouraged and frowned upon in Western European cultures. In the mid-nineteenth century, rapid industrialization widely and regularly employed children, their small bodies and nimble fingers welcome commodities (it wasn't until 1870 that an American census even distinguished between child and adult workers). But activists and advocates for children began to push for labor regulations that would bar children from long hours and hardship. The new paradigm – though widely contested and disputed – was that children needed education; that in fact, they deserved it. And alongside this, children *deserved* leisure. Play became, as the idea of the child himself had become, a romanticized, coveted, and sought-after thing, worthy of fierce protection and the locus for adult fantasy. The innocent, romantic child was shielded from hardship, work, and corruption. Felix Adler, the first chairman of the National Child Labor Committee said in 1905 said that to make profit out of children was to “touch profanely a sacred thing” (Zelizer 56). Viviana Zelizer outlines the move from child as worker to child as a fetishized, precious object as a phenomenon that made the child “economically worthless, but emotionally priceless” (Zelizer 56-102).

As labor became more regulated, education, work and play were increasingly structured and theorized. Just five years before Laura Ingalls was born, in 1860, Elizabeth Peabody opened the first English-speaking Kindergarten in America (previous schools had been in German), espousing the idea that play had intrinsic educational value.

Peabody had been influenced by Friedrich Froebel's philosophy that play was not only a natural occurrence for children, but a nearly sacred act that needed to be both revered and guided. Froebel's idea of "free work" both elevated play to a form of industry and mingled the two as equally important acts. Play was constructive, indicative of a child's self, reflective of his emotional state, development, and upbringing, and predictive of who the child would become. Froebel even called creative play a "gift," and produced his own educational toys to enhance the child's inherent creativity.

The frontier presented a particular backdrop for children, and for play. If children elsewhere were sequestered from adult life in nurseries, frontier children were in the thick of the adult sphere. Schooling was sporadic and dependent on the family's proximity to a town or a school. Constant mobility and transience meant that children might have had few playmates. Gender roles, too, were disrupted in the sometimes chaotic space of the frontier. One way for parents to combat this, frontier historians report, was to present children with proper toys that prescribed gender and labor roles to them. This is conflict is present in the *Little House* series. Throughout it Ma expresses dismay at the chaotic and uncultured landscape where she is raising her girls. Ironing their dresses on the back of the covered wagon, continuously reminding them to lower their voices (though who could hear them?), her reliable constant in cultivating even the shabbiest shelter into a homey space, and the occasional hint of Ma's more cultured past "back East" – Caroline Ingalls constantly shows that she is trying desperately to normalize her girls amongst the wild chaos of her country life. The

character of Ma surely reflects an accurate picture of a certain kind of pioneer woman.

A tool for providing some normalcy was the doll. Though by no means a new concept, the doll had become widely more available in the late eighteenth century, resulting in a “conspicuous doll culture” that reflected economic status and also emerging as a tool for mothers to raise “useful” girls. If frontier mothers could not, or did not care to, present their children with overt expressions of a consumer and social sphere, their dolls could at least present some semblance of decorum.

‘Prettier than any doll’: Dolls, Girlhood, and Occupation

After the Civil War, dolls were mass-produced and marketed toward mothers as playthings that would aid in making their girls “useful.” They could learn to sew by making clothes for their dolls, showcased fashion with their clothing, and became commodities to show. They could also instill in girls practice in social traditions, signifiers, and decorum through imitative play, and even imbue them with early ideas of maternal, even romantic, love. These ideas were presented in play manuals, women’s magazines, and marketing geared toward mothers, who especially in urban middle class families were spending more time shopping and consuming than ever before. Formarek-Brunnel argues in her article “The Politics of Dollhood” that dolls “served as training in everything but emotional development” (Formarek-Brunnel 363). She goes on to argue that while dolls were often symbols for prescriptive play, girls found ways to subvert and reinterpret the messages their dolls conveyed, playing with them in creative and inventive

ways. To start my close reading of play, I look to the figure of the doll in the Little House books, and the ways that they map a trajectory for Laura, developmentally and culturally. Laura consumes, reinterprets and reconfigures literal doll figures in the books, and ascribes some of the lessons the dolls present onto other figures, who I will argue serve as “doll figures.”

The figure of the doll in children’s literature is significant because of the ways that it idealizes, mimics, and distorts actual bodies. The doll, created for play, both informs and reflects the values of the culture from which it comes. . As much as it is about play and childhood, the Little House story is about putting away play, the departure from the innocence of childhood as she realizes herself as an adult. The doll symbolizes Laura’s journey through childhood, preparing her for her future domestic and female roles, and expresses the particular tension and nuance that the pioneer girl embodies. In my reading, I see doll figures transmuted to represents various facets of Laura’s development, rebellions, resistance and negotiation with her role as a girl.

The first doll object is literally transformed from one thing to another, reflecting an important change in Laura as well. In an early scene in *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura plays in the womb-like space of the cabin’s attic with Mary, who has a “real doll,” while Laura plays with a corn cob wrapped in a handkerchief. This detail primarily serves to illustrate the family’s poverty. If children in “the east” or urban centers were playing with mass-produced, factory-made toys, frontier families made do with their spare resources. But the corn cob doll in the well-stocked attic, well stocked with a bounty of food, also represents

the Eden-like innocence of Laura's early childhood in the first half of the Big Woods, before she is exposed to the knowledge of consumer culture that the doll represents.

When she receives her rag doll Charlotte as a Christmas gift, it is significant also because it is the first thing that Laura actually owns. The moment is ceremonial. The family stands back and watches as Laura is rendered speechless by the beautiful doll. "She was so beautiful that Laura could not say a word" It is also the first time Laura judges some things to be more value than others, as she prizes and prices her various gifts. "Laura sat down on the bed and held her doll. She loved her red mittens and she loved the candy, but she loved her doll best of all. She named her Charlotte." Naming the doll, perhaps more than anything, cements ownership (*Big Woods* 76).

Charlotte is also significant because she is the first prescription of femininity Laura receives; though presented as a gift from Santa Claus, it is clear that Ma has constructed the doll, a mirror and model for Laura with her a "face of white," "black button eyes," a red mouth dyed with pokeberries," black yarn hair and a full outfit of calico, stockings, and shoes (*Big Woods* 74). Charlotte serves as what D.W. Winnicott calls a connecting transitional object between Laura and her mother, both a prescription for the woman she might become and an item that she owns all her own. Winnicott's transitional object is an item that moves the child from its erotogenic impulses – fist, thumb – to outside objects, provided by and thus connected to the mother, but moving the child's consciousness into the world. The transitional object is the first "not me" thing he understands, but still safely within the orbit of the mother's realm. From the possession of and attachment to this object, the child develops an awareness of his inner reality ("that can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war") and their outer reality. There

is a membrane between the inner and outer, Winnicott suggests, that creates a “resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (Winnicott 1-2, 86-88). In taking ownership of her own doll, Laura emerges from the womb of the snug cabin space, where she is safe under Pa’s watchful eye and the gun over the door, into a wider world. Arguably, from the moment Laura receives her doll she moves further and further from the safety of the Little House. We see this when the family takes a trip to the nearby town, a disorienting experience for Laura. Laura has never left the sphere of the little cabin, and she is overwhelmed by the wideness of the space, then the sheer number of things in the general store where the family shops. She also struggles with her first experience of feeling compared to her sister, Mary.

Ma prepares the girls for their presentation in town by emphasizing their appearance, much like dolls. She curls their hair (Laura notes for the first time Mary’s “beautifully golden” hair and her own, “only dirt-colored brown” (*Big Woods* 161). Later, she has a meltdown when she collects so many pebbles at a pit stop by a creek that she rips the pocket of her dress. Laura begins to show her first signs of rebellion as well, as she expresses resistance to her mother’s beliefs and has “naughty” thoughts, which she conceals. The comparison with Mary is a first indication of Laura’s awareness of herself as a person – and as a member of the commodity culture she observes in the store – a kind of doll figure herself.

Prescriptions of femininity can also be read in the paper dolls Ma makes for them, having drawn the faces and making pretty dresses, complete with hats,

ribbons and lace. These two-dimensional representations of femininity, like Charlotte, are Ma's own prescription for the girls, her didactic message of the possibilities for womanhood – and, possibly, the limitations of it as well. Notable too, is that the dolls are presented “After the day's work was done,” and that, although the girls like to play with the dolls, “the best time of all was at night, when Pa came home” (*Big Woods* 33). Both Ma's prowess as a home-maker and the luxuries of fashion are emphasized in the dolls, but Pa's paternal presence is most important of all. Laura and Mary internalize these values and reenact the domestic tranquility they observe in their parents' models in their play, setting up separate playhouses in their yard. Each has their doll, a wooden man made by Pa, and a dish (thrift and re-use are emphasized: they are not new items, but a “cracked saucer” and “a beautiful cup with only one big piece broken out of it.”) (*Big Woods* 157). This is what Piaget calls imitative play, or assimilation: “with the socialization of the child, play acquires rules or gradually adapts symbolic imagination to reality in the form of constructions which are still spontaneous but which imitate reality” (Piaget 87).

The Ingalls home sphere is, in some ways, similar to the home in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, where, as Holly Blackford writes, the “matriarchal household in which objects and people are not separate,” but are sacred vessels that define the girls' identity and their relationship with the outer world. “Objects,” she writes, “ease the pain of separation from the mother by allowing mother and daughter to be separate subjects yet connected and communicating through feminine objects” (Blackford 2). For Laura, this idea rings true for a time, but eventually changes. Although Ma is upheld as a goddess, she is not, like Marmee in Alcott's book, a soft and comfortable, all-engulfing

maternal entity. Rather, she comes to represent stability and nourishment, but also limitations and disapproval for Laura, as we see in the next book, *Little House on the Prairie*.

The end of the book brings the arrival of “the wonderful machine,” a threshing plow that revolutionizes – and mechanizes – Pa’s labor and ushers the family into a new era. The change is dramatic, for in the second installment in the series, the Ingalls strike out of the Big Woods to head west to “Indian Country.” This is a definite breaking point for Laura. At first as disoriented by the vastness of space as she was when the family ventured into Pepin from the Big Woods cabin, she comes to prefer and to love the prairie. When Pa waxes poetic about the freedom of the prairie’s ample space, “Laura knew what he meant. She liked this place, too. She liked the enormous sky and the winds, and the land that you couldn’t see to the end of. Everything was so fresh and clean and splendid” (*Prairie* 74-75). While Ma struggles to keep the family in the habits of decorum fitting for a house, Laura, like her Pa, embraces the prairie – an important move for Laura as she will continually identify more with her father and male gender roles than her mother. In fact, it is her father who presents her with her second doll object, an Indian papoose. Almost as a kind of bargain plea, Pa dangles the possibility of seeing a papoose in front of Laura when the family sets out. Laura becomes obsessed, but is sure Pa will help her find one, “just as he had shown her fawns, and little bears, and wolves.” After all, “Pa knew all about wild animals, so he must know about wild men, too” (*Prairie* 56). In the transient and chaotic space of the prairie, Ma’s ideas of decorum are obsolete, and Laura further

engages in naughty rebellions, playing cowboy and making too much noise. More importantly, Laura discovers a fascination with the Indians on the land. The primary drama of this book is the tension between the white settlers and the Osage tribe, on whose land the Ingalls are squatting.

The idea of Indians also provides Laura with an interest, even an obsession, that drives her as well. She continually asks her parents about seeing the papoose. She boldly asks her mother why she does not like Indians (to which she responds, “I just don’t like them; and don’t lick your fingers, Laura” (*Prairie* 47)) and questions her father about why the settlers are taking over land that belongs to the Indians. To this question, Pa provides a flat non-answer, that “White people are going to settle this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick.” When Laura counters, “I thought this was Indian territory. Won’t it make the Indians mad?” Pa cuts her off abruptly (*Prairie* 236). But in other ways, Pa presents to Laura the chance for a relationship with Indians, at least from a distance. He leads the girls in a treasure hunt through an abandoned Indian camp, showing them signs of their daily life through animal tracks, and evidence of their shelters. (Here Laura also acts out a private rebellion, as she resists silently giving up the beautiful glass beads they have collected at the camp.) The Osages continually enter the previously snug and secure sphere of the Ingalls’ home, twice literally and another time as the family cowers for days as the tribe holds a war rally. Laura experiences intense fear, possibly a result of learned ignorance, as well as an intense curiosity about the Indians, presenting a nuanced if troublesome perspective on the racial ramifications of her family’s need to move west. Anne Romines has an optimistic reading of Wilder’s treatment of this, arguing that is “an attempt to convey,

from a white girl's viewpoint to a readership of children, the extraordinary stresses and tension that burdened even the simplest contact between Euro-American females and Indian men" (Romines 67).

This tension and conflict comes to be embodied in the Indian papoose, which Laura finally finds in a puzzling scene that shows Laura's departure not only from her mother's conventions and restrictions, but from her entire family. The Osages have been driven off of their land, and process past the Ingalls' house as the family stands to watch. On the back of an Indian woman is the Indian baby Laura has been looking for: "Laura looked straight into the bright eyes of the little baby. . . Those black eyes looked deep into Laura's eyes and she looked deep down into the blackness of that little baby's eyes, and she wanted that little baby. 'Pa,' she said, 'get me that little Indian baby!'" (*Prairie* 307). When her parents try to question her/calm her, she can't explain, only saying, "Its eyes are so black!"...She could not say what she meant" (*Prairie* 306). This book, and this scene, is significant, because it expresses a kind of breaking open for Laura, a widening of her emotional and spiritual vistas and expansion of her knowledge and possibility. Much like when she comes to own a doll, and learns of the vast number of "things" in the world in the store in town, here Laura, perhaps, sees that little papoose as another kind of doll, an acquisition to play with, conquer, own, and nourish. Ma even counters Laura by reminding her that they have their "own baby," but Laura's desire has expanded beyond the realm of the family unit. Laura seems to identify heavily with the little baby's eyes, which are "so black," much like her brown eyes that contrast her good sister Mary's. In desiring to play

with and own the papoose – and even projecting the baby’s desire to go with her – she plays out a wider, and higher-stakes game that shows a growing sense of imperialism, perhaps even a maternal urge, and a new participation in the colonizing structure she is inheriting. The strangeness of Laura’s desire for the papoose, and the alien nature of seeing these strange people file away in front of their home, has unnerved and unhinged the family. Ma is “so let down” she can do nothing; Pa does not even want to eat dinner. The family has been affected, perhaps, by a hint of what Freud termed the “*unheimlich*,” the “unhomelike” that invades the familiar and disrupts a sense of well-being. (The uncanny is often referred to in narratives in which toys come alive.) Here, the papoose can represent a disturbing animation of the lifeless toy object for Laura, evidence that the wildness of prairie life has transformed her consciousness to realms that seem dangerous to her family, particularly her mother.

Laura’s identification with and desire for the papoose is unexplainable even to herself (and in fact, does not ever really get resolved or explained). It represents Laura’s travel and growing knowledge beyond the Little House, a departure from her mother, an openness to the chaos and tumult of the frontier. Susan Naramore Maher contends that “such doubleness is necessary in remote country. Arguable, Laura’s ability to blend visions enables her to face the challenges of settlement life” as the family continues to navigate various landscapes and social realms (Maher 132).

Read as a measuring stick for femininity and beauty, the doll and the child become a self-same object, bearing the burden of identity and expectation. The houses the family builds and makes, under Ma’s nurturing control, can be seen as doll houses, their inhabitants her charges. In that Laura does not fit into Ma’s desire for her to be more

doll-like, feeling rejected by this, she also rejects the lack of agency she sees in this role. “Depicted as conscious and desiring,” Kuznets writes in discussing Godden’s ‘The Dolls’ House,’ “dolls are also shown to be totally dependent on sympathetic human owners for the fulfillment of their wishes” (Kuznets 147). In *The Doll’s House*, the protagonist dolls are packed away in boxes and unearthed by their owners. Alcott also wrote about dolls that lack agency in “The Dolls’ Journey from Minnesota to Maine,” a short story in which two dolls are shipped out by mail by their owners’ father, and take a journey by train to their aunt’s house. Along the way, they visit an orphanage, and, loved by the sickly girls, gain fulfillment by nourishing them. In this way, Laura internalizes the ways that she will, as a girl, be nourished and fulfilled in the service of others. Laura learns about her role as a female in the other female prototypes she sees: Ma as a domestic goddess, Mary as a selfless beauty, and later an immobile doll, Grace as an aesthetic pleasure (Ma sews her a beautiful hood made from a swan Pa kills on accident, declaring her “lovelier than any doll”). The doll figure is meant for the utility of the divine and sacred service to others. But Laura, who is often selfish in her desires and rebellions, resists these expectations.

If childhood is a construct, the pioneers’ constantly moving and toiling lifestyle disrupted this construct, always obscuring it and challenging the ideals behind the notion of the romantic child. As Laura’s responsibilities grow and she approaches adolescence, we see her trying harder to assert herself as a child in play, resisting crossing the threshold into adulthood, and thus domesticity. In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, this desire to be child-like and boisterous is especially

pronounced. In that book, Laura takes risks and plays on her own, challenging her parents' rules and resisting responsibility. This volume also brings back Charlotte as a figure, in a scene that reflects Laura's desire to regress to a previous point in childhood and hold onto it, while also mending her increasingly fractured and tense relationship with her mother. Here, Laura reclaims her doll as a form of agency, as well as a last grasp at her rapidly disappearing childhood.

Charlotte reappears in *Plum Creek* as a symbol of Laura's increasing distance from her mother, and, perhaps a reconciliation and a "mending" of their relationship, fractured by Laura's resistance to her mother's rules and restrictions. Charlotte has been put away, not mentioned since the first book. She is unearthed only to appease the Ingalls' neighbor's toddler, Anna, who likes the doll so much that Ma suggests that Laura give her away to the little girl - "you are too old to play with dolls anyway," says Ma. Laura is upset, but cries only "on the inside," and Ma apologizes. When Laura later discovers the doll discarded by Anna, face down in a puddle and "scalped," she takes the doll to Ma, who shows a rare moment of gentle indulgence toward her daughter's emotional needs. Ma "ripped off her torn hair and the bits of her mouth and her remaining eye and her face," then they "thawed her and wrung her out." Charlotte is cleaned, starched, and ironed, while Laura picks from the scrap basket "a new, pale pink face and new button eyes." At the end of the night, Laura is satisfied with the new, "clean and crisp" Charlotte. She lays her in her box and admires the way her "red mouth smiled, her eyes shone black," and her braids lay just so (*Plum Creek* 236). While this scene recalls the first scene when she receives the doll, it also recalls a funeral: Laura, in fact, is too old to play with dolls, though Ma has appeased her by mending her old toy. Here, she

lays to rest her old friend, laying down a part of her childhood as well. Perhaps here, she is mending a part of her relationship with Laura, too, putting to rest some stubborn grudge against her curtailing ways and smothery indoor domestic values. Ma's patience about Charlotte presents a rare moment of understanding and bonding between the two, who are often at odds. As Laura, despite her attachment to her childhood toy, is beginning to depart from the freedom of childhood and play, she might also be learning to appreciate her mother's labor and values.

As the land the Ingalls traverse becomes more densely populated, Laura is introduced more deeply into consumer culture and the rules of the appendant society. Nellie Oleson, Laura's nemesis, is presented first in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* as an antithesis to the tomboy Laura. Nellie's dolls serve as yet another symbolic transitional object, representing Laura's introduction to consumer culture and her emerging recognition of herself as a commodity object herself. A transition into town and into school culture is difficult for Laura, who prefers to be in her own familiar sphere, and untamed. The Olesons represent decadence and hedonism, a counter to the resourceful, humble and hard-working Ingalls family. The stark contrast between the country families and the affluent Olesons is particularly highlighted by their "proper" toys – more finely made toys that were a trickle over from more cultivated society. When the children are invited to the Oleson's house for a party (a notion foreign to the country-raised girls; Ma has to explain it to them) they see the Oleson's impressive collection of playthings, "proper" toys: a jumping jack, a Noah's Ark, toy soldiers, a

velocipede. Nellie has both a porcelain and a wax doll. Laura is transfixed by the realistic features of it, with its “smooth red cheeks and red mouth” and “wee” China shoes, hands, and feet. The wax doll speaks when Nellie punches its stomach; it “seemed to laugh” and “seemed to be alive.” The *seemingness* of the doll, without really being, is both desirable and uncannily disgusting for Laura, who is rendered speechless (the same reaction she has to receiving Charlotte as well as seeing the Indian papoose). Laura reaches for the doll, her desire taking hold, but Nellie slaps her hand away, embarrassing Laura. Laura might resist the accoutrements of femininity in some ways, but she wants to be a part of this symbol. She is denied access because of her social class. Nellie’s behavior is cruel, and Laura and the narrator soon turn to see the meanness and falsity that Nellie’s dolls, extensions of her, represent. Readers learn, then, that ostentatious wealth and beauty is not ultimately fulfilling. The falseness of the doll signals both a desire and a disgust for Laura, a different kind of uncanny as when she sees the familiar but foreign papoose.

The little girl guests even “digest” this message symbolically when they drink Mrs. Oleson’s lemonade: “At first it was sweet, but after she ate a bit of the sugar-white off her piece of cake, the lemonade was sour,” Laura says (*Plum Creek* 166). Desire and sweetness can be corrupted with overindulgence, an important lesson to learn for children as they begin to navigate consumer desires and the corruption of materialism. When Mrs. Oleson sees Laura sitting alone, she offers her a book of nursery rhymes. The book amazes Laura, who “had not known there were such wonderful books in the world” (*Plum Creek* 167). Charlotte serves as a transition from the womb, the papoose into the much wider world. But the little wax doll serves to show a different kind of danger in consumption and indulgence, and shows Laura an alternative to this kind of play. Laura

turns her attention to the storybooks Mrs. Oleson shows her, which present an alternative to the girl who has been cast out and turned off by the ostentatious culture of the dolls and the Olesons, and also foretells her future role as storyteller and artist of words.

Nellie's dolls symbolize rejection for Laura: she is rejected by the consumer culture they represent, and in turn, spark Laura to reject this culture. Laura's desire for the Indian papoose is prohibited, nor can she remain in the childhood realm of play Charlotte represents. And this doll, too, she resists. Laura fits in neither in an overtly masculine sphere (symbolized by the papoose) nor a feminine or capitalist sphere. She exists in the liminal territory between the two.

Like Nellie's dolls, Ma's china shepherdess wields power over Laura, a doll figure that represents the sacredness of the domestic space. The shepherdess is Ma's doll totem; her appearance throughout the series, on mantels and on the bracket on the wall, is Ma's signal that the shelter has been made into a home. Her "little china shoes and her wide china skirts and her tight china bodice" perhaps recall Ma's fashionable days "back East," before she followed Pa to the frontier. The shepherdess is pretty; her "pink cheeks and blue eyes and golden hair," recall the prized daughter Mary's looks – the looks that Laura envies and resents throughout their childhoods.

Louise Mowder points out that even Laura's coloring, often called brown by her concerned mother, more resembles the Indians Ma hates, while Mary's is more like the fair pink and blue-hued china doll. Laura, like Ma's idea of a wild Indian, is transgressive and naughty, while both Ma and Mary are good at self-

suppression. “For, while the china woman is stock-still and voiceless,” Mowder writes, “she is also the tacit referent of socialization in what otherwise is read as a barbaric landscape” (Mowder 17).

The shepherdess is also just out of Laura’s reach, as only Ma is allowed to handle her. But Laura does not seem exactly interested in playing with the little figurine. Ma’s deistic status as homemaker is not something she aspires to, for most of the series. But as she grows up, Laura begins to appreciate and revere the shepherdess even more. Once the family lands in Plum Creek, Ma sets the china shepherdess in the bracket Pa built, securely on the wall. Laura remarks that it was “the same smiling little shepherdess with golden hair and blue eyes and pink cheeks,” who “had travelled from the Big Woods all the way to Indian Territory, and all the way to Plum Creek in Minnesota, and there she stood smiling. She was not broken” (*Plum Creek* 122-23). The shepherdess, tethered symbolically to Ma alone, means that Laura does not have to match it or embody it; she can simply accept it for the totem that she is to Ma.

Boundaries and Borders

In genteel urban nineteenth century life, play was romanticized, but adults still held a firm grip over the modes and forms it took. Especially when it came to gender roles, the disparity between boys and girls was stark, largely in terms of the ways the two were allowed to play. In his essay, “Boy Culture,” Anthony Rotundo discusses the deliberately separate subculture of boyhood that emerged in the nineteenth century, as

little boys were removed from the labor force and left to run free in the space between their coddled early years in the domestic sphere and the point at which they joined their fathers as laboring men, fathers and workers. Boys were described as animalistic, reckless, wild and carefree, actively rejecting women's world and work. This world, "created just beyond the reach of domesticity," provided "a space for expressive play and a sense of freedom from the women's world that had nurtured them early in boyhood – and that welcomed them home every night" (Rotundo 342). Girls, in contrast, were not afforded the freedom of unbridled play, as Melanie Dawson outlines in her study of the emerging genre of play handbooks for nineteenth century parents. These handbooks emphasized the need for girls' play to be useful, and for the girls themselves to be contributors to the domestic industry of the family. Girls, then, were not allowed the carefree childhood adults romanticized, but were expected to be self-regulating miniature adults.

Through a creative approach to play, Laura plays with these gender boundaries, both physical and cultural. Through mastery of space and interactions (and possessions) of other cultures and types of people, Laura navigates the roles prescribed to her by her mother and father, and at the same time pushes the boundaries between domestic and outdoor, male and female, child and adult. In the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura shows her early boldness when she and Mary play the pretend chase game "Mad Dog" with their father. Swept up in the pretend of the game, Laura rescues her sister, pulling the older girl over a log pile to save her from their imaginary predator. "By jinks!" declares

Pa. “You’re as strong as a little French horse!” (*Big Woods* 36). Several times later in the books, Laura plays at inhabiting other lives, imagining who she might be: In *Big Woods*, she wishes she could be Adam in the Bible, because he doesn’t have to wear clothes; on the prairie, she “has a naughty wish to be an Indian child”; she plays at being a cow boy (she “wished she could be a cowboy,” after Ma tells her to stop yelling because it is not “ladylike”) (*Prairie* 167).

Also in *Little House on the Prairie*, she plays explorer and ethnographer under the supervision of her father at the Indian camp. When the family first arrives on the prairie, she explores the physical space of the land, finding that she feels excited by the vastness of the uncharted land. Once unnerved by the space, Laura begins to push past visible horizons, to master the space in a kind of play at settling:

There was nothing more to do, so Laura explored a little. She did not go far from the tent. But she found a queer little kind of tunnel in the grass. You’d never notice it if you looked across the waving grass-tops. But when you came to it, there it was – a narrow, straight, hard path down between the grass stems. It went out into the endless prairie. Laura went along it a little way. She went slowly and more slowly, and then she stood still and felt queer (*Prairie* 55).

The “queer little tunnel” represents a passageway, a possibility to pass out of the family domain and act as an independent entity. This book also presents to Laura a chance to interact with and master animal life, as she and Mary play with the animals in the prairie grass. Most of all, something almost cosmic happens to Laura when she reaches the prairie, signaling a growing of her imagination and possibility for the future: “Thickly in front of the open wagon-top hung the large, glittering star. Pa could reach them, Laura thought. She wished he would pick the largest one from the thread on which it hung from

the sky, and give it to her. ...The large star winked at her! Then she was waking up, next morning” (*Prairie* 37).

Laura’s separation from her mother and indoor activities becomes conflated with her desire to break rules here, too. Though “the sunshine was blistering, even the winds were hot, and the prairie grasses were turning yellow,” Laura wants to be out of the cabin. “Mary preferred to stay in the house and sew on her patchwork quilt. But Laura liked the fierce light and the sun and the wind, and she couldn’t stay away from the well. But she was not allowed to go near its edge” (*Prairie* 151). Craving sensation and even considering breaking a rule are boundary-disturbing. Laura’s play with boundaries and ventures into liminal spaces is most overtly presented in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, when we see Laura as a playful pre-adolescent. It is in this book that Laura plays in the creek, exploring it and even playing a prank on Nellie Oleson before nearly drowning.

Susan Naramore Maher writes about the blurring of these boundaries in her essay, “Laura Ingalls Wilder and Caddie Woodlawn: Daughters of a Border Space.” She argues that children, and especially girls, growing up on the frontier were given a freedom to play along the borders of gender roles. These pioneer girls follow more closely to their fathers and brothers, seeing domestic work as “limiting.” They could hardly help it, as they were constantly receiving. In peavy’s words, “a garbling of messages, the push and shove of conflicting influences,” some traditional, some more progressive. Being able to be a part of both spaces – Indian and settler, male or female, indoor and outdoor – is crucial in these narratives, expressing “the complexities of childhoods spent in the ebb and flow of American settlements” (Maher 135).

The frontier child's role was "shifting and imprecise," says West. For children on the frontier – in fact, one in five pioneers were children until the California Gold Rush – the serious work of creating the frontier landscape was blurred with their childhood, play as their "work" mingled with very real survival. The pioneer himself was a child, defining himself, playing house, building space. Laura's forms of work and play are closely interwoven, so much so that they are at times indistinguishable, until it is time to recede from play and take on her adult roles, which will increasingly be outdoors. Laura embraces the liminality of being in both female and male roles. In this way, she exhibits the spirit of the pioneer, imaginative, resourceful – and hedged by adult responsibilities.

Building, Keeping, Playing House: Work, Industry and Play

In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Ma and Pa leave for a trip to town, leaving the girls in charge of the house. Laura suggests they play house. "We *are* playing house," counters Mary. "What is the use of playing it?" (*Plum Creek* 185). This moment illustrates a particular condition of frontier life: if children elsewhere were sequestered in nurseries away from the adult world, pioneer children were entrenched in their parents' daily labor and rituals. As West outlines in his history of frontier life. A caution against excess leisure is presented in the "Harvest" chapter in *Little House in the Big Woods*. Charley, nearly eleven years old, is playing gleefully with Laura and Mary when he is called away to help the men in the field. Charley prefers to play, but joins them. When he is unhelpful – tricking the men into checking on him, bothering them and disrupting their

work – he ultimately punished by a swarm of stinging yellow jackets, a retelling of the “Boy Who Cried Wolf” story. Not only this, he is shamed by everyone for being spoiled. For not working, Charley is “monstrously naughty.” Laura has been naughty, but never as naughty as Charley: “He hadn’t worked to help save the oats. He hadn’t minded his father quickly when his father spoke to him. He had bothered Pa and Uncle Henry when they were hard at work” (*Big Woods* 210-11). These grave errors are unpardonable, and make an impression on young Laura.

Through a continuous portrayal of the mingling of work and play in the series, Laura forges an identity, and explores the fluidity of her prescribed gender roles. Laura is shown throughout the series to be industrious and helpful, expected to help with her mother’s chores and even helping her father with more traditionally masculine work. Maher reminds us that the blurred lines between gender roles was a particular setting of the frontier girl, comparing Laura to Caddie Woodlawn, whose parents let her run wild with her brothers, and who even learns the particularly male work of engineering when she dismantles and rebuilds a clock. Highlighting the crucial fact of labor in Laura’s childhood might have been a way for Wilder to appeal to her Depression-era audiences. In the early 1930s, out of necessity many children were forced to work, departing from the idyllic space of the romantic nineteenth century idea of childhood that was largely a privileged middle-class idea. Showing the nobility of labor might have provided a comfort for such a readership.

One of the appealing qualities of the Little House books is the particular and laborious detail devoted to everyday household tasks: Ma making butter, the event of seasonal cleaning; as well as the transformative acts by Pa to change the raw and rugged landscape into his own mastered and tamed spaces: making bullets from scratch, whipping up a house in a day. These passages show step by step the tedium of daily tasks are frequent, detailed, and a hallmark of the series. Laura delights in following her father and watching her mother as they perform these earthly miracles, their hands rendering the relative chaos and poverty of their lives into tranquil and orderly scenes.

Ma and Pa display different attitudes toward their work, and thus, play. Though Ma and Pa are both laborers, Pa's relationship with work seems effortless and looks more like play, at least to Laura. It is Pa who ventures out into the Big Woods each day, encountering adventure and wildness. In her younger years, Laura gravitates toward Pa's style of labor, perhaps in part because Pa allows more for play than Ma, and maintains a playful attitude toward his work. No doubt, this is connected to a patriarchal idea espoused implicitly in the books, which Romines also comments on, saying that "In Wilder's work, a house is a container for a heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear family" (Romines 23). The Ingalls – and Wilder – have to continually build and rebuild this container, making it look fun. When Pa has finished building their house in *Little House on the Prairie*, he takes Ma's compliment with a wink. When he comes home at night, Pa plays his fiddle, adding leisure and gaiety to the little houses. He entertains the family with nightly stories, and Laura calls this time "the best time of all" (*Big Woods* 33). When Laura and Mary disobey Pa by sliding down carefully baled hay stacks in Plum

Creek – a result of his work – Pa chides them, but secretly laughs, understanding Laura’s impulse to play.

Ma, on the other hand, labors in the house, which Laura sees as boring and smothering. Ma keeps civility and decorum in the house, which Laura interprets in her younger years as a curtailing play and pleasure. Ma provides the girls with dolls and paper dolls, as well as books – stories will later become an important element of play for Laura. Only once does she orchestrate play, when she engages the girls in a game of Pussy in the Corner to distract them from missing their father, who is gone away for months to work to pay off their gambled land claim in Plum Creek.

Even in the “Harvest” scene when Charley is removed from play to work, there is an element of this act that is related to freedom and agency. The narrator notes that Mary, “being the oldest,” wanted to play “a quiet, lady-like play,” – the kind that Ma would prefer the girls espouse - while Laura prefers Charley as a playmate (*Big Woods* 180). Perhaps Laura sees in Charley’s expectation to work a more noble sense of responsibility, and internalizes this message. If Laura, who early on demonstrates herself to be more interested in outdoor and traditionally male kinds of play, seems to fail at being lady-like, quiet, and domestic, she excels at a different type of play: the play of work.

Laura is engaged and curious about work – Pa’s work – throughout the series. In *Big Woods*, she calls butchering day “great fun” because the entire family helps with the process. In *Little House on the Prairie*, she helps Pa build the door for the family’s cabin (without nails, no less, a symbol of Pa’s intrepid

resourcefulness). In *Plum Creek*, Laura integrates elements of a game structure as well as pleasure into her chores. As she and Mary pick plums, Laura delights in eating them as she goes. Though Mary, who “was cross because she would rather sew or read than pick plums,” chides her for this pleasure, Laura is as efficient a worker as Mary. Laura is confident in the rules of plum-picking: “You must know exactly how to shake a plum tree. If you shake it too hard, the green plums fall, and that wastes them. If you shake it too softly, you do not get all the ripe plums. In the night they will fall, and some will smash and be wasted” (*Plum Creek* 64). Laura can bend the rules of her work by making them into a game.

Maher contends that Laura and Caddie Woodlawn’s gravitation toward their fathers’ world is a way for Wilder and Brink to show a new kind of girl, created by the unique setting of the frontier that allowed gendered boundaries to be softened. Romines presents the Little House series as an homage to the patriarchal values that, in Wilder’s writing, made the frontier great. While Laura does gravitate toward the power and agency her father has early on in the series, I also think that Laura emulates her father’s form of work because it is more like play. In essence, performing more male forms of work allows Laura to extend her childhood, to keep existing in the liminal space between male and female, domestic and wild.

The frontier mythology is distinctly male, an adventure game was outlined in Frederick Turner’s writing about it in the 1890s. Turner theorized and retold the story of the frontier as an active myth, a story of exploration and experimentation, a grand adventure that employed and created a robust vitality in its participants. This spirit can be directly connected to the ways that, at the turn of the 20th century, theorists beginning

with Stanley Hall began to think about play, as both constructive and productive, but also fluid. The idea of the frontier, then, is a mix of both work and play. Work begets progress, but play is a crucial component of this. Laura's negotiation of boundaries is a primary tension in the retelling and theorizing of the frontier period, and also a tension in the *Little House* series. Laura fully participates in this myth, agreeing with her westering father's desires to push onward and craving progress, exploration, and mobility, in contrast with her mother and sister, who want stability and quiet.

The question appears and reappears, explicitly and implicitly: why play house when you are already keeping house? Again and again, play is disrupted by work – in particular, women's work. Early on, in *Big Woods*, we see Laura's grandmother participating in a gleeful moment of play as the community celebrates the sugar snow that has produced maple syrup. Grandmother pauses her cooking to dance, challenging her dance partner, drawing attention to herself – but the moment is halted abruptly when she remembers the maple syrup cooking in the kitchen. She must drop everything to tend to this important domestic task.

Work becomes a way for Laura to connect with her father and provide for the family. As Laura gets older, the inevitability of her gendered role of domestic caregiver subsumes her forays into masculine kinds of work. She learns the kind of self-regulation that Dawson presents. In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura must emerge as a woman, not a child, charged with taking care of her sister and helping her mother. In one instance she takes a moment to “spread her arms wide to the wind” and run against it. “Big girl as she was,” she lies down in the grass

and looks at the sky, so happy she nearly cries. But the moment is curtailed: “Suddenly she thought, ‘Have I got a grass 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 little dark tar-paper shanty” (*Silver Lake* 271). Later in that book, she meets her cousin Lena, who introduces her to a new kind of play, as the girls race ponies out of the sight of their parents. Laura rides the horse bareback, coming to an orgasmic peak: “She and the pony were going too fast but they were going like music and nothing could happen to her until the music stopped” (*Silver Lake* 54). But this moment of freedom is interrupted. The girls are riding to deliver laundry for the railroad camp, and they meet the middle-aged laundress, who tells them about her daughter, who has just been married at age fourteen. The same-aged girls are disconcerted by the idea of such a young marriage. Laura “soberly” points out that the girl “can’t play any more now,” that “once she’s doing her own work in her own house...she’ll have babies,” and (in Lena’s words) “she can’t ever have any more good times” (*Silver Lake* 50-51). While Laura likes babies and does not mind hard work, the thought of being in charge of a home distresses her. Like the horses, Laura will see herself as both domestic and wild, embodying the liminal space between the two.

The fluid spaces of play and work prepare Laura for her future roles, mobilizing her through various stages of her life and transmuting play to work within the restrictions placed upon her. Yet, even Pa’s work is changing by this time. As he takes a job managing the railroad workers, it not only signals the end of Pa’s single-handed mastery of land, the rawness of an original kind of pioneer dream, usurped by industry. It also signals a departure for Laura:

Always before, Laura had helped Pa with his work. When she was very little, in the Big Woods, she had helped him make the bullets for his gun; in Indian Territory she had helped finish the house, and on Plum Creek she had helped with the chores and the haying. But she could not help him now, for Pa said that the railroad company would not want anyone but him to work in the office (*Silver Lake* 110).

In the next book, *Little Town on the Prairie*, the family is stationary in town, and Laura is fully employed in women's work, as she becomes a seamstress. She hates sewing and being inside, and laments missing the "great white cloud-puffs would be sailing in sparkling blue," and the "fluttering roses" that will have "faded and their petals...scattering on the wind" by the time she is done with work. "She was too old now to play anymore," Laura knows. When later in this book Pa gets a new plow, which affords him more leisure time, "Carrie and Grace followed behind the plow, playing." But Laura holds back: "Laura would have liked to, but she was going on fifteen years old now, and too old to play in the fresh, clean-smelling dirt" (*Little Town* 10). Here, Laura *has* put away play, shifting her presence into the female sphere. The switch from following her father and engaging fully in traditionally female work signals the end of Laura's childhood. It also mirrors the closing of the frontier, and the Ingalls' admission that they cannot continue the dream of forever pushing West. If the push westward has been a game until now, the game is over.

Authoring Self, Space and History

A crucial plot point in the Little House series is Laura's eventual resolve that the dream of forever moving west will be unrealized. *By the Shores of Silver Lake* ushers in Laura's adolescence, and, significantly, Pa and Laura's acceptance of the need to stay in one place. The impulse to move west, and to move in general, has informed much of Laura's identity in the books as she grows up. Mostly, it informs her predominant identification with her father. But in the beginning of this book, we see the Ingalls family changed: ravaged by poverty, drought, and illness, the book opens with Laura and Ma in the house – another significant moment, because Laura's role as a domestic helper has been cemented. Both are "too sad to care" even about their untidy house as a stranger approaches. The visitor is Aunt Docia, who invites Pa to move West to work on the railroad: "Pa's face lit up. He wanted to go west and so did Laura." He "did not like a country so old and worn out that the hunting was poor. He wanted to go west. For two years he had wanted to go west and take a homestead, but Ma did not want to leave the settled country. And there was no money. Pa had made only two poor wheat crops since the grasshoppers came; he had barely been able to keep out of debt, and now there was the doctor's bill" (*Silver Lake* 36).

The family instead moved yet again temporary to a railroad camp so Pa can work. Rather than follow them as he has before, Laura's dog Jack, who was "especially her own," dies. "Laura knew then that she was not a little girl anymore," she decides in this moment. "Now she was alone; she must take care of herself. When you must do that, then you do it and you are grown up. Laura was not very big, but she was almost thirteen years

old, and no one was there to depend on. Pa and Jack had gone, and Ma needed help to take care of Mary and the little girls, and somehow to get them all safely to the west on a train” (*Silver Lake* 14).

After some time at the railroad camp, Laura gets acquainted with her free-wheeling cousin Lena, and then watches Lena and her family depart to move further West – “Oregon, probably,” Laura longingly muses. Laura’s yearning to go west becomes unbearable for her:

The wings and the golden weather and the tang of frost in the mornings made Laura want to go somewhere. She did not know where. She wanted only to go. "Let's go West," she said one night after supper. "Pa, can't we go West when Uncle Henry does?" Uncle Henry and Louisa and Charley had earned money enough to go West. They were going back to the Big Woods to sell their farm, and in the spring, with Aunt Polly, they were all driving West to Montana. "Why can't we?" Laura said. "There's all the money you've earned, Pa; three hundred dollars. And we've got the team and wagon. Oh, Pa, let's go on West!" "Mercy, Laura!" Ma said. "Whatever--" She could not go on. "I know, little Half-pint," said Pa, and his voice was very kind. "You and I want to fly like the birds. But long ago I promised your Ma that you girls should go to school. You can't go to school and go West. When this town is built there'll be a school here. I'm going to get a homestead, Laura, and you girls are going to school (*Silver Lake* 127).

Later, in *Little Town on the Prairie*, Laura connects her desire to follow her and her father’s dreams directly with her desire to return to childhood and play: “Oh, I don’t know!” she says. “I am so tired of everything. I want – I want something to happen. I want to go West. I guess I just want to play, and I know I am too old” (*Little Town on the Prairie* 212). And yet, it is in that volume that Laura finally understands the value of putting away play, and the satisfaction in industry. Anne Thompson Lee, in writing about revisiting the text after becoming

a mother, talks about seeing Pa and his impulse to go West as a “ne’er do well, a little child, lovable but irresponsible, always wanting to go on to the next thing instead of committing himself to the present reality.” Lee goes on to read in the text a slow shift from Laura’s blind idolization of her father to an understanding of her mother’s strength and courage. As the family’s grand and perhaps unrealistic plans go unrealized, Laura grows into a woman, who though at times is reluctant to put away childish play, gains maturity.

The series begins with a book rooted in Pa’s stories, lesson and adventures, from inside the view of the snug little house. As the series, progresses, Laura inherits many things from her father: a kind of restlessness and impulsiveness, a love of the outdoors. What is most crucial of these is that she emerges in her adolescence as a storyteller, just like her father. The emergence of this gift will, I argue, replace Laura’s previous impulses to play, and expresses a more true and meaningful participation in the construction of the West: the invention of and contribution to the story and myth.

Laura has been primed to become a storyteller all her life. Her father’s stories and music bring joy and adventure to the family, Her mother emphasizes the importance of reading, education and communication. Mrs. Oleson introduces her to picture books, providing an alternative for a consumer social culture. And Mrs. Boast, the city-bred young neighbor in Plum Creek, gives the family magazine serials they eagerly devour. Laura flexes her creative muscles early, when, after Pa has forbidden the girls to play on the hay stacks he has carefully stacked for the livestock, she uses her verbal acuity to keep playing. “Pa didn’t say I couldn’t smell it,” Laura tells Mary, convincing her to keep playing. “He did not say we must not climb up it. He said we must not slide down it. I’m

only climbing” (*Plum Creek* 56). When the girls are caught, Laura manipulates language to explain their defiance, saying solemnly, ““We did not slide, Pa. . . .But we did roll down it.”” Pa only laughs. It is Pa who takes Laura to the Indian camp to explore, and Pa who allows the girls to dance and sing even Ma has qualms about it. Pa takes Laura to watch the railroad men working while Mary and Ma stay at home, quenching her curiosity and inviting her to a wider world. Finally, Pa imbues with permission to speak and create stories, as he charges her with the task of “seeing” for Mary once she has been struck blind by illness. “On that dreadful morning when Mary could not see even sunshine full in her eyes, Pa had said that Laura must see for her. He had said, ‘Your two eyes are quick enough, and your tongue, if you will use them for Mary’” (*Silver Lake* 22). Pa gives Laura the permission and agency to speak, although she has been edited by societal restrictions throughout the series. If the stories he told in earlier volumes have receded in their importance, Laura’s recollections can replace them in a new imagining.

In his essay “Creative Writers and Day Dreaming,” Sigmund Freud suggests that when a child transitions into adulthood, he learns to conceal his true desires, which he previously enacted through play. These desires transform into “phantasy,” the adult version of enacting and imagining other worlds and lives within the concealed play space adulthood allows. Both Laura’s boisterous, rule-bending play, imaginative journey west she shares with Pa, must be halted. As her childhood recedes, Laura finds new ways of working out her fantasies and imaginative fancies. A child plays out in the open, but an adult conceals his

desires: this is how we learn to put away our idealized worlds, at the threat of verging into the realm of insanity. The child, Freud suggests, wishes and plays at being an adult, but the adult plays at a wish for the past, and knowing that this is impossible, thinks his fantasies “impermissible” to share and be open about (Freud 422). Once Laura learns to conceal her desires – putting away play, quieting herself, understanding her role at home – she replaces these forms of play with storytelling, playing with words.

Laura fully harnesses the task of seeing for her blind sister, and finds a compelling and powerful identity within that role and fulfill the bildungsroman plot. Rather than transcribing the events of the world for Mary literally, Laura employs the kind of sensual enjoyment the narrator has at times employed in Laura’s inner dialogue. Now, however, this pleasure is allowed to be verbalized, and is permissible. Describing a horizon to Mary, she says, “The road pushes against the grassy land and breaks off short. And that’s the end of it.” “It can’t be,” the practical, rule-abiding Mary counters. “The road goes all the way to Silver Lake.” But when Mary chides her for not being “careful to say exactly what [she] mean[s],” Laura protests, claiming an author’s poetic license: “There were so many ways of seeing things and so many ways of saying them. In another instance, Laura describes Big Jerry riding a horse: “‘Oh Mary! The snow-white horse and the tall, brown man, with such a black head and a bright red shirt! The brown prairie all around – and they rode right into the sun as it was going down. They’ll go on in the sun around the world.’” Again, Mary counters: “Laura, you know he couldn’t ride into the sun. He’s just riding along on the ground like anybody.”

Laura has a strong self-conviction and confidence about what she has said: “Laura did not feel that she had told a lie. What she had said was true too. Somehow that

moment when the beautiful free pony and the wild man rode into the sun would last forever” (*Silver Lake* 65). Previously in the series, Laura has shown an inability to explain how she feels or means. Her words are often caught in her throat, when she is frightened or surprised. Here, we see her enjoying the beauty of the landscape and the language itself – a kind of expression of the *jouissance* of language Kristeva writes about. In her assuredness of her ability to express herself, Laura finally finds an acceptable space to play. Either way, telling the story of her childhood is as much about harnessing the “spirit of the frontier” as anything else. Laura retells the story of the landscape to fit her vision. Wilder retells the story of her childhood to fit her vision and message. The frontier story is a similar retelling, a playful imagining of a true event, a fable and myth that fulfills a need and a desire in the American psyche.

Pa’s expectations for settling the West may have proved to be a myth; as this is realized, we see a shift in Laura. While we might read this, as Ann Romines, does as a reassertion of a patriarchal authority, a conviction of the myth and the strong-armed fervor that “won” the West. The predominant take-away of the wild west story is that it was an “inspiring, dramatic, romantic – and wild” time in American history, one that is, in Ronald Reagan’s words (in a 1983 dedication to a Western-themed exhibit) “woven into the dreams of our youth.” The “west” was created by the East, the people looking toward it from a distance or from the future. It was generated by a quickly-emerging media and artists looking for a way to capitalize on a story.

the late 19th century, the settling of the frontier was coming to a close, and officially closed in 1890. The mythology of “the west” centers primarily on the final frontier, the main characters the cattle herders and cowboys that populated the far west. Wilder presents this as myth, too – because the Ingalls never really reach that border or the far West or inhabit that world, it remains an idea and a concept. The reality was that the romanticized cowboys were actually wage laborers, overworked and struggling. Farmers, like Pa, did not come to a bounty easily. Finding land to farm was full of negotiations, bartering, backtracking, and bureaucracy – and, as Wilder illustrates, a lot of loss. The Reclamation Act of 1902, Murdoch points out, was a government bail out that flew in the face of the self-reliant, libertarian ideals purported by the frontier myth-makers. Murdoch: “Legends may have made heroes of the frontier-tamers but the raw material for these images needed a good deal of reshaping” (Murdoch 7).

And reshape people did: James Fennimore Cooper was the first to write the romanticized fiction of the West, and was followed by the massive, determined swell of the Western dime store novel. As early as the 1870s the idea of the “the West” appeared in advertising. From the first Western film, “The Great Train Robbery” in 1903, the Western as an aesthetic narrative form has long endured. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West toured the country just after the frontier had closed, from 1883 to 1913, presenting a version of the nostalgia-fueled myth in a deliberately blurred format that emphasized a false authenticity of the just-passed history.

Wilder might be retelling this story in order to fit her father’s heroic memory into shape. Certainly, others do: Murdoch, for example, writes of Wilder’s “image of the restless pioneer, forever moving on,” as “happily described” in the Little House series. In

his reading, Wilder's interpretation might disguise the realities and hardships that actually make up the history of the frontier. But truly, Wilder's stories present another side of this myth that is crucial in providing a fuller picture. In telling the story of the Little Houses in which the family dwells – each one a transient and inconsistent shelter – she presents the realities of the domestic, women-centered sphere. Although the story begins with Pa, it ends with Laura. Not only this, Laura as a child figure is the ideal author for this period in history.

The child as artist is a modern concept. Laura's gaze at the developing west fits perfectly with the imaginative narrative surrounding the mythology. Play theorist Brian Sutton Smith writes that the child is "the true romantic, because he or she is untouched by the world and still capable of representing things in terms of an unfettered imagination" (Sutton Smith 133). The child is primitive, original, innocent, and play is a vital aesthetic, becoming dignified for the first time in Western civilization around the time that the story of the American frontier was unfolding. When Laura editorializes her vision of the landscape to her sister – and later, when Wilder reframes her childhood and the historical context – she exhibits a form of play Sutton Smith presents in his book, *The Ambiguity of Play*. Laura's playful and romantic view of her world is placing "nonsense," as Sutton Smith puts it, "in the behavioral and social sphere," the kind of "frivolity that makes adults mad, as in the case of the hilarious disorders of infants, the obscene parodies of children, and the cruel mockeries of adolescents. When it is written down, however, it is immediately recognized as play form" (Sutton Smith 141).

The child in play constructs imaginative plots, but also consumes and reenacts the stories he has been told. The child as an artist is shown in this series as the figure who plays with an experience and renders it a story, using elements given to her by adult figures, transforming raw images and messages into their own story. The adult Wilder, like the creators of the Western myth, has rewritten her past to protect and promote a particular narrative.

Maria Montessori, who believed that education should be based on imagination and play, said that the child “is endowed with unknown powers, which can guide us to a radiant future.” The child, then, is enlisted in a new kind of work for the child, that of play, that would guide the adult world into a “utopian scheme.” This, I think, fits with the ways that the Western myth so needs a narrative to shape it. Wilder, for the most part, stays within the realm of the child’s voice in this series. But the close of the series suggests a wider scope, and actually crosses the border away from children’s literature. In *The First Four Years*, we see Laura transformed into a young wife and mother. The book was a memoir that Wilder never got around to publishing. Perhaps that is because it does not quite mesh with the rosy picture of pioneer questing the rest of the series hints at, but never really delivers. In the rest of the books, we see a child Laura thirsting for the open range, and then realizing the details of that quest and their impossibility. *The First Four Years* is very adult. It shows a young woman negotiating huge life choices: marrying, reluctantly following her husband into a farming life, watching him become injured and debilitated, having two babies, watching one die, watching her house burn down. The frontier hero that the majority of the nation knew the West by is absent from this story.

In the experience in authoring, Laura locates an independence beyond the physical scope of the quest for moving west and beyond the scope of the family's domestic domain. She maintains a sense of self, stamping out a greater sense of identity, connected to the land she loves and in service to her family. Laura, and the real life Wilder, only recounts what she and her family experienced comma she also creatively tells the story, editorializing it and shaping it into the mythology it will become. As Murdoch says, the heroes and characters of the West needed much shaping before they could grow to the scope of myth and legend. The ways that Wilder presents and rewrites her childhood, as well as the frontier experience, contributes and transforms the narrative we internalize.

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