

Little Town on the Prairie Study Guide

Little Town on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder

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Plot Summary

“Little Town on the Prairie” is a young adult semi-autobiographical novel by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and is the seventh installment of her “Little House” series of books. The novel deals with the life of Laura Ingalls at the ages of 14 and 15, and follows changing events in her life between the family homestead and the nearby town.

It is spring, 1881 when the novel begins. Fourteen-year-old Laura is happy with life and her family, Pa, Ma, Mary, Carrie, and Grace. She is thrilled to be living on the homestead, and considers the growing, nearby town a scar on the beautiful landscape. Laura has lately come to dream of being a teacher, to help pay for Mary to attend college for the blind in Iowa. The family also takes on a new kitten, and a brood of baby chickens.

As the town expands and changes, so do the experiences in Laura's life. She is hired to help produce shirts through the summer at Mr. Clancy's dry goods store. Laura is nervous at first about this, but is thrilled to have earned \$9 in the process for her efforts.

The Fourth of July celebrations in town excite Laura. There, she sees a young man named Alamanzo Wilder, a young man and new homesteader who wins a wagon race. At the end of the summer, Pa sells a calf to pay for Mary's tuition to attend college. Laura herself attends school in town, where she becomes fast friends with Mary Power, Ida Wright, and Minnie Johnson. Laura is dismayed, however, to learn that Nellie Oleson has moved to the area. At their old homestead in Minnesota, Laura was bullied by Nellie.

Nellie becomes close with the new teacher, Miss Wilder, who is the sister of Alamanzo. Nellie says bad things about Laura, causing Miss Wilder to be unfair on many occasions to Laura and her sister, Carrie. This prompts the other school kids to rally in defense of Laura, and to disrupt class for an entire week. Only when the school board reminds the children to behave do they settle down.

Over the next year, Laura attends many different social functions and dinners with her friends, and begins to be courted by Alamanzo Wilder, who is clearly smitten with Laura. Laura forgets her studies for a little while, but doubles back down on them in order to receive her teaching certification by the end of the novel. She will have a two-month term in the new country twelve miles to the south. For this, she will be paid \$20 a month, plus board. Laura is excited because this extra money will help to allow Mary to come home for the summer.

Pa believes that Laura will make a fine teacher. However, Laura is also worried because she will have to move away from home for an entire two months, and will only have herself to truly rely upon. She is also worried because she is expected to begin teaching in only a few days.



Surprise – Nine Dollars

Summary

Surprise – It is 1881. Charles Ingalls (Pa) asks his daughter, Laura, if she would like to come work in town. Charles's wife, Caroline (Ma), worries about Laura working in town since she isn't even old enough to teach school, yet. Laura herself is happy on her family's homestead, and doesn't want to go and work in town.

Springtime on the Claim – In the past, the family has stayed in town during harsh winters, but they have always returned to their homestead. Laura loves the homestead, and cannot imagine being anywhere else. People from all over the East are making a home for themselves on the prairie, too. Laura enjoys milking Ellen the cow, loves the beautiful landscape, loves working in the garden, and treasures being at the homestead with her family.

Laura has three sisters. There is her older, blind sister Mary, and her younger sisters, Carrie and Grace. Laura admires Mary for her courage and ability to help out at the homestead. Mary's blindness has increased her faith in God, for Laura explains that Mary is able to see things in a special way. Pa has acquired a new plow, which makes springtime farm work much easier. Ma, Laura, Mary, and Carrie set about spring cleaning their little house. The family has many prized, but simple possessions, such as a wooden bracket carved for Ma by Pa, and Laura's white china jewel box.

The Necessary Cat – Gophers ruin Pa's cornfield twice, and he and Ma declare they need a cat. That night, a mouse chews off some of Pa's hair, which adds to his desire to get a cat. Pa later goes to a county commissioners' meeting at the Whiting homestead, for there are now enough people in the area to organize a county. As the oldest homesteader in the area, it is Pa's duty to attend despite his bad hair. He returns with a female kitten which he has paid the high price of fifty cents for.

The Happy Days – As more people move to the area, the town expands. People turn to raising animals as wild game becomes scarce. Mr. and Mrs. Boast tell Pa that they will be giving him an entire set of chicks in thanks for taking the Boasts in during a snowstorm when they first moved out. The family tells Pa about how the kitten has gotten its first mouse already. Mary longs to go to a college for the blind in Iowa, and Laura vows to work as a teacher when she is sixteen to help make that happen.

Working in Town – Pa has spoken to Mr. Clancy, who will be selling dry goods from his store. Among those goods will be shirts. Mrs. White will be producing the shirts with a pedal-operated sewing machine. Mrs. White is looking for a good hand-sewer for twenty-five cents a day, plus dinner, so Pa has suggested Laura. She could earn as much as six dollars a month, which she could then use to help send Mary to college. Laura is both excited and nervous about the prospect, for she will be leaving more of



the homestead chores to her mother and sisters, and will be working among strangers. Ma gives her grudging consent to Laura to work in town.

Working with Mrs. White is fast-paced and hard. Laura worries about being able to keep up. She learns that Mrs. White is Mr. Clancy's mother-in-law, and they argue constantly about meeting production quotas. At dinner with the entire Clancy family, Laura feels awkward as Mr. Clancy, Mrs. Clancy, and Mrs. White argue, and their children fight one another. Back at work after dinner, Mrs. White compliments Laura's ability to set buttonholes. Pa then collects Laura to walk home with her.

The Month of Roses – Laura begins to excel at making shirts as the month of June comes on and wild roses bloom across the prairie. Laura enjoys working knowing that her money can be used to help send Mary to college. Laura, however, dislikes the expanding town, thinking it to be ugly compared to the prairie. Of special annoyance are the two saloons, where people are either fighting or drunk. Laura one day ends up laughing at two drunk men, Tay Pay Pryor and Bill O'Dowd, for horrible singing. While Pa find this amusing, he believes two saloons in town are two saloons too many. Mrs. White and Ma are both horrified at how badly liquor is affecting good people.

Nine Dollars – With the spring rush for shirts over, Mrs. White lets Laura go. She has earned nine dollars, and is sad because she knows it is not enough to make a difference for Mary. She comes across Pa, who has just received the baby chickens from Mr. Boast. While she is excited about the chickens, she is sad about work. Pa tells her she has done very well, and should not be sad. It makes Laura feel a little better. At home, she helps Ma to settle the baby chicks into their coop. Ma reveals to Laura that with Pa's wages, if the corn and oat crops are good, Mary could go to college.

Analysis

"Little Town on the Prairie" is a young adult semi-autobiographical novel by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and is the seventh installment of her "Little House" series of books. The novel deals with many changes in Laura's life as she moves between the ages of 14 and 15, both personally, and around her in the world.

From the start, change is an important theme in the novel. This is most immediately reflected in Laura's unhappiness over the nearby growing town. She considers it to be a blot on the beautiful prairie. The town is constantly growing and changing, and more and more people are moving into the area. A county is being organized because there are now enough people in the area to warrant it.

Pa's revelation that Mrs. White is looking for someone to help produce shirts at Mr. Clancy's dry good stores is also a change for Laura. Laura dislikes change, though she understands that it can sometimes be for the better. This is certainly true of her experience with Mrs. White, for not only does it allow her to make nine dollars, but it also exposes her to life in town and how other families live.



Indeed, Laura becomes even more grateful for the kindness and orderliness of her own family after seeing how argumentative the Clancy family is. Laura's love of her own family can clearly and constantly be seen throughout the novel, making the theme of family just as prominent as change. Indeed, the entire family functions selflessly. Everything they do is in service for one another. While they do not have much, they share everything they have with one another.

A large part of Laura's desire to become a teacher, for example, is to be able to help pay for Mary to attend college for the blind in Iowa. Laura's desire to earn money wholly coincides with her desire to see her sister succeed. She has no interest in money for herself.

While Pa serves as the head of the house, it is clear he does not make any decisions without input from Ma or his children. This is true, for example, in Laura's working in town, and is also true of Laura's concerns about the corn crop and the blackbirds.

Interestingly enough, it is through the theme of family that a subtle theme of feminism also emerges. The decision to work in town is ultimately left up to Laura, who as a young American woman is able to freely choose whether or not she will work in town. That Ma herself should have so much say in the household decision-making process speaks not only to a sense of feminism, but of how deeply Pa loves her, and how truly important Ma is to the family.

Mary's desire to be educated at a college for the blind is also a gentle example of feminism, for the choice is Mary's, one she makes in consideration of love for her family, and concern for their finances. Laura's own tenure as a shirt-maker, as well as her dream to be a schoolteacher, speak not only to American independence, but feminism as well, for it is Laura, and no one else who is deciding her future.

Considering the family truly does not have that much to spare in the way of income, it is important that the family commits to homesteading for much of the year. Here, the theme of homesteading is especially important. It demonstrates the skills, versatility, and talents of Laura and her family to adapt to changing circumstances, and to live life independently. Everything they have, they have either earned or made themselves, from clothing to the food they eat to the house in which they live.

Their industriousness and their hard work become apparent in their ability to be able to have moved beyond mere subsistence farming. They are now able to produce enough in the way of crops and farm animals that some of these may be sold for money. This itself is also a change from the past, and portends other changes as well. If the crops are good, then Mary will be able to afford to attend college for the blind.

Discussion Question 1

At the beginning of the novel, what are Laura's thoughts about homesteading and the nearby town? Why does she feel this way about the homestead and the town?



Discussion Question 2

What dream does Laura have for her life in terms of work? Why is she so determined to see this dream through?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Laura unsure at first about going to work in town? For what reasons does she dislike the idea? For what reasons does she commit to the idea? Does working in town change her opinion of the town at all? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

homestead, shanty, gaily, serene, rebellious, exasperated, earnestly, squalled, baching, faltered, haughtily, contemptuously, jaggedly, solemnly, dignified, contrive



Fourth of July – Miss Wilder Teaches School

Summary

Fourth of July – The family is awakened by exploding gunpowder and firecrackers for the Fourth of July. Pa suggests heading to town. Ma, Mary, and Grace will remain at home, while Pa will bring Laura and Carrie to town. They dress up for the occasion. Speeches are made, free lemonade is given out, and the Declaration of Independence is recited. It makes Laura proud to be an American, to reflect on freedom, and realize that the only king Americans have is God. Pa buys smoked herring for lunch. He brings a gift of firecrackers for the girls from Lawyer Barnes, who is planning a political run.

They then meet up with the Boasts at the makeshift racetrack. Among the events is a wagon race, with one of the wagons being manned by Almanzo Wilder. Wilder's wagon is borrowed from his brother, Royal, and is heavier than the others in the race. Laura hopes he wins, for he has a fine team of brown Morgan horses. Laura is thrilled when they win. Pa is also proud of Almanzo's accomplishment. On the way home, Pa, who is on the school board, reveals that Almanzo's sister wants to come out from Minnesota to teach. Laura hopes that this means Almanzo's sister might take her out driving.

Blackbirds – It is August. Laura and Mary are excited that she will be able to attend college. While out walking one day, they come across Spanish needle grass, a painful plant that hurts people and animals. Pa must burn it to get rid of it. Ma sets to making suitable clothing for Mary to wear at college.

Laura, who herself is growing, hates having to wear corsets. She hates the idea of having to move back to town in the winter. She also worries that the blackbirds are ruining too much of the corn crop, which will hurt Mary's chances of attending college. Pa shoots down the blackbirds, and they are fried for dinner. Pa decides to sell a calf to pay for Mary to attend college.

Mary Goes to College – Mary is given a brand new trunk for traveling to college. The night before Mary leaves, Laura and Mary take a final walk. They will miss each other very much. Laura says that when she turns 16, she'll take up teaching to continue to help pay for Mary's college. It will take Pa and Ma a week to bring Mary to college, and then return. Laura is left in charge of Carrie and Grace. The girls work hard to do the chores. Laura has a newfound respect for her mother. Ma is thrilled with how well the girls have done when she and Pa return. They bring back gifts for the girls, including an autograph album for Laura – all the rage in Vinton, Iowa.

Miss Wilder Teaches School – The first day of school arrives. Laura and Carrie are both nervous and excited to attend. They meet their up with their friends Mary Power and Minnie Johnson. The girls sit on one side of the schoolhouse, and the boys on the other.



Among the girls is Nellie Olesen, who had bullied Laura for being a country girl when the family lived in Plum Creek, Minnesota. Laura takes satisfaction in the knowledge that Nellie is now a country girl herself. Nellie forces Mary and Minnie to give up their seats for her. This angers Laura.

Miss Wilder, the teacher, then begins class, talking about how being well-behaved and kind towards others. At recess, Laura, Minnie, and Mary Power speak to Ida Wright, a new girl who has been adopted. Nellie refuses to go outside, saying it will tan her skin and ruin her complexion. At dinner that night, Pa reveals that Nellie's father lost everything in Minnesota, which is why he brought his family out to the prairie. Laura decides that she will do her best to be good, no matter how bad Nellie is.

Analysis

This section of the novel brings the theme of change front and center once again. Laura's time in town on the Fourth of July exposes her to the understanding that the town is continuing to grow in population and expand in size. She is unsure about so many unknown strangers being around, as she is used to a smaller community of people, but is also interested to see the town is large enough now to have a celebration for the holiday.

In this section of the novel, changes also begin to occur in Laura, though she doesn't quite recognize them yet. She notices the wagon being drawn by Alamanzo Wilder, for example, during the horse race. She attributes this merely to interest in the beautiful horses he drives, but that she notices Alamanzo at all foreshadows romantic feelings still to come between Alamanzo and Laura.

Other changes that come include Mary's departure for college in Iowa. Laura is happy that Mary will be able to attend school, but is also sad that she will not have Mary around anymore. Mary herself is sad for the departure, knowing that she will miss her family tremendously. She does, however, look forward to being able to learn things at college. This again speaks not only to change, but to a theme of family and a subtle theme of feminism.

A small number of other changes begin to develop as Laura grows. For example, her mother is well-aware that young ladies are interested in styles and trends, and so one of the gifts she returns with from Iowa is an autograph album, which are all the rage in more populated areas. Laura is thrilled not only with being on par with a trend, but deeply values the gift because it has come from her mother and father, whom she loves tremendously and knows how hard they work for every cent.

One change that Laura is decidedly against is the appearance of Nellie Olesen in town. In previous novels, Nellie was essentially a bully toward Laura, so Laura is not looking forward to Nellie being in town. Nevertheless, Laura tries to focus on good changes brought about by the start of school, such as making friends with Ida Wright, Minnie



Johnson, and Mary Power. It reinforces in Laura's mind that not all changes are necessarily bad.

Laura's time in school in town also exposes her to the idea that town is not in and of itself bad, that there is a sense of community that can be gained in town the way a sense of community is gained with family. Laura's friendship with Ida, Minnie, and Mary Power underscores this point as Laura feels that she belongs with, and is accepted by, them. She might not have these friends if she did not attend school in town.

Discussion Question 1

For what reasons does the autograph album mean so much to Laura? Which of these reasons is most important to Laura? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Mary's departure for college both happy and sad for Mary and for Laura? What does this say about Laura's character as a person? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Laura so unhappy to learn that Nellie will be attending school with her? How are Laura's experiences with the other girls different at school? Why?

Vocabulary

unruliness, soberly, affable, despots, tyrannizing, monarchies, impel, basque, modulate, bleak, impudently, airily, impertinently

Snug for Winter – Name Cards

Summary

Snug for Winter – Laura and Carrie enjoy their autumn schedule of school and work on the homestead in preparation for moving to town for the winter. While packing clothes, Laura discovers a book of Tennyson's poems hidden by her mother. She imagines it must be a Christmas present, so she puts it back and doesn't say anything to her mother about it. It is the first time she ever keeps a secret from her mother, and she feels guilty about it. The family moves into the apartment above Pa's store. They are well-stocked and well-prepared for the winter.

School Days – Laura excels at school, and is proud of herself. Laura, Ida, Mary Power, and Minnie Johnson become fast friends. Sometimes they play ball with the boys, but do not want to be seen as tomboys. Nellie refuses to even take walks outside. The girls laugh among themselves about Nellie, and think she is trying to get in good with Miss Wilder to have access to her brother, Almanzo. Laura herself says she is more enamored with Almanzo's horses than Almanzo.

Nellie makes fun of Laura at school, saying that Miss Wilder said that Pa has little to say about the school. This angers Laura and her friends. Laura then retorts that it is too bad Nellie and her family are living in the country, or Nellie's father could be on the schoolboard and have a say at all.

Sent Home From School – Miss Wilder says she does not intend to punish students when they misbehave. Laura and her friends know that Miss Wilder will have a difficult time controlling the older students when they arrive in school after the end of harvest season. They also dislike how friendly Miss Wilder and Nellie have gotten.

At school, Mamie and Carrie misspell three words. Miss Wilder tells Mamie to study harder, while Carrie must write these words on the blackboard fifty times each. Laura and the other students consider it unfair. When Laura intervenes on Carrie's behalf, Laura is made to finish writing the words. This makes everyone even more unhappy with Miss Wilder.

One morning before school starts, Laura accidentally tears her skirt on the coal hod. Miss Wilder meanly says that perhaps Laura's father could get her a new skirt and new coal hod since she can have everything as she wants it. While reading, Carrie and Mamie are accused of rocking their seat and disrupting class, so Miss Wilder orders them to keep rocking. When they can't, Laura intervenes, and is ordered to help Carrie rock the seat. She does so loudly, causing Miss Wilder to send both Laura and Carrie home, early. They explain to Pa and Ma what has happened. While the girls are believed and not punished, they are told to remain on their best behavior.



The School Board's Visit – Everyone except Nellie is happy to see Laura and Carrie when they return to school the next morning. Charley, Clarence, and Alfred help lead the other students in disrupting class. Laura and Carrie behave themselves. Miss Wilder is forced to dismiss early, and the disruptions only continue through the week. Even Nellie participates, telling the students that Miss Wilder's name is Eliza Jane, and that she had lice years ago as a student. She was mocked as "Lazy, lousy, Liza Jane". At lunch, Ida composes a poem about this, which Laura helps to correct. The poem spreads like wildfire among the students, which horrifies Laura.

On Monday, the disruptions continue. The school board visits. Miss Wilder blames everything on Laura. Pa dismisses this, and reminds the students to be good. They obey. At home, Laura explains that what began everything was probably the disagreement between her and Nellie over Pa being on the school board. Ma cautions Laura to learn to be forgiving. Ma writes down a reminder about what Laura says, and to whom, in Laura's autograph album.

Name Cards – Miss Wilder returns to Minnesota at the end of the fall term. She is replaced by Mr. Clewett, a firm but fair man. Nellie mocks Laura for wanting to work as a teacher, which causes Laura to retort that at least her family isn't being financially supported by relatives back East. The older boys come to school, and most girls take an immediate interest in them. Mary Power is especially taken with Cap Garland, whom Nellie tries to steer away from Mary. Nellie later says she is more interested in Almanzo Wilder than Cap Garland, so Mary can have Cap.

The girls all write in each other's autograph albums. Laura notices that Nellie does not have one. Nellie says they are out-of-date, and everyone is exchanging name cards, now. Soon, all of the girls, including Laura, are purchasing them. When Laura picks her up, Almanzo offers her a ride to school. She consents and introduces herself. Almanzo gives her one of his cards. He explains his name comes from his family's history, during the Crusades where an Arab, Al Manzoor, saved a Wilder's life. Laura then gives him one of her cards. At school, Nellie is fuming that Laura has driven with Almanzo.

Analysis

One of the biggest changes for Laura in the novel beyond Mary's attending of college is leaving the homestead to live in town through the winter. Laura has been able to tolerate her time in town based on the fact that she can return home each night to the homestead. This will not be the case through the coming winter. Laura is very unhappy about this change at first, though she does take comfort in the fact that at least she will be there with her family.

Adjusting to town life takes a little work for Laura. For example, instead of wide open prairies, there are dirt streets and wooden walks all over the place. She must also deal with strangers being around constantly, and has no garden to work in. Having to attend school with Nellie, who turns Miss Wilder against Laura, is also problematic for Laura.



Nevertheless, even these difficult situations and adjustments end up as blessings. Laura's time in town intensifies her friendship with the other students, who rally to Laura and Carrie's defense by disrupting class for over a week. It also brings her closer to Alamanzo in many ways, though she is still seemingly more captivated by his horses than by Alamanzo himself, at first. This, as in the case of seeing Alamanzo at the Fourth of July event for the first time, foreshadows greater closeness between the two in chapters to come.

Family also plays a crucial role in this section of the novel. With Nellie turning Miss Wilder against Laura, Laura becomes the recipient of unfair treatment and unjust punishment. Pa and Ma, however, know their daughter, and know who she truly is as a person. While they caution her to behave herself, they do nothing to punish her, for they do not believe Laura has done anything wrong. This kind of loyalty is emblematic of the love of family, and the confidence that Ma and Pa have in Laura.

At the same time, living in town also brings changes to Laura and the other girls. As they get older, they begin not only to notice boys, but to pay more attention to style and trends. For example, the girls all initially have autograph albums, but are informed by Nellie that autograph albums are no longer in style. By then, name cards are in style, and all the girls rush to place orders for them. Pa and Ma consent to Laura purchasing the cards, which in turn leads to Laura exchanging cards with Alamanzo – more foreshadowing for future closeness between the two.

Laura and the other girls also realize they are changing as young ladies, and do their best to behave more like adults whenever they can. For example, they do not play ball with the boys as often as they used to, for they want to be seen as feminine rather than tomboys. Nellie herself wants to be so feminine as to refrain from even taking a tan by being outside if she doesn't have to. A large part of becoming an adult is learning how to be forgiving, as well. Ma reminds Laura that she must also learn to be forgiving, even of Nellie.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do Laura and the other girls attempt to behave more like young women? Why is this so?

Discussion Question 2

How does Laura adjust to life in town? What are some positive experiences she has? What are some negative experiences she has? Which have a greater effect on Laura? Why?



Discussion Question 3

When Laura and Carrie are sent home early from school, Ma and Pa do not punish them. Why is this? How do they respond to the situation? Why?

Vocabulary

aghast, gloated, hypocrite, exasperate, nubia, catcall, scornfully, outlandish



The Sociable – The Madcap Days

Summary

The Sociable – Mary Power tells Laura about a dime sociable being hosted by the Ladies' Aid Society in Mrs. Tinkham's rooms above the furniture store across the street. Ma consents to Laura's attending, helps her get ready, and allows Laura to cut her hair for stylish bangs (which some refer to as a "lunatic fringe" derisively). Many people are at the sociable, including newly-arrived Reverend Brown and his wife. Reverend Brown is supposedly a cousin of the abolitionist, John Brown. The sociable is a bit boring to Laura and Mary Power since they are the only girls there.

Literaries – Christmas approaches. Laura becomes overwhelmed by the monotony of winter life and studying all the time. Pa announces that people in the town will be forming a literary society. Laura and her family head to the meeting at the schoolhouse to organize the society. Mr. Clewett conducts the meeting. It is decided that, because it is their first literary meeting and they have nothing on the agenda, a spelling contest will be had. Laura comes in third place, Mr. Foster in second, and Pa in first. The deviation from her normal schedule makes Laura feel better.

The Whirl of Gaiety – Each literary meeting involves a different game or activity, such as charades, music, and a wax figure exhibit with moving wax figures. The church roof, which has been under construction, is completed. Reverend Brown is a good preacher, Laura decides. The Ladies' Aid Society hosts a New England Supper to help pay for the church. Laura and her entire family attend. The entire community has happily turned out. Many of the women volunteer to help do dishes and clean, including Laura.

Laura is saddened, however, that Mary is away at college as Christmas gets closer. The family puts together a Christmas package to mail her, full of gifts and five dollars. At Christmas, Laura receives the book of Tennyson's poems, and pretends to be surprised. A letter arrives from Mary, speaking of learning Braille. Laura is later invited to her first birthday party, at the home of Ben Woodworth.

The Birthday Party – Laura prepares for the party, hopes she is pretty enough, and walks to Ben's house with Mary Power. The party gets along well, with Ben's mother chaperoning. After dinner, birthday cake and oranges are served. Games are had, and Jim brings the guests downstairs to the telegraph office to show off the electrical telegraph machine. Everyone is amazed. As the party ends, Pa arrives to escort Laura home.

The Madcap Days – Laura is so thrilled with social life in town that she begins to neglect her studies. She takes to snowball fights and sledding, things which even Nellie cannot resist doing. The boys pull the girls all over Main Street on the sled, including past Alamanzo, which ends up embarrassing and angering Nellie. Nellie calls the boys



“ignorant westerners”. A minstrel show is held, in which five men in the community, including Pa, dress up like black men, with black makeup on their faces.

Pa later reveals plans to return to the homestead with the onset of spring. Though Laura is happy to go back, she will miss the town. She also knows, as she is now 15, that she has only a year left before she is old enough to teach. She will have to double-down on her studies.

Analysis

Life in town continues to provide new experiences and change for Laura. Between her growing into young womanhood, and her increasing circle of friends, town becomes more of a positive experience for Laura than a negative experience for Laura. For example, she begins to attend sociables, dinners, and literaries – all experiences that she never had on the farm. While some, like the sociables are not too much fun for Laura, others, such as the literaries, are hits.

These town activities also foster an important sense of community among the townspeople. The people of town are brought together for common causes and celebrations, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging, friendship, and acceptance. Laura comes to see the people in town less as strangers, and more as friendly acquaintances. Indeed, she makes many more friends as time goes on.

The town also picks up on trends and fashion styles. One of the newest such fashions for women is to give themselves bangs. While some mockingly refer to bangs as “lunatic fringes” because they make girls look wild, others excitedly embrace them, such as Laura. Laura gives herself bangs with her mother’s permission – here evidence that family matters to Laura more than style.

It is important to Ma that Laura keep up with trends and styles, for Ma remembers what it is like to be young. She also knows that Laura is growing up fast. This can be seen in Ma’s reluctant willingness to allow Laura to cut her hair, and in always making sure Laura is properly dressed for whatever the situation may require. The themes of family and growing intertwine here.

However, Laura does encounter some difficulties in terms of change and growing up. Now 15, she is attending social gatherings frequently in town – a dramatic change from life on the homestead only a few short months before. Laura realizes that her grades are beginning to slip as she is neglecting her studies in favor of having a social life. Yet she is grown enough and mature enough to understand that she will have to double down if she is to become a teacher.

Interestingly enough, the reader should note that Laura’s life in town in the winter leads to impatience and unhappiness based on routine and no change. In the time that Laura spends on the homestead, she relishes routine and change. This can best be seen prior to the organizing of the literaries in town. Laura’s attending of the literaries – and other social functions – leads to her calming and feeling better.



Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Laura change in this section of the novel with respect to herself as a person? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Before and after Laura turns 15, Ma does her best to make sure Laura is pretty and well-dressed. Why is this so?

Discussion Question 3

While routine on the homestead does not bother Laura, routine in the town does. Why do you believe this is so?

Vocabulary

anticipation, desolate, differentiation, repetitious, mimosaceous, xanthophyll, gaiety, daintiness



Unexpected in April – Unexpected in December

Summary

Unexpected in April – Back on the homestead, the Ingalls family has settled in for spring. It is late April, but an unexpected blizzard comes on. It lasts for three days. Traveling to and from town, Pa tells his family that two visiting easterners were lost in the blizzard, frozen to death. Laura later asks her mother about her own days as a teacher. Ma explains she was a teacher for two terms until she met someone. Laura also hopes to meet someone, for she wishes to be a wife and mother.

Schooldtime Begins Again – Laura spends much of her summer studying. The crops and animals grow. Hoop skirts come into style, and Laura is given a hoop. Though she finds them a little difficult to wear, she is glad to be in style. There is a new teacher at school, Mr. Owen, who is serious and firm in discipline. With the town growing, there are more students than ever, and a new building is needed. Mr. Owen hopes that the upcoming School Exhibition will reveal this to the town. Each student has a part. Laura and Ida will recite all of America's history from memory. Both girls love history, so they believe they will do well.

At the same time, revival meetings begin to sweep the country. One such week of meetings is held by Reverend Brown. Laura and her family attend. Afterward, Almanzo asks to see Laura home. Pa consents to this, and leads the others on ahead. Ma is worried about this, but Pa is not. Laura happily wonders why Almanzo, who is older and very mature, has walked her home. He does so again the next night. During this walk, he explains he is originally from Malone, New York, after which he lived in Spring Valley, Minnesota.

The School Exhibition – The night of the School Exhibition arrives. So many members of the community show up that the Exhibition must be moved to the church. Laura and Carrie are nervous. The Exhibition begins, in which the subjects and knowledge the students have been taught are displayed for those assembled. Carrie does very well. Laura's turn comes, in which she is able to talk about America's history, including how beautiful it is to be free in America. After the Exhibition, Pa compliments Laura and Carrie on a fine job.

Alamanzo walks Laura home from the Exhibition. He explains he is building a cutter, to drive his horses through the snow. This excites Laura. He promises to take her out sleighing when all is set. At home, Laura excitedly relates this to her parents, and asks their permission. Ma says she'll see when the time comes, but Laura can tell Pa approves by the happy look in his eyes.



Unexpected in December – Laura does not look forward to another Christmas without Mary. They know that Mary will need new clothes, and Ma worries about paying for them all. Laura explains she is almost 16, and will seek a teaching certificate in the summer. The extra income means that Mary could even come home to visit for the summer.

Mr. Boast stops by with Mr. Brewster, explaining that Mr. Brewster's new county, twelve miles south, is in need of a teacher. Mr. Brewster, present at the Exhibition, believes Laura would be perfect for the job. Laura's age could be forgotten in lieu of the needful circumstances. The term would only last two months, and would pay \$20 per month, plus board. Laura and Ma agree. Mr. Brewster and Mr. Boast then fetch Mr. Williams, the county superintendent, who is in town. Williams gives the examination, which Laura easily passes. She is then given a teaching certificate. When Pa gets home, he is very proud, and believes Laura will be an excellent teacher. She will have to report to teach the following Monday.

Analysis

As the spring arrives, the family moves back to the homestead. Laura is thrilled to be returning home, but also a little saddened by the fact that she will be leaving a full social life behind. Here, the theme of change can again be seen in Laura's living situation. This is one of the few changes that she is more in favor of than against. The only changes that Laura wishes for now are that she will become a schoolteacher, and that Mary will return home.

As a young woman of 15 on the frontier, Laura herself continues to change and grow up. Her desire to wear a hoop skirt demonstrates her insistence on keeping up with style – even if those styles are not very comfortable. At the same time, Laura herself begins to become interested in the idea of being a wife and mother. This is reflected in her conversation with her mother about her mother's time as a teacher, which lasted until she met the man who would become her husband. Laura, too, hopes to be a wife and mother. The theme of family can also be strongly noted in this instance.

Additionally, the theme of feminism can again subtly be seen. Laura's determination to be a teacher is once again her own decision. No man is making it for her. Additionally, Laura's respect for being a wife and a mother, and her desire to want to be a wife and a mother, are her choices, and no one else's. When Laura is asked by Alamanzo to be walked home, it is Laura herself who agrees to be walked home.

Almanzo's frequent walks home from social occasions and events with Laura lead to a closeness between them, which is what has been foreshadowed by their earlier encounters. It is clear that Alamanzo has romantic inclinations toward Laura, a prospect which makes Laura happy. Between her desire to be a wife and mother, and her budding interest in Alamanzo, it is clear she is continuing to grow up.



The novel ends with other important changes as well. First, Laura is given a teaching exam, which she easily passes. She has achieved her dream of earning her teaching certification, which will lead to employment, money, and allowing the possibility of Mary coming home for the summers from college. This is a very good change for Laura, and is one of the few of which there are few, or not bad sides in her mind.

The other change that teaching brings is employment for Laura. She is immediately hired to teach school for two months in a town twelve miles away. While Laura is thrilled because it will give her income and employment, she is also worried for two primary reasons. First, she will be an entire twelve miles away from her family. Secondly, she will have only herself to rely upon. It will be an experience unlike anything Laura has ever had before.

Discussion Question 1

In this final section of the novel, Laura begins to become interested in boys. In what ways does she demonstrate this interest?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Laura so eager to become a teacher, especially as it relates to the summers? What other things does Laura hope that employment as a teacher will mean?

Discussion Question 3

While Pa seems to be less concerned about Alamanzo escorting Laura home from social events, Ma seems to be a little more cautious. Why do you believe this is so?

Vocabulary

industrious, exhibition, dashing, parse, glibly, cordially, jiggered



Characters

Laura

Laura Ingalls is the main character and principal protagonist in the novel “Little Town on the Prairie” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Laura Ingalls is a lightly-fictionalized autobiographical version of the author at the ages of 14 and 15. Laura is the daughter of Ma and Pa, the younger sister of Mary, and the older sister of Carrie and Grace. When the novel begins, Laura and her family are preparing for the spring and summer on their homestead one mile outside of town. Laura is a sweet, kind, intelligent, and pretty girl who deeply loves her family, and values them above everything else. Her main goal at the beginning of the novel is to become a teacher by the age of 16 so that the family can afford to send Mary to school for the blind.

Laura is also very patient, very thoughtful, and very much opposed to most change. For example, she dislikes having to move into the town during the winter, since it uproots her from the homestead. While she knows that it is important that Mary attend school, she also dislikes that Mary will have to go so far away, and won't be around for a few years. However, Laura ends up being able to cope with all of the changes she encounters, demonstrating both maturity and resilience on her part. For example, one of her concerns about the town is that it is full of strangers. By the end of the novel, Laura has come to see town as a community of friends rather than a collection of strangers.

Not every change is easily dealt with, however. Nellie and her family move to the area, and Nellie, as in the past, continues to bully Laura. Nellie even turns Miss Wilder, the schoolteacher, against Laura and Carrie. Laura manages to handle Nellie by doing her best to behave, and by ignoring Nellie whenever she can. Laura also manages to handle Nellie by taking comfort in her friends, including Ida, Minnie, and Mary Power. By the end of the novel, Laura is being courted by Alamanzo Wilder, has earned her teaching certificate, and has already been hired to teach in a town twelve miles away. The prospect both excites Laura, and worries her, for she will have only herself to rely upon.

Ma

Ma, Caroline Ingalls, is the mother of Laura, Mary, Grace, and Carrie, and is the wife of Pa. Ma is a compassionate, kind, and beautiful woman who values her family above all else, and happily spends her life as a wife and mother. She is able to give her daughters good moral advice in life, and to teach them the skills required for frontier living. Though her husband has the final say in everything that goes on, Ma's input is highly valued by Pa in every situation. Through the novel, Ma does her best to help Laura handle the transition from childhood into young womanhood, making sure that Laura is well-dressed and pretty for social occasions. However, Ma also worries about Alamanzo Wilder courting Laura, though she is assured by Pa that Alamanzo is a fine young man.



Pa

Pa, Charles Ingalls, is the father of Laura, Mary, Carrie, and Grace, and is the husband of Ma. Pa is a good, patient man who is resilient and deeply compassionate. He values his family above all else. He is well-respected in the town and in the county, for being honest, fair, and the first settler in the area. Everything Pa does he ultimately does in support of his family. This includes ensuring his family not only has enough food, secure shelter, and clothing, but making sure that there is enough income for his family to follow their dreams. For example, he works long hours on the homestead and in his store, and sells a heifer-calf in order to help pay for Mary's college tuition. When Alamanzo Wilder begins to court Laura, Pa is content because he knows Alamanzo is a good man.

Mary

Mary Ingalls is the oldest child of Charles and Caroline Ingalls, and is the older sister of Laura, Carrie, and Grace. Mary turns 18 during the course of the novel. Having been blinded by scarlet fever, Mary has proved to be incredibly courageous and resilient in adapting to life without sight. She is able to do chores and work around the homestead, and her faith in God has increased tremendously. Mary goes away partway through the novel in order to attend college for the blind in Vinton, Iowa. Though she is thrilled to be headed to school, she is also saddened by having to leave her family, and her share of the chores, behind.

Carrie

Carrie is the second-youngest child of Charles and Caroline Ingalls, is the younger sister of Mary and Laura, and is the older sister of Grace. Carrie is about 12 years old during the novel, is a thoughtful, sweet, and kind girl. She is eager to help with chores on the homestead, and looks forward to attending school in town. Carrie is horrified when she becomes a victim of Nellie's antagonism, and Miss Wilder's unfairness. Laura comes to Carrie's defense. Carrie is later thrilled when she is able to successfully handle her part in the School Exhibition at the end of term.

Grace

Grace is the youngest child of Charles and Caroline Ingalls, and is the younger sister of Mary, Laura, and Carrie. Grace is about 5 years old, and does her best to help out around the house and the homestead. She looks up to her older sisters and her parents, and aspires to be just like them.



Almanzo

Almanzo Wilder is a relatively new homesteader to the area. He is in his mid-20s, is well-respected and well-liked by the people in town. He is first encountered by Laura during the Fourth of July races, and he later exchanges name cards with her when he gives her a ride to school on his wagon. Pa, especially, has a high opinion of Almanzo. When Almanzo begins to court Laura, it is done with Pa's approval and support.

Miss Wilder

Miss Wilder is the local schoolteacher for the fall term, and is the sister of Almanzo Wilder. She looks down with disdain on the town and its inhabitants. She becomes a confidante of Nellie Olsen, who turns Miss Wilder against Laura. Miss Wilder becomes very harsh and metes out unfair punishments to Laura and Carrie, causing everyone in the class to turn against her. Only the intervention of the school board restores order, and after the fall semester, Miss Wilder leaves town.

Nellie

Nellie Oleson is a pretty but unkind girl whose family has moved to the Dakota Territory after her father has lost everything. Years before in Minnesota, Nellie had cruelly bullied Laura, and picks up again now that she is new to the area. Nellie turns Miss Wilder against Laura and Carrie, competes with Mary Power for the attention of Cap Garland, and then attempts to win Almanzo Wilder's attention unsuccessfully.

Mary Power

Mary Power is a pretty, kind, and loyal girl of 14 or 15 who becomes one of Laura's best friends. Mary Power attends school with Laura, and attends many social events and functions with Laura. Mary Power is enamored with Cap Garland, but is too shy to compete with Nellie for his attention. In the end, however, Nellie is unable to win Cap's attention, which is won by Mary.



Symbols and Symbolism

Money

Money is earned through hard work in the novel. The earning of money by Pa, both in his store and from the crops and animals on the family homestead, demonstrates that Pa and his family are doing much better than in the past. They are no longer subsistence homesteaders, but are able to turn a profit from their labors. As such, they are able to afford to send Mary to college for the blind. Laura herself goes to work in town making shirts at Clancy's dry goods store. There, she earns nine dollars, something she has never done before. She is thrilled to have made an income to help her family.

Corn

Corn is one of the main crops that Pa grows on the family's homestead. It is besieged by blackbirds just before harvest season. The entire family works to chase the blackbirds away while Pa uses his shotgun to kill the blackbirds to save the crop. The corn crop is part of what Pa hopes will pay for Mary's college tuition, but the crop is ultimately ruined by the birds.

Oats

Oats are one of the main crops that Pa grows on the family's homestead. It is one of the crops that Pa is able to sell to earn money in order to help send Mary to college. The oat crop proves to be especially important to Pa and the family after the blackbirds destroy the corn crop.

Heifer-calf

A heifer-calf is one of the animals being raised on the homestead by Pa and his family. The heifer-calf is sold to earn money for Mary's college tuition. The heifer-calf is sold because the corn crop is ruined by blackbirds.

Chicks

An entire set of chicks is generously gifted to Pa, Ma, Laura, and the family by the Boasts. The chicks are in thanks for the Ingalls taking in the Boasts during a very bad winter when the Boasts became lost as new settlers to the area. The chicks are a tremendous blessing to the Ingalls family, for they will be able to raise the chickens, breed some, eat some, and collect some of their eggs for use in cooking.



Cats

Cats are rarities on the American frontier. A kitten is purchased by Pa for fifty cents in order to protect the house, barn, and homestead against mice, rats, and other small vermin. The kitten quickly takes to her work, and does very well. She earns the praise and love of the family for her work.

Autograph albums

Autograph albums are small books with blank pages of varying colors that are used by friends to write messages and mementos to one another. They are all the rage among young women in the novel early on. Ma brings back an autograph album from Vinton, Iowa, for Laura so that Laura may keep up with trends and styles like the other young ladies. Laura is very grateful for the album, for she knows how hard her parents work to earn money, and because she knows how much they must have been thinking about her to have purchased such a gift for her.

Name cards

Name cards are small, rectangular pieces of heavy paper on which small pictures or designs are printed, along with the name of the individual who purchases the cards. These cards replace autograph albums as the new trend among young people. Laura's parents generously allow her to purchase name cards to keep up with the times, and Laura happily exchanges one such name card with one from Alamanzo. The exchanging of the name cards between the two can be seen as foreshadowing for a trading of hearts later on.

Teaching certificate

A teaching certificate is given to Laura at the end of the novel. The certificate is written up by county superintendent, Mr. Williams, after he gives a teaching exam to Laura. The certificate makes it legal for, and authorizes Laura to teach in the county. This enables Laura to be employed immediately as a teacher in a town twelve miles to the south.

Shotgun

A shotgun is kept and wielded by Pa during the novel. Pa keeps the shotgun in order to defend his family and the homestead. He also uses the shotgun for hunting, and for protecting his crops against the blackbirds. The shotgun is able to down hundreds of blackbirds, which are then used for food by the family.

Settings

Ingalls Homestead

The Ingalls homestead is located approximately one mile away from the town of De Smet in the Dakota Territory. The family has lived on the homestead for a few years now, and it is Laura's favorite place in the world. She finds it warm, comforting, and beautiful. The homestead is the location of the Ingalls shanty, where the family lives, as well as a barn and other small outbuildings. The homestead is also the location of numerous animals, including cows, and crops, including corn and oats. Laura hates having to move from the homestead and into town each winter, preferring life on the homestead.

De Smet

De Smet is a rapidly-growing town in Kingsbury County in the Dakota Territory in the western part of the United States. It is located approximately one mile from the Ingalls homestead. The town features general stores, dry goods stores, furniture stores, a telegraph office, two saloons, lawyers, blacksmiths, and numerous other businesses and trades. De Smet is first seen by Laura as a growing scar on the beautiful landscape, but is later warmly embraced as a community by Laura.

Dakota Territory

Dakota Territory is a newly organized territory in the Western United States. It is the location of Kingsbury County, and is where the town of De Smet and the Ingalls homestead are located. Laura loves the Dakota Territory for its beautiful prairies and wide open spaces. The Dakota Territory is rapidly filling up with homesteaders and small towns. Laura herself dislikes how fast the Territory is filling up with people and towns.

Minnesota

Minnesota is a Midwestern state in the United States of America. It is the location of Plum Creek, and is where Laura and her family previously lived. It is where Laura was previously bullied by Nellie, and is the state where Alamanzo Wilder lived before moving to the Dakota Territory. Though Minnesota is not as far east as other states like New York, it is considered vastly more civilized and important than the West.

New York

New York is one of the eastern states in the United States of America. It is the home state of Alamanzo Wilder and the Wilder family. It is considered by some, like Miss

Wilder, to be far more civilized and cultured than the American West. For many Westerners, states like New York are seen as condescending and elitist.



Themes and Motifs

Change

Change is an important theme in the novel “Little Town on the Prairie” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Change in the novel most affects Laura, for between the ages of 14 and 15, she undergoes a number of new experiences that affect her life in important ways.

Laura is generally not a fan of change. She dislikes nearly all change, and does her best to always keep things the same, both about herself, and in the world around her. Her favorite place in the world is to be at the homestead with her family, doing chores, and enjoying the beauty of the landscape. She looks unfavorably upon the nearby growing town of De Smet, which she takes to be a scar on the land.

During the winter months, the family moves to reside in the town, which is a change that Laura especially dislikes. She feels constricted and out of place among strangers in town. However, over the course of the winter, Laura’s opinion of town changes. While she still prefers the homestead, she comes to understand that a town can be a community full of friends and warm acquaintances, rather than a place full of cold strangers.

The town also serves as a place of exciting new experiences for Laura. These include sociables, parties, and literaries. Laura is able to keep up with modern trends, such as hairstyles and name cards, and is able to grow close to Alamanzo Wilder. Indeed, Laura’s growing into young womanhood also means that she is embracing some changes, such as cutting her hair, worrying about whether or not she looks pretty, and exchanging name cards. She also worries about doing things like playing ball with the boys, for she wants to behave more like a young woman than a tomboy.

One changing experience that Laura is decidedly against is the presence of Nellie Oleson in town. Nellie has long been a bully toward Laura, so her moving to the area is something Laura is not happy about. Nellie quickly resumes her bullying ways, speaking cruelly to Laura and turning the teacher, Miss Wilder, against Laura and Nellie. However, Laura is able to handle both the teacher and Nellie, adding to her moral character and maturity as a young woman.

Other changes are seen as bittersweet by Laura. For example, Laura does everything she can to prepare to become a teacher so that extra income can be earned for use in sending Mary to college for the blind. When Mary finally leaves for college, the experience is both sad and happy for Laura. Laura is glad Mary will be able to attend college at last, but is sad that Mary will not be around anymore. Laura deeply feels Mary’s absence throughout the novel after she leaves.

The greatest change of all for Laura comes at the end of the novel, and like Mary’s departure for college, is also bittersweet. Laura achieves her dream of becoming a



teacher at the end of the novel. However, her certification as a teacher is brought about with immediate employment. She will have to be a teacher at a town twelve miles away, and will more than likely have to leave home to be a teacher. Laura will have to depend solely on herself for the first time in her life, which worries her.

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Little Town on the Prairie” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Family can be found consistently throughout the novel, and family affects the plot of the novel in various ways.

Laura values her family more than anything else in life. It is readily apparent and consistently evident throughout the novel just how deeply Laura loves her family, and how closely-knit her family is. Everything each of the family members does is ultimately for one another. Pa works long hours in his store in town, and long hours on the homestead in order to provide for his family. Ma herself spends her days working hard on the homestead and in the home, making sure that her family is well-fed and well-cared for.

Laura and her sisters each have responsibilities and chores to attend to on the farm. These they carry out well because they know they are all a part of a functioning family unit. Each member of the family is vitally important to the others. Laura dreams of being a teacher, not only because she wants to be a teacher, but because she knows it will help earn money to support the family. Specifically, money Laura can earn as a teacher she intends to use to help pay for Mary’s college tuition.

Even the way that Pa runs the family is evidence of how much his family means to him. While Pa is indisputably the head of the household, and has the final say on things, he makes no decisions without consulting his wife and children. This occurs in even the simplest ways. For example, it is Laura who convinces Pa that the blackbirds will be a problem with the corn, and that he had better shoot them. When Laura begins to be courted by Almanzo, Pa takes Ma’s concerns into account before approving of the walks that Laura and Almanzo take.

When Mary leaves for college, her absence is dearly felt by the family, especially by Laura. Mary has not only been Laura’s sister, but essentially her best friend as well. They have done everything together, from chores to long walks on the prairie. No holiday feels the same without Mary around.

Laura is very defensive of her family as well. At school, when Carrie is set upon by Miss Wilder with unfair punishments, it is Laura who immediately comes to Carrie’s defense. This is done not just out of a sense of justice, but out of family loyalty as well. Laura will not tolerate anyone doing anything wrong by her family.



Laura even worries about how her own choices will affect her family. She understands how important her family members are to one another, not just as a matter of love and loyalty, but in functionality as well. When Laura is hired to make shirts in town, she worries that her absence from the homestead during the day will put a greater strain on Ma, Carrie, Mary, and Grace due to them picking up the chores that Laura will not be doing.

Family also becomes incredibly important as Ma and Pa do their best to teach their daughters how to be good, respectable people. For example, Pa reminds Laura to behave, no matter how bad things get with Miss Wilder. Ma herself reminds Laura that she needs to be more forgiving of people like Nellie. Ma also serves as a role model for Laura. Ma herself was a teacher, until she met and married Pa. Laura, too, hopes to be a teacher like her mother. Like Ma, she also hopes to be a wife and mother one day.

Homesteading

Homesteading is an important theme in the novel “Little Town on the Prairie” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Homesteading involved a family or individual claiming a tract of land, putting up a house, and raising crops and animals on that land. As such, they lived as self-reliant individuals. Each territory and state had different laws or requirements for homesteading, such as how long a family had to live on the land before they properly owned the land, or what must be done with the land in order to claim ownership.

In the novel, Laura and her family are homesteaders near the town of De Smet. In fact, they are the first homesteaders to have come to the area. As a result, Pa is afforded tremendous respect in the town and surrounding county. They have been homesteading in the area for perhaps two or so years, though the exact time is never given.

Laura and her family live as self-reliant people on their homestead, originally relying very little on the town when it is founded. The house that Laura and her family live in on the homestead they have built themselves. In a previous novel, the family opens up their home to the Boasts, who become lost during a snowstorm as new residents to the area. In the tradition of homesteading community, the Boasts gift the Wilders with a set of chicks in thanks.

The family raises its own crops, including corn and oats. It raises its own meat, including beef and chicken. The family also makes most of its own clothing, only buying the needed materials for making clothing. Anything that they kill – such as the blackbirds – they use in some way, shape, or form. The blackbirds, once killed, are used to make blackbird pie and other related dishes.

The ways of homesteading are carried by the family into town through the winter. The animals are kept in a barn in town. Ma continues to make clothing for Laura and her sisters by hand. Laura herself proves to be an excellent sewer. Laura’s desire to style her hair like modern girls – with bangs – does not come by way of a barber, but by her own hand.



Feminism

Feminism is an important theme in the novel “Little Town on the Prairie” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Feminism appears subtly in the novel, and involves not only equality between the sexes, but as the ability for women to make their own choices and choose their own paths in life. This is quite clear with respect to the female characters in the novel.

In a day and age when men presided over families as heads of house, Laura’s own family is somewhat different. While Pa clearly is the head of the family and makes the final decision on all things, he never makes a decision without first consulting his wife and children. Here, the women are afforded just as much value in the decision-making process as Pa. This comes by way of not just love for his family, but by way of his respect for his wife and daughters as human beings and equally responsible for the family’s survival. Ma, for example, gives her input about Laura and Almanzo taking walks, while Laura helps to convince her father to go after blackbirds.

All misgivings about Miss Wilder’s fairness aside, Miss Wilder herself presents an excellent demonstration of feminism. She travels west to teach school based on her own decision to teach, and where to teach. Likewise, she travels alone – a very unusual thing for a woman to do in that day and age.

Ma herself is an excellent demonstration of feminism. Ma herself was a teacher, until she met and fell in love with Pa. Ma’s decision to teach was her own, and her decision to marry Pa was her own. Likewise, Ma’s desire to become a wife and mother were her own choice – a set of choices which Laura hopes to emulate.

Laura herself proves to be the strongest point of feminism in the novel. She dreams of being a teacher not because she is told or because it is expected of her, but because she wants to be a teacher herself. She hopes that being a teacher will help out her family, especially in affording college for Mary. Likewise, Laura’s desire to one day be a wife and mother is not forced on her by anyone. It is her own dream to want to be a wife and mother. When Almanzo begins courting Laura, it is Laura’s own decision to allow herself to be walked home by Almanzo. He does not force her. Instead, Laura happily accepts the escort.

Community

Community is an important theme in the novel “Little Town on the Prairie” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Community occurs where various individuals come together for one another in loyalty, support, acceptance, and celebration. A sense of community is especially important through the novel. Laura ultimately comes to see that a sense of community can even occur in a town.

When the novel begins, Laura considers the nearby town to be a scar on the beautiful landscape. She believes there is relatively little good that can come out of a town. She absolutely dislikes having to move into the town during the winter. She believes that the



only real sense of community can occur between family, and between homesteaders. In a previous novel, the Ingalls family opened up their home to the Boasts, who became lost during a bad snowstorm as new residents to the area. In the tradition of homesteading community, the Boasts return the favor with a gift to the Wilders of a set of chicks.

Laura learns in time that towns, too, can have a sense of community as well. Laura's first step towards a sense of community in town comes by way of her friendship with Ida, Minnie, and Mary Power. The four girls get along very well as friends, and find a sense of loyalty and belonging in one another. Even their entire school class offers a sense of community to Laura when Laura and Carrie are unfairly targeted by Miss Wilder. The students in class rally around Laura and Carrie by disrupting class for an entire week.

Community shows itself in many other ways as well in the novel. People begin hosting dinner parties and evenings known as sociables. The community rallies together in support of finishing the town church by attending a supper hosted by the Ladies' Aid Society. The Ladies' Aid Society itself becomes a fixture in town, organizing numerous dinners and events which brings members of the town together in community. The town also organizes Friday evening entertainments, known as literaries, where everything from spelling contests to exhibits, music, and debates are had. Literaries give the town something to gather together to talk about, purely for the sake of fun and entertainment.

Styles

Point of View

Laura Ingalls Wilder tells her novel “Little Town on the Prairie” from the third-person omniscient perspective in a reflective manner as though the narrator were relating the past history of a good friend to another good friend. The third-person narrator traces the life of Laura Ingalls from the age of fourteen to the age of 15. The third-person narrative mode allows the narrator to take moments in the midst of the unfolding plot to explain certain things to the reader. For example, when Laura decides to cut her hair, the reader is given some background into the style, how it is accomplished, and how other people view it. The omniscient aspect of the narrative serves this end well, and also reinforces the fact that the story being related has been told years after the event. As such, the narrator is able to fully explain events as they unfold. While Laura and her family do not know at first what the sound of fireworks are about on the Fourth of July, for example, the narrator and the reader do.

Language and Meaning

Laura Ingalls Wilder tells her novel “Little Town on the Prairie” in language that is simple, straightforward, and interspersed with historical references and terms. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the novel is directed toward an audience of children and young adults. As such, the language employed reflects their age and their level of education. Second, because the novel is about a girl growing into young womanhood, the language is reflective of her age and level of education as well. Third, the language is interspersed with historical references and terms due to the setting of the novel – the early 1880s. Numerous historical terms and phrases, such as “sociable”, “literaries”, “lunatic fringe”, and “the long and the short of it”, serve to give the novel an atmosphere of historical realism and believability, reflecting the time in which the novel is set.

Structure

Laura Ingalls Wilder divides her novel “Little Town on the Prairie” into 25 unnumbered, titled, chronological chapters. This simple and straightforward approach to the novel is reflective of both the target audience of the novel (children and young adults), and is reflective of the main character of the novel (Laura, who herself is moving into young adulthood). Each chapter is given a title respective to the events and parts of the plot found within that chapter. For example, “Fourth of July” deals with the experiences of Laura and her family on the Fourth of July, 1881, while the chapter “Literaries” has to do with the community organizing entertainment evenings called “literaries”.



Quotes

How would you like to come work in town, Laura?

-- Pa (Surprise paragraph 1)

Importance: Early in the novel, Pa gives Laura the chance to come and work in town. For much of her life, Laura has been committed to her family on the family's homestead. Pa's relaying of an offer to work in town signals a series of big changes that are going to come in Laura's life through the course of the novel. The first such change is Laura's decision to begin working in town as well as on the homestead, rather than just on the homestead.

She knew how good it would be to stay at home again, to help with the housework and do the chores and work in the garden, to go walking with Mary and gather wild flowers, and to look forward to Pa's homecoming at night. But somehow she felt cast out, and hollow inside.

-- Narrator (Nine Dollars paragraph 6)

Importance: Though at first she is worried about working in town, Laura comes to enjoy and excel at working in town. In many ways, she feels sad and cut off when she is let go after the spring rush for shirts. While she very much looks forward to being at home all the time, she also feels as if a part of her life is now over, and so feels cast out and sad as a result. It is another change in her life, and Laura dislikes most changes of any kind, immensely.

Ma is right, there is always something to be thankful for.

-- Laura (Blackbirds paragraph 113)

Importance: Laura learns some valuable advice from her mother through life. One such piece of advice is to be able to find something to be thankful for, even in the midst of what seems to be disaster. For example, the arrival of blackbirds may be dangerous for the corn crop, but it is also beneficial to the family because the blackbirds prove to be a source of food the family did not otherwise have.

It isn't likely this winter will be as hard, nor come as soon, but this time I intend to be ready for it when it does come.

-- Pa (Snug for Winter paragraph 9)

Importance: Pa has determined that his family will move to town in the winter. This will be done primarily for reasons of safety and well-being. Past winters spent on the homestead have been difficult and dangerous, and Pa has learned from past experiences not to let this happen again. He will be taking no more such chances in the future. Pa's decision to move the family in town will change Laura's life in important ways.



Now there was always Friday evening to look forward to, and after the second literary, there was such rivalry between the entertainers that there was news almost every day.
-- Narrator (The Whirl of Gaiety paragraph 221)

Importance: Laura, though she enjoys routine on the homestead, does not enjoy routine in the town since the town still seems to be so constrictive to her. Only after the forming of literaries does Laura feel better, for it gives her – and the community of townspeople – something fun and exciting to do, and to look forward to doing.

Laura was having such a good time that she almost forgot about improving her opportunity in school.

-- Narrator (The Madcap Days paragraph 3)

Importance: As Laura becomes a young woman, keeps up with styles and trends, and attends parties, literaries, and sociables, she begins to slack on her schoolwork and studying. This is normal for all teenagers to begin to focus too much on friends and social activity rather than school, and demonstrates that, although times have changed, teenagers really haven't changed so much in certain ways.

Hopefully she thought that she might meet somebody. Maybe, after all, she would not have to be a schoolteacher always.

-- Narrator (Unexpected in April paragraph 27)

Importance: Here, another reason why Laura wants to be a schoolteacher is revealed. Not only was Ma a schoolteacher, but Ma met Pa while working as a schoolteacher. Laura hopes that she, too, may meet her future husband as a schoolteacher. This demonstrates how Laura is growing into a young woman, and how she is looking forward to her future.

May I see you home?

-- Almanzo Wilder (Schooldtime Begins Again paragraph 58)

Importance: Here, Almanzo's simple but important question to Laura signals the beginning of a relationship between the two that will ultimately lead to marriage. Almanzo's request is well-mannered, respectful, and reveals that Almanzo is a good young man, just as Pa says he is. This begins the first of several walks that Almanzo makes with Laura, and demonstrates that they are slowly growing closer.

I'll be 16, two months from now," Laura said, hopefully. "Maybe I can get a certificate next summer.

-- Laura (Unexpected in December paragraph 10)

Importance: Laura's dreams of becoming a teacher remain with her well into her fifteenth year. She is focused on becoming a teacher when she turns 16 so that her family may have extra income, and because she hopes that she may meet her future husband in the process. The age of 16 is, legally, the age at which a person must wait until becoming a teacher.



She could not think what it would be to teach school 12 miles away from home, alone among strangers.

-- Narrator (Unexpected in December paragraph 64)

Importance: The biggest change for Laura comes at the end of the novel, when she receives not only her teaching certificate, but a teaching job. Laura's new job will be in a town 12 miles away, and will keep her away for two full months. It is a new experience quite unlike anything Laura has ever had before, for she will have to rely on herself and no one else. This underscores Laura's dislike of change, but her willingness to deal with it in the face of greater things.