

On the Banks of Plum Creek Study Guide

On the Banks of Plum Creek by Laura Ingalls Wilder

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Plot Summary

“On the Banks of Plum Creek” is a young adult semi-autobiographical novel by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and is part of her “Little House on the Prairie” series. It details the life and experiences of young Laura Ingalls between the ages of seven and eight while living along Plum Creek in Minnesota. As the novel begins, Charles (Pa) and his wife, Caroline (Ma), have just arrived along Plum Creek with their three daughters, Mary, Laura, and Carrie, and a few animals including their dog Jack. Pa trades his wagon and horse team to Mr. and Mrs. Hanson for their house and property. The Hansons are headed West.

The Hanson house is built straight into one of the banks of Plum Creek. It is a small but sturdy house. Laura and Mary are especially excited to be living near a beautiful creek, while Ma is thankful that the journey from Wisconsin is over. Immediately, the family sets to work making improvements. The family also becomes acquainted with their neighbors, the Nelsons, for whom Pa helps to work the land in exchange for goods and animals such as Spot the cow. The summer is long and dry, which is perfect grasshopper weather according to the Nelsons. None of the Ingalls have any idea what this means.

Through the winter, Pa purchases two horses, who will provide good labor and transportation for the family into the nearby town of Plum Creek. As the spring comes on, Pa and Mr. Nelson construct a new house for the Ingalls family, including an attic bedroom and two rooms downstairs. Laura, Mary, Ma, and Carrie are thrilled to be moving into an above-ground house with not only more than one room, but with more than one floor. Ma likewise is thrilled to have a cookstove and oven in the house, an item which she considers to be a luxury of the highest kind.

Spring planting goes very well, and the summer goes by beautifully. The family attends church weekly. In the autumn, Laura and Mary are sent into town to attend school. There, Laura is bullied by wealthy Nellie Oleson, whose father runs a general store. Nellie meanly refers to Laura and Mary as “country girls”. However, Laura and Mary become fast friends with Christy Kennedy, who introduces them to other friends as well.

Things go very wrong in the autumn, however. The grasshopper weather Mr. Nelson spoke about is a foretelling of events to come. Millions and millions of grasshoppers descend on the area, destroying the landscape and ruining the crops of countless homesteaders. Pa decides to head east a few hundred miles, beyond the reach of the grasshoppers. There, he takes on work harvesting crops and sending home money. By the spring, millions of baby grasshoppers have hatched, making planting impossible. By the end of the summer, the grasshoppers leave and go west.

Pa must again move east to take on work in the autumn to support his family. He returns to an early, brutal winter. Blizzard after blizzard bears down on the countryside through December. While heading back from town one day, another blizzard sets in. Pa must take refuge under an embankment along the creek. Ma, Mary, Laura, and Carrie

are beside themselves with worry and fear for Pa, and are relieved to see him come home safely a few days later, just in time for Christmas. Though there are no material gifts, the family knows that Pa's survival is the best gift possible.



The Door in the Ground – Cattle in the Hay

Summary

The Door in the Ground – Pa (Charles Ingalls), Ma (Caroline Ingalls), and their daughters Mary, Laura, and Carrie, their wagon team, and their dog, Jack, have come to Minnesota all the way from Indian Territory. They arrive at the Plum Creek home and stable of Mr. Hanson, who trades his earthen dugout home for the wagon team in order to move West. Seven year-old Laura finds the landscape to be beautiful, and finds it interesting how the home is dug into the creek bank. Pa intends to build an above-ground house and plant wheat soon. Laura is saddened by the trade of the horses for the home, but understands it must be done.

The House in the Ground – As the Hansons move out, the Ingalls move in. The house is small, but built very well. The home is practically invisible against the meadow grasses that surround it. Pa collects willow boughs for beds with Laura's help. They then bring Bright and Pete, the cattle, to water. Laura is still sad that the family's horses are gone, but Pa promises her that they will own horses again. The family feels safe and secure in their new house. Laura, though, would much rather sleep outside.

Rushes and Flags – After Laura and Mary do their morning chores, they are allowed to go outside and play. They discover rushes and blue flags growing along the creek. They use the rushes to make necklaces, and wade in the water. They are cautioned never to go around the bend in the stream, though, for there is a deep hole nearby.

Deep Water – Pa brings Laura and Mary to see the deep hole in the creek. Ma cautions the girls about going in, but they go in anyway. There Pa swims and dunks the girls, reminding them to always obey their mother. Ma and little Carrie watch from nearby on a tableland, a raised piece of ground.

Strange Animal – With Pa away, and Mary staying inside to be with Ma and Carrie, Laura is free to play outside and explore on her own. She climbs the tableland, and then decides to head toward the deep pool to look at it. Along the way, she finds a strange creature which Pa later identifies as a badger. Pa is disappointed to learn that Laura was heading toward the pool, so he says that Ma will now have to watch Laura. Laura must stay inside as a result. Laura does so, and the next day, she and Ma go looking for the badger. They do not find it. Ma reminds Laura to always be good and do as she is told.

Wreath of Roses – There is a large gray rock on the prairie beyond the stable that Laura and Mary like to play on. They never play on the rock out of safety when they see Johnny Johnson bringing a herd of cattle by. Pa brings the girls to the big rock to see the cattle, one day. Pa reveals that the family now owns one of the cows. It is a small,



white cow with red spots which resembles a wreath of roses. Laura, Mary, and Ma are thrilled. The cow will give them milk. The girls name the cow “Spot”.

Spot, Bright, and Pete are often herded with the other cattle during the day. During a stampede, Pete runs across the house, putting a hole in the roof. Laura and Jack then chase Pete into the stable. The roof is easily repaired. The next day, Pa and Laura completely rebuild the roof to make it sturdier.

Straw Stack – Pa helps Mr. Nelson harvest crops to pay for Spot. At home, Pa sets to harvesting a crop of wheat and cutting down prairie grass. Three men visit with a machine to thresh the wheat. There is enough wheat to last the family through winter, and enough straw to feed the animals. Laura and Mary play in the straw-stack, and make a mess of it. Pa tells them not to do it again, but they do it again. They lie and say they did not. Rather than punish them, Pa reminds them the animals need the straw to live. If the girls ruin the straw, the animals will die. The girls understand this and no longer play in the straw.

Grasshopper Weather – Wild plums ripen while Pa plows the land across the creek for a very big wheatfield. Laura and Mary head out to collect plums. They eat as they pick, brushing away bees and hornets. A first frost comes in November. Surprisingly, there is no snow. Pa and Mr. Nelson do not know what to make of it. Mr. Nelson calls it “grasshopper weather”, though no one quite knows what is meant by the term. Laura, though, loves running through the fields seeing grasshoppers jump around her.

Cattle in the Hay – Ma, Pa, and Carrie go to town. Laura and Mary are left home with Jack. Laura and Mary play and eat, and then differ over what to do next. Laura wants to go to the big rock while Mary wants to stay inside. It is then that they and Jack see the cattle are eating Pa’s haystacks. Mary, Laura, and Jack chase the cattle away. They discover that Johnny has fallen asleep on the job, and urge him to get up and keep the cattle away.

Analysis

“On the Banks of Plum Creek” is a young adult semi-autobiographical novel by Laura Ingalls Wilder. It details the life and experiences of young Laura Ingalls between the ages of seven and eight while living along Plum Creek in Minnesota. As the novel begins, the themes of family and homesteading can be seen instantly. Laura and her family have come west to Minnesota from the Big Woods of Wisconsin. Laura and her family have traveled together long and far in order to arrive at Plum Creek, where they trade their wagon team for the Hanson homestead.

It is clear from the start that the family is close-knit. Pa thinks only of creating a wonderful home for his family, and living as a free and independent homesteader. Laura herself recognizes the good of her family as being more important than her own personal interests in some situations, such as in the sale of the horse team. While she



is sad to see them go, she understands that it is for the better, for the family will now have a home and land to call their own.

As Pa works to improve the homestead, he often trades labor for things the family needs. For example, he exchanges labor for the purchase of the cow, Spot, who will come to give the family good milk. Likewise, Pa works hard in the fields as the late summer and early autumn come on, harvesting wheat for the family, and straw for the animals. Pa does his best to rely as little as possible on purchasing things, and does whatever he can to be self-reliant for the sake of his family and their homestead. It becomes apparent that even the simplest things, such as milk, are of vital importance to the family. They show immense gratefulness for what modern readers would take for granted.

The new Ingalls homestead is located right along Plum Creek (also the name of the nearby town). It is through Laura and Mary exploring the creek that the theme of nature emerges. Laura and Mary discover all sorts of wildlife, from wild plums and badgers to the fish living in the creek. They discover marvels of nature, such as dramatically raised sections of lands called “tablelands”. Though Jack, Spot, and the oxen are domesticated animals, they are still to some degree a part of the wild world, and Laura and Mary take great delight in their company.

However, nature can have a downside as well. Strange weather patterns (including a late frost and no snow) emerge late in the autumn, which confuse both Pa and Mr. Nelson. While Mr. Nelson knows enough to call these strange weather patterns “grasshopper weather”, none of the Ingalls know what this means. The odd weather and the use of the term “grasshopper weather” serve to be an ill-omen the reader should bear in mind for the coming sections of the novel. The cattle stampede also serves as a danger of nature, in that people can become susceptible to natural inclinations if they are not careful.

As Pa works and tends to his family, it is clear that the family operates in a very traditional way. The theme of patriarchy emerges here as Pa is clearly the head of the house, and makes all of the final decisions regarding everything from where Laura and Mary play to what crops will be planted on the farm. However, the patriarchy of the Ingalls family is not cruel or overbearing, but is operational. For example, Pa only ever makes decisions with the consideration of Ma’s opinions. Though he has final say, he will not decide on anything until Ma has given her input. He sees Ma as more or less an equal to him, and his love for her can also be seen through this level of equality.

Interestingly enough, even when Pa must be heavy-handed as the head of the household, he is still a calm and reasonable man. When Laura and Mary persist in playing in the straw he is gathering for the animals to feed them through the winter, Pa does not punish his daughters. Instead, he explains that the animals will die without the straw. Laura and Mary take this lesson to heart, and do not play in the straw again, just as their father has instructed.



Discussion Question 1

Why have Laura and her family moved to Plum Creek, Minnesota? What plans do they have for their new home in Plum Creek? Why?

Discussion Question 2

When Laura and Mary misbehave, their father tends to reason with them rather than punishing them. Give an example of how this is done. Is it an effective way of dealing with misbehavior in the novel? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How does Laura feel about moving into the new earthen house at Plum Creek? Why? How does Ma feel about moving into the new earthen house at Plum Creek? Why?

Vocabulary

dugout house, gaily, tableland, scramble, milch cow, sown, dreadfully, quivered



Runaway – The Old Crab and the Bloodsuckers

Summary

Runaway – Returning home, Pa loses control of the oxen and the wagon. Only through hitting Pete on the head does Pa save Ma, Carrie, and the wagon. Laura and Mary are thrilled no one is hurt. They help unload the wagon and later tell Pa about the cattle in the hay. Pa tells them they did the right thing. Pa then reveals he has brought home two pieces of horehound candy for Laura and Mary. The girls are thrilled. Sitting outside with Pa and Mary, Laura tells them she likes wolves better than cattle. Pa says they will have team of horses, soon.

The Christmas Horses – There is still no snow by Thanksgiving Dinner. That night, Pa reflects on how he'll need horses for planting in the spring. Ma asks the girls what they would like for Christmas. They hope for candy and dresses. Ma gently suggests the girls wish for horses, because Christmas is a time to be unselfish. Laura and Mary realize that they could ride the horses, so they decide to wish for horses. They pray to be only glad about Christmas horses, instead of unhappy about not getting things for themselves.

A Merry Christmas – It begins to snow. Mary, Laura, and Ma make a beautiful button-string for Carrie for Christmas. Pa reminds the girls to hang up their stockings. The next morning, they are thrilled to find candy in them. The girls are then thrilled to find two horses in Pete and Bright's places in the stable. Laura and Mary then happily ride the horses.

Spring Freshet – Laura, Pa, and the others are awakened in the night by heavy spring rains. In the morning, Laura runs out to see how high the creek has gotten, but Ma warns her about going out in the rain. When the sun goes out, Pa, Laura, and Mary venture out to see how high the creek has gotten. Pa knows it won't be long until he can plant crops, for the water is good for the ground.

The Footbridge – The next day, the water level in the creek has fallen some. Part of the footbridge across the creek is now above the water. Laura decides to go into the water, but the current is so strong that she is barely able to hold onto the footbridge. She is finally able to pull herself out. At home, Laura tells Ma what has happened. Ma is worried and relieved, and decides not to punish Laura because Laura nearly drowned. She forbids Laura from going near the creek while it is flooded. It makes Laura realize that some things are stronger than people.

The Wonderful Horse – The Christmas horses are named Sam and David. Pa finishes planting with them, and the wheat begins to grow. The family also plants oats and potatoes. The horses make quick trips to town possible. Pa purchases lumber to build a



house on credit. Mr. Nelson helps Pa to dig the cellar and build the house. Laura and Mary eagerly finish their chores to go watch. They are amazed the house will have an attic, and two whole rooms downstairs. They are also amazed by the lean-to, cookstove with oven, and glass windows.

Moving In – The family moves into their new house. Ma is surprised and happy with the cookstove, but she worries about the cost of such a luxury. They add curtains to the windows, set out the Bible, and set up their precious few books. The girls are given the attic as their own room. Laura happily falls asleep listening to the rain on the roof.

The Old Crab and the Bloodsuckers – Laura wants to go to the creek, but Pa tells her not to do so. He tells her and Mary to follow the path that Mr. Nelson made when coming to work on the house. They follow the path to a beautiful, quiet creek and a clear pool of water. They play in the water and come across a crab, and get leeches on them while playing in the mud. Pa later cautions the girls not to play in the mud in the future to avoid the leeches.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, the theme of family is again strong and consistent. Everything that Pa and Ma do in the novel is for their family, and the decisions that Laura and Mary themselves make are decisions that affect the entire family. For example, at Christmas, Laura and Mary decide to wish for horses because they know that the horses would help better their lives, and the lives of their family, than personal material gifts.

Nevertheless, Pa has managed to scrape and save enough to provide his family not only with horses, but with candy for Christmas as well. He understands the kind of sacrifices that they are making in order to homestead, and so he himself has no reservations about sacrificing in order to provide for them.

Pa continues to improve the lives of his family through homesteading. He and Mr. Nelson construct an above-ground, traditional American house for the family to live in. As homesteaders, they rely only on themselves to do this. The house has two floors, three rooms, a cookstove, and a lean-to.

This is a dream house for the family, and is evidence of how hard Pa has worked to make life better for them. Ma is floored with her new cookstove oven, considering the item to be a luxury. Her first concern is that of cost, for she knows that every cent counts toward providing for the family. It is emblematic of Ma's love for the family.

The natural world around Laura and her family continues to heavily influence how the family lives. For example, spring flooding means that Laura and Mary cannot go running around and playing the way they used to. Laura almost drowns while playing in the flood creek as she has been told not to do so. The natural world also has other down sides, as is the case when Laura and Mary get leeches while playing in some muddy water.



As homesteaders, the girls are learning more about their natural environment. They learn quickly that flooded waterways are not to be taken for granted, and that leeches are not something to risk catching. As such, owing to love and loyalty inherent in the theme of family, Ma and Pa do not punish the girls for this misbehavior, but allow the lessons they have learned to be punishment enough. That Laura nearly drowned, for example, is certainly enough proof for her to not risk taking floods lightly again.

As homesteaders, the Ingalls family members are again always gracious and grateful for the things they have in life. Things modern readers take for granted, or take to be very simple, Laura and her family take to be blessings. Ma considers her stove oven to be a luxury, while the fact that the house Pa has built not only has more than one room, but more than one floor is astounding to Laura and Mary.

Likewise, that candy should be worthy of a Christmas gift – and a gift, for that matter, which is prized by Laura, Mary, and Carrie – is striking to the modern reader. Yet, is emblematic of the simple homesteading lifestyle, and how simple things are blessings for which the Ingalls family cannot be grateful enough.

Discussion Question 1

In this section of the novel, Laura has some close brushes with different parts of the natural world. What are these close brushes that Laura has, and how does she manage to survive them?

Discussion Question 2

Though Laura and Mary are hoping for exciting Christmas gifts, they are reminded that horses will be a good gift for the family. Why do Laura and Mary ultimately wish for Christmas horses? Do you believe this is fair for Ma to remind them that Christmas horses are an appropriate gift?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ma consider the cookstove with oven to be such a luxury? Why do Laura and her sisters consider the candy at Christmas to be such a wonderful gift?

Vocabulary

harrowing, interrupting, unselfish, queer, beckoned, jounced, flutterbudget, freshet, boughten,



The Fish-Trap – The Glittering Cloud

Summary

The Fish-Trap – Ma and Pa decide Laura should attend school as she is almost eight years old, but Laura does not want to go. Ma explains that education is always important. Laura then helps Pa construct a fish trap to catch fish as they come over a small waterfall. While catching fish for dinner, Laura complains about having to go to school, but Pa reminds her she is lucky to be able to have the chance to attend. Each day, Pa catches enough fish for the family to eat.

School – The first day of school arrives. Ma sends Laura and Mary off with the schoolbooks she used when she was younger in case they are needed. They walk two and-a-half miles to town to go to school. They are worried about what town and school will be like. At school, they realize their dresses are shorter than those worn by town girls.

A girl named Christy Kennedy introduces herself and her younger brother, Sandy, who calls Laura and Mary “snipes” because of their long, thin legs. Christy tells them to ignore her brother. Christy then points out her older sisters, Nettie and Cassie, and her other younger brother, Donald. She has seen Pa in town before, and points out her house near Beadle’s Store. She reveals that Miss Eva Beadle is the teacher. The girls then meet Nellie Oleson, who dismisses Laura and Mary as “country girls”. Miss Beadle spends much of the day helping Laura to begin to learn how to read.

Nellie Oleson – The girls are given money to purchase a slate for school at Mr. Oleson’s store. There, Nellie and her little brother Willie greedily help themselves to candy in front of Laura and Mary. Laura and Mary feel bad about needing to purchase a slate pencil as well. Nellie makes fun of them for not having enough money. They spend their own money on a slate pencil at Mr. Beadle’s store so Pa does not have to spend more of his own money. They come to enjoy school, despite Nellie.

Nellie becomes a bully as time goes by. This includes pulling Laura onto the ground by her braids, and demanding to have her way at recess. Laura refrains from hitting Nellie, remembering that Pa has told her never to hit another person. The other girls refuse to let Nellie have her way, which angers Nellie. The following week, she invites Laura and Mary to a party at her house.

Town Party – On Saturday, Laura and Mary head into town for Nellie’s party. They meet Cassie and Christy in town. None of the girls have ever been to a party before. They are amazed at how wealthy the Olesons are, from their fancy furniture to the number of toys Nellie and Willie have. Nellie will not let anyone touch her toys, and embarrasses Laura by singling her out, telling her not to touch her wax doll.



Mrs. Oleson is much kinder, letting Laura look through a book and making sure Laura's lemonade is sweet enough. It is the first time Laura has ever had lemonade. As the party ends, Laura and the other girls thank Mrs. Oleson for her kindness. Laura vows to Christy that she will get even with Nellie. At home, Ma decides they must return the hospitality. She tells Laura and Mary to invite all their friends to a party one week from the following Saturday.

Country Party – Ma, Mary, and Laura make their house look beautiful for the party, and prepare good food, including dainty cakes. The guests begin arriving, and Nellie complains about Jack getting too close to her dress. She then rudely tells Ma she didn't wear her best dress to only a country party. Laura has had enough. Nellie asks where Laura's dolls are, but Laura says she plays in the creek instead of with dolls.

Laura brings Nellie and some of the other girls to the creek, where she pretends that the old crab is after Nellie, causing Nellie to run into the muddy water. Nellie then begins screaming as she gets leeches all over her. Laura laughs hysterically. Ma comes rushing to the creek to see what is going on. She helps remove the leeches, then comforts Nellie. Inside, all of the girls except Nellie love the food Ma has made, especially the vanity cakes. Only Nellie does not say thank you as the party ends.

Going to Church – Pa announces the new church in town has been completed, and Reverend Alden will begin preaching the next day. Pa says his family will attend. Ma is excited. Laura and Mary have never been to church. The entire family dresses up for the service. Laura and Mary also attend Sunday School with Christy and the other children. Mrs. Tower is the teacher. She helps them memorize Bible verses and Christian hymns. The family looks forward to attending church each week.

Pa's boots give out, and he knows he must purchase a new pair for three dollars. They are too expensive, so he waits. He borrows Mr. Nelson's mowing machine for making hay. The wheat crop is also coming in well. While out to purchase boots, Pa donates the money to the church instead, to buy a bell for the belfry. Ma does not like this because she wants her husband to have good boots. Pa is not worried, for he is hopeful about the money the wheat crop will bring in.

The Glittering Cloud – The hot weather is good for the wheat. Pa tells his family that forty bushels of wheat can be had from an acre, and that each bushel fetches one dollar. But then a swarm of grasshoppers approach and fall down everywhere. Pa and Ma rush out and burn small piles of hay and manure to cause smoke to drive the grasshoppers away from the wheat, but are unsuccessful.

The chickens happily eat the grasshoppers, which causes Ma to remark that there is a good side to everything: they will not have to buy feed for the hens, now. Pa and Laura learn that the swarms have cost many families everything they have, and they are headed back East. Pa earns the use of Mr. Nelson's plow to prepare the field for next year's planting.



Analysis

The experiences that Laura and Mary have in Plum Creek while attending school contrast sharply with their life as homesteaders. It also demonstrates their gratitude and moral character as people when they encounter Nellie Oleson. Nellie here emerges as something of an antagonist to Laura, a role which Nellie will also resume in future novels in the series (including “Little Town on the Prairie”). Nellie’s family is a wealthy town family as her father owns and operates a general store.

Nellie is aware of her wealth and measures her self-worth by status and material possessions. She and her brother are also able to freely walk into their father’s store and eat all the candy that they want whenever they want. It is the same candy which the homesteading Pa struggled to be able to afford for only one special occasion. The dress that Nellie wears is also longer, evidence of more modern fashion available in town, but not out on the homestead. Nellie meanly refers to Laura and Mary as “country girls” due to their clothing and their lives as homesteaders.

When Laura, Mary, and other town girls go to visit Nellie’s house for a party, they are all amazed by the family’s wealth. This includes beautiful decorations and fancy furniture. But the girls are especially impressed by the number of fancy toys that Nellie and Willie have in their possession. Not only does Nellie cruelly laud these toys over the others, she even refuses Laura permission to touch anything. She even embarrasses Laura by loudly telling her not to touch her doll.

Not everyone in town is bad, though. Ma decides that a reciprocal country party is to be had, and the girls are given to invite all of their friends out to the country for a Saturday of enjoyment. Only Nellie scoffs at the homestead. The other girls think the place is beautiful, and rave about Ma’s country cooking. It is clear that Laura, Mary, and Ma are proud of what they have on the homestead, and are happy to share their lives with others. This reflects a sense of gratitude, and adds to the theme of gratefulness.

The theme of gratefulness can also be found in small and unusual places. Following the destruction of their crop, the family takes comfort in the fact that at least they will not have to buy food for their hens, as the hens are happily munching on grasshoppers left and right. Meanwhile, Pa is in need of a new pair of boots. His current pair is literally breaking apart. Boots cost three dollars – a small sum for contemporary readers, but a high sum for nineteenth-century homesteaders. Pa decides the boots are a luxury that he cannot afford, especially knowing his family will have greater need for money in the coming months.

Another area in which the family demonstrates a profound sense of gratitude comes in their attendance of church. Many contemporary readers find attending church to be either boring or an obligation. Laura and her family consider attending church to be a blessing. The difference between Laura’s family and the modern reader’s time owes in large part to ease and taking things for granted.



Church now takes little more than an hour. In Laura's time (the late 1870s), attending church was an all-day affair. It required cleaning and dressing well, making the journey into town, attending the services, socializing, and then returning home that afternoon or evening. It wasn't as simple as things are today, where contemporary readers can hop into a car and be at church in a few minutes.

Despite the town party event, Laura and Mary are still thrilled with what they have, and are happy to be homesteaders. However, homesteading becomes immensely difficult as the summer comes on. Here, the theme of nature returns. Pa and the family now learn what "grasshopper weather" refers to. The strange weather conditions cause the migration and congregation of millions upon millions of grasshoppers.

The grasshoppers are ruinous to the area for hundreds of miles around. Not only do they destroy Pa's prized wheat crop, but they decimate the landscape and ruin the lives of innumerable other homesteaders, many of whom decide to return to the East. It is a plague of Biblical proportions, and the grasshoppers serve to be symbolic of destruction.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Laura and her family consider attending church to be such a blessing? How do contemporary people view attending church? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Though Pa is desperately in need of a new pair of boots, he refuses to buy one. Why? Is his decision to be approved of? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the lifestyles of Laura and Nellie. How are they similar? How are they different? Why do you believe they are so different?

Vocabulary

anxiously, snipes, soberly, velocipede, missionary, belfry, marvelous, mournfully



Grasshopper Eggs – Prairie Winter

Summary

Grasshopper Eggs – Laura and Mary discover that the grasshoppers have not only ruined the prairie, but they have begun to lay millions and millions of eggs. Pa does not know how to handle them. He decides to head a hundred miles east to help harvest unaffected crops to earn money. Pa then plays his fiddle and leaves the next morning. Ma reminds the girls that they must work hard while Pa is gone.

Rain – Laura and Mary are sad without Pa around. The heat is hard on them and on the animals. Unable to attend church, Ma reads to the girls from the Bible on Sundays. Of especial interest is the plague of locusts in the Old Testament, and how God promised a land of milk and honey to His people. A rainstorm comes on which brings cool, sweet air, and causes new growth on the prairie to repair the damage done by the grasshoppers.

The Letter – Laura and Mary anxiously await a letter from Pa. Mr. Nelson checks for letters at the post office each time he goes into town. Finally, a letter arrives. Ma cries with relief that Pa is okay. He has had to walk three-hundred miles to find work, has sent home five dollars, has purchased new boots, and is making one dollar a day.

The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn – Winter frosts come on, killing millions of grasshoppers. Mrs. Nelson and her infant, Anna, visit Ma and her family. Laura allows Anna to play with Charlotte, her old rag doll. Anna will not let go of Charlotte, and Ma allows Anna to keep Charlotte. Laura is upset, but Ma reminds Laura that she has made Anna very happy. Mr. Nelson comes the next day to chop up firewood for Ma.

Laura later finds Charlotte scalped and discarded by Anna. Laura brings Charlotte home, where Ma repairs the doll. The next morning, Pa returns home. Everyone is happy to see him. He says he has earned a good amount of money, and - overjoyed - is going to town since new shoes are needed.

Going to Town – Pa brings the family into town. There, he pays down his debts and buys new shoes for Mary and Ma, and material for new winter dresses for Laura and Mary. Nellie makes fun of Laura for not being able to afford the kind of fur cape that Nellie has. Pa and Ma do not buy themselves anything, however, in order to save money. At home, Pa plays the fiddle.

Surprise – The winter is mild. Laura and her family return to church and Sunday School. They head into town one evening for a Christmas service, where they see a Christmas tree for the first time. Afterward, Christmas presents are handed out to everyone. They are purchased and donated by Reverend Alden's congregations back East. Among the things Laura receives are a fur muff and cape. She is thrilled. She is so thankful that on the way home, she even wishes Nellie a Merry Christmas.



Grasshoppers Walking – It is spring again, and the grasshoppers are hatching. They eat everything, and when they are fully grown, they begin to head west. They even come in through the open window of the house and head west before the window is shut. The grasshoppers do not stop for anything, including water, where many drown. This goes on for days, until all the grasshoppers fly away to their ancestral home. Laura and her family are incredibly thankful the ordeal has ended.

Wheels of Fire – The land recovers in July after the departure of the grasshoppers. Pa puts in a turnip crop for Ma and the girls, knowing he will have to head east to harvest. He leaves soon after. A prairie fire comes on, resembling wheels of fire spinning down and striking the earth. Ma, Mary, Laura, and Mr. Nelson run across the land to successfully put out the fires with water.

Marks on the Slate – The cold comes on fast after the fire. Ma, Laura, and Mary work hard to harvest potatoes and turnips. Ma makes a salve of beeswax and lard to heal dry, cracked hands. The family eats many turnips, and the tops go to the animals. Laura and her family also anxiously await the return of Pa, making marks on a slate. They are thrilled when he returns. Pa tends to firewood immediately, knowing a hard winter is setting in.

Keeping House – Pa spends as much time as he can preparing firewood and hunting game, which is scarce. He is considering heading further west. On a rare mild day, Pa and Ma take a walk to town while Laura and Mary remain behind to watch over Carrie and the house. They do chores, play school, teach Carrie some letters, and are then very board. They see a blizzard coming on, so they rush to bring in firewood, even though they have been told to stay in the house. Pa and Ma arrive home a short time later and approve of what the girls have done given the circumstances.

Prairie Winter – The blizzard continues to rage. It is so bad that Pa goes to the stable with a rope attached to his waist in order to find his way back to the house. The weather after the storm is sunny and very cold. Pa and Ma discuss raising their own meat. Between each blizzard that sets in, Pa does everything he can outside, including chopping more wood. The family cannot even go to church for fear of being hit with a blizzard while traveling.

Analysis

The catastrophe of the grasshoppers means that Pa is now shorthanded – without crops or money – to support his family. Here, the theme of family is more important than ever as Pa decides to travel east hundreds of miles, beyond the extent of the grasshopper plague, to work to earn money to support his family. Pa does not travel by horse, wagon, or train, but by foot. He can afford to travel no other way, and this serves as a further testament to Pa's sense of family.

Pa's decision to travel to find work to earn money for his family also directly feeds into the theme of patriarchy. Pa's family is Pa's responsibility, and he will do what he must to



earn an honest living to support them. Pa's decision to leave is his own, and is a decision made by the male head of the family in order to benefit the family. Patriarchy here proves to be a very positive thing. Literarily, patriarchy isn't always oppressive or a sense of entitled power. Here, it speaks to a sense of responsibility and courage to do what is needed, and to do what is right. Indeed, he must do this two years in a row.

With Pa gone, family becomes even more important to Laura. She, Ma, Mary, and Carrie think of Pa nonstop, pray for him always, and wish him well. They constantly worry about how he is doing while he is away, and turn to one another for comfort and emotional support. The theme of family is also very strong here. Laura attempts to keep herself occupied by focusing on chores, housework, and schoolwork, but this is all very difficult to do without Pa being around. It is even worse the second year he must go away. Ma does her best to keep the spirits of her daughters up by playing games with them and helping them to keep track of the days until Pa returns home. However, the entire family grows sad without Pa around.

The import of the homesteading community is inherent in this section of the novel. As Christians and Americans, Mr. and Mrs. Nelson are aware of the difficulties of the Ingalls. They consider it to be a blessing when Mrs. Nelson and her daughter come over to visit for a social call, though Laura ends up being unhappy about Charlotte's being given away. The family also feels blessed, and is extremely grateful later when Mr. Nelson comes over to chop firewood.

The family is very grateful when Pa returns. They know how hard he has worked, and how far he has walked in order to be able to provide for them. It is something they do not take for granted. Many contemporary readers take work commutes for granted, as there is a set work day and a set place to travel to and from to get home. Work is not something that Pa, Laura, and the rest of the family take for granted because work means being away from home for months at a time across great distances. The theme of gratitude is especially strong here, for Laura understands how crucial an income is to their survival now that the crops have been destroyed.

Nature returns as a force to be reckoned with in this section of the novel. This is clear both in terms of the prairie wildfire storm, and the brutal winter which immediately follows it. Only through the quick work of Ma, Laura, Mary, and Mr. Nelson are the fires able to be put out all over the area. However, nothing can be done to counter the blizzards, except for sticking close to home and remaining inside as much as possible. While people may have some successes over nature, people are still at the mercy of the world beyond their control. Pa, for example, must leave the safety of the house for the stable, but will only do so with a rope in order to find his way back.

Laura and Mary have learned much as homesteaders. Throughout the novel, they have frequently been reprimanded for misbehaving, but in this section of the novel, they must misbehave in order to survive. They recognize the approaching blizzard, having been conditioned to pay attention to such things as homesteaders by now.



They have been instructed not to leave the house while Ma and Pa are gone, but do so anyways in order to bring in enough firewood to keep the house warm and make human survival possible. Even as the storm comes on, Laura and Mary rush to bring in the necessary firewood. When Pa and Ma return home, they are proud of the resilience and courage of Laura and Mary.

Discussion Question 1

What kinds of acts of nature must Laura and her family face in this section of the novel? Choose three, and explain how the family reacts to each instance.

Discussion Question 2

Though Laura and Mary have been told to remain in the house while Pa and Ma are gone, they venture outside with the onset of a snowstorm. Why? How do Pa and Ma react to the decision of the girls? Why do you believe this is?

Discussion Question 3

How do Laura, Mary, Carrie, and Ma cope while Pa is away working to earn money? How do they get along without him? How do they handle missing him?

Vocabulary

enormous, brassy, feebly, sulking, skimpy, scampering, quarreling, scudding

The Long Blizzard – Christmas Eve

Summary

The Long Blizzard – Pa decides to go to town for tobacco, news, and supplies. Ma doesn't like the idea, but Pa goes anyway, promising to stay in town if a storm sets in. He brings in more wood before he leaves. A bad blizzard later sets in. Ma is so worried about Pa she cannot even eat. Using the clothesline, Ma makes her way to the stable to fetch milk, feed the animals, and muck the stalls.

Back inside, Ma warms up and plays bean-porridge hot with the girls. She puts a lantern in the window. Suddenly, some fireballs come down the stove pipe, and disappear. No one knows what to make of them. She reassures her girls that everything is alright, including their father. But Ma herself is still worried as the girls go to bed for the night.

The Day of Games – The blizzard grows worse the next day. Laura and Mary tend to household chores while Ma heads out to take care of the animals. Ma compliments her daughters on doing so well and helping out. She decides they will have a day of games. Ma, Laura, Mary, and Carrie play pussy-in-the-corner, tell slate stories, and draw pictures in the steam on the windows. All the time, they think about how much they miss Pa and hope he is safe.

The Third Day – The storm is even worse on the third day. Ma does her best to keep the spirits of Laura and Mary up with a suggestion of playing cat's cradle, but Laura cries herself to sleep that night.

The Fourth Day – The sun comes out on the fourth day, but the cold is even worse. Pa returns, cold and thin. Laura, Mary, Carrie, and Ma are overjoyed to see him. As Pa warms and eats by the fire, he reveals his story. In town, he learned that the bad winter means no grasshoppers the following spring. Leaving for home, he purchased a buffalo coat for ten dollars on credit from Mr. Fitch. On the way home, Pa was caught in the blizzard. He took refuge beneath an embankment and spent the next few nights, living on oyster crackers purchased in town. Digging out, he realized he was at Plum Creek near the fish trap, and collected real oysters to bring home.

Christmas Eve – It is now Christmas Eve. Chores are done, and Pa can tell another blizzard is coming on. He plays the fiddle for his family that evening as dinner is prepared and set on the table. Though there are no gifts this year, Laura is grateful to have her father home alive.

Analysis

Despite the onset of winter once more, Pa decides to risk the wrath of nature in order to go into town for some assorted supplies, including tobacco for his pipe. On an ordinary day, town can be reached and returned from in one afternoon. However, Pa will not use



the wagon or the horses to go to town, so it is clear his trip will last the day at least. Pa's decision to go to town is incredibly important with respect to various themes.

First, Pa arrives at the decision to go to town as the male head of house, owing to the theme of patriarchy. While he solicits Ma's opinion – and Ma disapproves of Pa's going to town – Pa ultimately makes the final decision to go to town. Secondly, Pa's decision to go to town also draws on the theme of family in that Pa's decision is one made in consultation with his family. The love he has for his family is clear in his discussing the trip with them.

Third, Pa's decision to go into town underscores the need of even homesteaders to have to head into town once in a while for various reasons. It also underscores the point that the family is not yet entirely self-sufficient. Fourth, Pa's decision to go to town also reinforces the idea that man must not tempt fate when it comes to nature. It is better to be safe than sorry, as Pa himself quickly comes to realize.

Pa's decision to go into town also brings to light the theme of gratitude, as he is caught up in a raging blizzard and manages to survive only by huddling beneath an embankment. Pa is grateful for his life, for the oyster crackers he has with him, for the buffalo coat, and for the snow that builds up around him to insulate him in an igloo-like fashion. Ma, Laura, Mary, and Carrie are likewise thrilled and grateful that Pa is still alive after such a horrible storm. The theme of gratitude is stronger here in the novel than anywhere else.

Pa's return also makes gratitude apparent in another very important way in conjunction with the theme of family. It is Christmas, and as the family has been struggling, so there will be no gifts this year. However, Laura does not concern herself with material gifts. For Laura, the best gift of all is the gift of family, of her father's life being preserved through the blizzard.

Discussion Question 1

Pa's decision to head into town before a storm seems to be primarily for tobacco and news. Do you believe that Pa has made a sound decision to go into town? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How do Laura, Mary, Carrie, and Ma pass the time while Pa is away during the blizzard? Why do they have such a hard time keeping themselves occupied while Pa is not at home?



Discussion Question 3

Though it is Christmas, and although there are no material gifts to be given or received, Laura is not unhappy with how things are. Why is this? If you were in Laura's position, how would you feel? Why?

Vocabulary

pendulum, shrieking, coaxed, whimpered, fretful, scoured



Characters

Laura

Laura Ingalls is the main character and principal protagonist of the novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek”. Laura is a sweet, kind, hardworking, and courageous girl of seven who deeply loves and values her family. Laura is the middle child of Ma and Pa, is the younger sister of Mary, and is the older sister of Carrie. Laura is thrilled to be moving with her family closer to the American frontier, and falls in love quickly with Plum Creek. Laura has an eye for beauty and nature, and Plum Creek is idyllic for her. She is able to explore the creek, its plants and wildlife, and the surrounding area with Mary. Indeed, Mary and Laura are best friends in addition to being sisters.

Laura’s attribute of courage is one of her greatest qualities. Sometimes it veers into foolishness, such as when she nearly drowns in the flooded creek she is told to stay away from. At other times, her courage is lifesaving, as is the case when she disobeys her parents to venture outside to bring in firewood before a snowstorm hits. Laura’s courage is also apparent when she helps her mother to put out prairie fires.

Though Laura loves the homesteading country life, she is made fun of for this in town by Nellie Oleson. Nellie emerges as Laura’s antagonist, taking every opportunity to mock, make fun of, and bully Laura. When Ma hosts a country party for the town girls, Laura lures Nellie into muddy water by the creek where leeches latch onto Nellie, causing terror and panic.

Laura’s love of her family also gives her an important sense of loyalty and maturity uncommon among young children. For example, Laura would rather the family receive horses for Christmas than material gifts, because she knows the horses would benefit everyone in the long term. As the novel draws to a close, Laura is terrified by the prospect of her father being killed in the blizzard. When he returns, it is Christmas, and there are no material gifts at all to be given or received. Laura does not care, because she considers her father’s life a far greater gift than anything else.

Mary

Mary Ingalls is the older sister of Laura and Carrie, and is the daughter of Ma and Pa. Mary is a sweet, gentle, and cautious girl who enjoys exploring the creek and surrounding environs with Laura. Laura and Mary are not only sisters, but they are also best friends. They do everything together. Laura often goads the more cautious Mary into misbehaving, such as when Pa forbids them to play in the straw, and Laura and Mary do it anyways. Though Mary is more feminine than Laura, Mary has no concerns about doing hard work and chores. She happily does them because she knows it is in service to her family. Mary has a tremendous amount of love and compassion for her family, and this is apparent whenever her father is not at home.



Pa

Pa, Charles Ingalls, is the head of the Ingalls family. He is the husband of Caroline (Ma), and is the father of Laura, Mary, and Carrie. Pa is incredibly kind, deeply Christian, and very rational. He is a hard worker, and puts his family above everything else in life. The move to Plum Creek is intended to make a better life for his family. Pa spends much of the novel doing just that, from building a house for his family with his own bare hands to traveling hundreds of miles to find work to financially support his family when the grasshoppers strike. When Laura and Mary misbehave, he prefers to teach them right from wrong rather than to merely punish them. For example, he explains that the girls ruining the straw crop will mean the animals will die without food over the winter – a lesson of reason which causes the girls to no longer play in the straw. Pa is later almost killed during a blizzard on his way home from town. He survives by seeking shelter under a creek embankment, and eating oyster crackers purchased in town.

Ma

Ma, Caroline Ingalls, is the wife of Charles (Pa), and is the mother of Mary, Laura, and Carrie. Ma is a beautiful, compassionate, and loving woman who puts her family above everything else in life. She is steadfast and courageous when her husband is away and she must care for her children. Though her husband runs the family, Ma's opinion is essential to his decision-making, and he always consults her before choosing to do something. Ma tends to household chores mainly, including cooking and tending to the gardens. When her husband is away, Ma takes over the harder, outdoor chores as well. This includes having to fight her way to the stable in a blizzard to milk the cow and feed the animals. Toward the end of the novel, Ma opposes Pa's trip into town which results in his getting caught in a blizzard. She is overjoyed when Pa returns home late, but safely.

Carrie

Carrie Ingalls is the youngest child of Ma and Pa, and is the younger sister of Laura and Mary. Carrie is a gentle, sweet child of about four or five. She is often kept indoors due to her age, and is given very limited freedom around Plum Creek because she is so young. She looks up to her sisters, and mans the door before the storm where Laura and Mary bring firewood into the house.

Nellie Oleson

Nellie Oleson is a pretty but cruel blonde girl who lives in the town of Plum Creek, Minnesota. She emerges as Laura's antagonist and bully. She is greedy and unkind. Nellie's family is wealthy, and she has no shortage of fancy toys and fancy clothes. Nellie takes an immediate disliking to Laura, looking down on Laura and her family because they live in the country. She mockingly refers to Laura as a "country girl". At her



party, Nellie embarrasses Laura by shouting at Laura not to touch her toys. At Laura's party in the country, Nellie is lured into muddy water, where Nellie ends up with leeches, and getting her clothing dirty.

Christy Kennedy

Christy Kennedy is a sweet, kind girl who lives in the town of Plum Creek, Minnesota. She is Laura and Mary's first friend at school, and takes an immediate liking to the sisters. Christy introduces Laura and Mary to her own siblings, and helps Laura and Mary to feel more comfortable at school despite Nellie's bullying tendencies.

Mr. Nelson

Mr. Nelson is the husband of Mrs. Nelson, and is the father of Anna. Mr. Nelson is an established homesteader who frequently hires Pa to do work on his land in exchange for goods or animals, such as Spot the Cow. Mr. Nelson also helps Pa to build the new Ingalls house near Plum Creek, and later chops firewood for the Ingalls women when Pa is away.

Mrs. Nelson

Mrs. Nelson is the wife of Mr. Nelson, and is the mother of Anna. Mrs. Nelson is a kind and patient woman who has long lived on her homestead. Knowing that the Ingalls women are alone and likely lonely without Pa around, Mrs. Nelson is happy to pay a social call to Ma and the girls to keep them company.

Mr. Hanson

Mr. Hanson and his wife, Mrs. Hanson, are the former owners of the property along Plum Creek that Pa and his family come to inhabit. The Hansons are looking to go West, and they trade their homestead and its surrounding property to Pa and the Ingalls for their wagon team. The Hansons are Norwegian by birth, and are noted for keeping a clean and healthy property.



Symbols and Symbolism

Milk

Milk is obtained from cows through the process of milking. Laura, Ma, and other members of the family milk Spot the cow in order to gather pails of milk to use for drinking and cooking at home. To the modern reader, milk is a simple convenience, but to Americans of the nineteenth century, it was a hard-earned blessing. Milk represents almost a luxury to the Ingalls which they use each day.

Wheat

Wheat is the main crop that Pa sows for growing while homesteading along Plum Creek in Minnesota. Wheat is a difficult but valuable crop to grow. It can be sold at a high price, and can be used in baking and cooking. Pa intends to use money from the wheat crop to pay down debts and provide more for his family and their homestead. Unfortunately, Pa's first planted wheat crop is destroyed by the grasshopper epidemic, which causes Pa to have to travel hundreds of miles by foot to seek work. The following year, Pa doesn't even attempt to handle a wheat crop as the offspring of the grasshoppers hatch by the millions, and decimate the landscape.

Money

American dollars are a form of currency based on the value of gold that are used as money in the novel. Money is essential for families to survive, even when they are on homesteads. Money is able to purchase things that cannot be produced on the homesteads independently of town. For example, the cookstove with oven that Pa purchases for Ma can only be purchased in town with money. Pa hopes that a good wheat crop will also provide the family with an important source of income. Wheat sells for one dollar a bushel, and there are 40 bushels to an acre. Pa has planted numerous acres of corn. When the wheat crop fails due to grasshoppers, Pa must walk hundreds of miles in order to find work to earn money to send back to his family,

Candy

Candy is a kind of sweet treat consumed by Laura and her sisters. There are many different kinds of candy in the novel, including horehound candy and ribbon candy. It can be purchased at the general stores and dry goods stores in town. To the modern reader, candy is a simple snack, but to Americans of the nineteenth century, it was a hard-earned blessing and a real treat. Indeed, candy is such a valuable commodity that it is the perfect Christmas gift for Laura, Mary, and Carrie.



Cookstove

A cookstove with oven is purchased by Pa for use in the family's newly constructed house. The cookstove with oven is considered a luxury by Ma, who worries about its cost. Ma is able not only to cook on the cookstove, but to bake things in the oven. It is a very modern piece of technology for a homestead near the American frontier, and is greatly appreciated by Ma and the family.

Grasshoppers

Grasshoppers are a kind of insect which eat plants and descend on the land around Plum Creek in the millions for hundreds of miles. They destroy all crops, including Pa's wheatfield. The grasshoppers are an element of nature that become symbolic of ruin and destruction. They cause numerous farmers and their families to pack up and head back East. The grasshoppers cause Pa to travel hundreds of miles to find work to earn money for his family.

Dresses

Dresses are worn by the girls and women in the novel. They are noted in the novel for their difference in style between homesteaders and town residents. Fashion trends are taken up by towns before they filter out into the surrounding countryside. New dresses can also be purchased more readily by town residents than by farmers. As a result, the dresses that Laura and Mary wear to school are shorter due to their increasing height and old style. Nellie makes fun of Laura and Mary for their shorter dresses.

Boots

Boots are worn by Pa in the novel for both church and work in the fields. He has only one pair of boots that have been mended numerous times. Pa is in desperate need of new boots, but they cost three dollars. In that day and age, three dollars is a lot of money, and Pa refuses to spend money on new boots until it becomes absolutely necessary. Footwear is a convenience taken for granted by many modern readers, but for nineteenth century Americans, shoes are a hard-earned commodity.

Firewood

Firewood is needed throughout the chilly autumns and springs, and the cold winters in order to keep houses heated so that people can survive the temperatures. In the novel, Pa and Mr. Nelson chop firewood for Ma, Laura, Mary, and Carrie at different points. Before the first major blizzard, Mary and Laura disobey their parents' instructions to stay at home while they are out in order to bring in firewood. It is a decision that Ma and Pa praise, for it demonstrates maturity and courage on the part of the girls.

Hay and straw

Hay and straw harvested by Pa through the late summer and autumn to be stored to feed the animals during the course of the winter. Mary and Laura, however, cannot help but play in the hay. This becomes an important lesson for the girls, as Pa rationally explains to them that without the straw and hay to eat over the winter, the animals will die. The girls stop playing in the hay after this, because they are aware of the greater effects of their behavior at this point.



Settings

Plum Creek

Plum Creek is a meandering creek that runs through the property that Laura and her family have homesteaded on. Plum Creek is a beautiful body of water, featuring a waterfall, clear pool, deep swimming hole, and shallows. Plum Creek is full of different kinds of fish, crabs, and less exciting creatures like leeches. Along the banks of Plum Creek grow willow trees, wildflowers, cattails, and wild plums. Animals like badgers live along the creek. Plum Creek can be forded in shallow areas, and crossed by a footbridge. During spring rainstorms, the creek swells and floods, and Laura almost drowns while playing near the footbridge.

The Town of Plum Creek

The Town of Plum Creek is located a few miles away from Plum Creek, and the Ingalls family homestead. The Town of Plum Creek is home to Nellie Oleson and her family, as well as numerous businesses and stores including Nellie's father's general store. The Town of Plum Creek is also host to the school that Laura, Mary, Nellie, and Christie attend. The girls later attend a party hosted at the Oleson house, during which time Nellie bullies Laura. Nellie also mocks Laura for not living in the town, meanly calling her a "country girl". Laura herself quickly comes to prefer life on the homestead to life spent in town.

Earthen dugout house

The earthen house is the first home of Laura and her family at Plum Creek. It is a home that is dug out from the creek's embankment, with the fourth wall being constructed of sod, and the roof of wood, earth, and grass. The house is small but sturdy, and proves to be a good first home for the family. Laura, however, dislikes the sod house because it is so quiet. She would rather sleep outside on the prairie so she can hear the noises of the night.

The boughten house

The boughten house is a house constructed of purchased, or "boughten" supplies like lumber and factory-made hardware, such as hinges. The boughten house is constructed by Pa with Mr. Nelson's help. The boughten house has two floors and a real tin roof. The upper floor, the attic, serves as a bedroom for Laura and Mary. The lower floor features two rooms. One is a bedroom for Ma and Pa, and the other is a family and common room where chores and cooking are done. Attached to the house is a lean-to, for storage and to help keep out the weather upon entering and leaving the house. The boughten house is essentially a dream house for Laura and her family.

Big Woods

Big Woods is a wooded area in Wisconsin, and is the former home of Laura and her family. It is from the Big Woods in Wisconsin that the family first moves to head west in search of a better life and a better future. Laura reflects fondly on her time in the Big Woods, but much prefers her life spent on the American prairie.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek” 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.

When the novel begins, Laura, Ma, Pa, Mary, and Carrie have moved to Plum Creek, Minnesota, from the Big Woods in Wisconsin. Laura is thrilled to be moving somewhere new with her family, seeing it as something of an adventure, while Pa is thrilled because the move is intended to give his family a better life and a better future. Everything that Pa does is in service to his family, to provide for them, and to make sure that his family is safe and healthy.

Pa immediately sets to preparing the homestead for his family by planning for a crop of wheat which will fetch a high price. The money will help to pay the family's debts, provide them with a new house, and will secure various things the family needs, such as clothing, footwear, and items that cannot be produced on a homestead (such as a cookstove). Pa hires himself out for labor to Mr. Nelson in order to purchase a cow named Spot for milk for the family, and to borrow a thresher to harvest hay and wheat.

When the grasshoppers set in on the farm and destroy the wheat crop, Pa must walk hundreds of miles to secure work to earn income to support his family. He does this now only out of a sense of patriarchal duty, but out of a sense of love for, and loyalty to, his family. In the times that Pa is away, the remaining members of the family – Laura, Ma, Carrie, and Mary – all turn toward one another to take comfort in one another's company and compassion.

To Laura, there is no greater thing in life than family. Laura has been brought up with, and truly believes in the idea that family matters most. This is clearly reflected in her understanding that it would be better for the family to receive horses for Christmas than material gifts, for horses will assist and benefit the family in tremendous ways for a very long time.

When harsh winter weather sets in, Laura thinks of her family before anything else. Laura and Mary disobey their parents' instructions that they remain in the house while Pa and Ma are out in order to bring in firewood before a blizzard sets in. This quick and mature decision on the part of Laura and Mary leads to getting enough firewood inside to last through much of the blizzard. It ensures a warm home for Pa and Ma to return to, and ensures that the family will survive the bitter cold. Pa and Ma approve of the decision that Laura and Mary have made.



The theme of family is nowhere stronger than at the end of the novel. Each time that Pa goes away to work, Laura and the others miss him terribly, and have a hard time staying focused. Their worry and fear for Pa intensifies when he gets caught in a blizzard on his way home from town. The love that Laura and the rest of the family have for Pa is clear in their concern and anxiety. When Pa returns home, it is nearly Christmas.

That particular Christmas, the family is unable to exchange gifts, for there is no money to purchase any, and there is no time to make any. Rather than being sad or unhappy about this, Laura is actually thrilled. She is thrilled because the best gift she could have asked for – her father’s safety – is given with his return home after the blizzard.

Homesteading

Homesteading is an important theme in the novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek” 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 nearly or entirely self-reliant individuals. It is clear that the Ingalls family is relatively new to homesteading, though they are by no means inexperienced. This is demonstrated in many ways in the novel.

In the novel, Laura and her family are homesteaders near the town of Plum Creek, Minnesota. They live along the banks of Plum Creek itself. They have just completed a long journey across the prairie, and the family is thrilled to be moving into a solid home. Ma is especially glad to have a firm roof over her head. The first house into which they move is built directly into the bank of Plum Creek, having been dug out by its former owner, Mr. Hanson.

Pa immediately sets to work on the homestead to make his family self-reliant. He is determined to grow a major crop of wheat not only to feed his family, but to sell as well for a profit. He also plants other crops, including oats, and hires himself out to Mr. Nelson for labor in order to purchase Spot the cow. Spot the cow provides the family with milk for drinking, cooking, and baking. It moves the family one step closer to self-reliance.

Part of Pa’s desire to raise and sell wheat at a profit comes because he knows the family’s path to self-reliance will require purchasing some important materials and items. For example, in order to build a new house, Pa will have to purchase professionally-cut lumber and factory-made items, such as hinges. Pa will also have to purchase a factory-made cookstove with oven for this new house.

In other areas, self-reliance means depending on the town only when absolutely necessary. When Laura and Mary begin school, they must purchase slates and a slate pencil in order to keep up in class. Clothing for the family comes by way of the purchase of new material rather than actual clothing. The clothing is handmade by Ma, and tailored specifically for her children and her husband.



The family's self-reliance in homesteading also comes about as they must deal with nature. There is no fire department to call when the prairie fires set in, and there are no plows to remove snow during the blizzards. The plague of grasshoppers which ruins the crop requires Pa to travel hundreds of miles by foot to find work to support his family financially. Pa's decision to tempt fate by going to town before a blizzard nearly costs him his life, and is a good lesson learned.

There is also a sense of community among the homesteaders around Plum Creek. As Christians and Americans, Mr. and Mrs. Nelson are aware of the difficulties that the Ingalls face. They consider it to be a blessing when Mrs. Nelson and her daughter come over to visit for a social call. The Ingalls family also feels blessed, and is extremely grateful later, when Mr. Nelson comes over to chop firewood. He is aware the family must have heat to survive the winter, and so kindly commits to ensuring the Ingalls girls will stay warm.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is an important theme in the novel "On the Banks of Plum Creek" by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Patriarchy involves the control of a family (or in other cases, society, group, or government) by men. In the novel, Charles "Pa" Ingall heads up his family and makes the final decisions for them. Patriarchy in the novel proves to be a very positive thing. Literarily, patriarchy is customarily oppressive and powerful. Here, it speaks to a sense of responsibility and courage to do what is needed, and to do what is right.

Despite being the head of his household, Pa is open to the suggestions, advice, and ideas of his family, especially Ma. This comes in large part because Pa loves his wife so deeply, and because he trusts her so implicitly. Several times throughout the novel, Ma gives Pa her thoughts and advice on various issues or concerns. Pa never makes a decision without first taking into account Ma's words. This occurs for even the most seeming simple things.

For example, Pa's decision to go to town before the big blizzard is not made without Ma cautioning him not to go. When Pa goes to collect materials to elevate the family's beds from the floor, he allows Laura to come along and help, noting approvingly that she is doing a man's job in helping him. This statement is not sexist as might be considered by some, but is rather a recognition of equality between family members and the patriarch. Because his family endures the same hardships that he endures, Pa has no problem elevating them to a level of equality consistent with decision making.

Pa's patriarchal leadership is likewise not merely a means to power and control, but is a condition of his responsibility. The family is primarily dependent upon his successes and failures. When the wheat crops fail, Pa takes it upon himself as a man, a husband, and a father to head hundreds of miles away on foot to earn a living to make money to support his family. His efforts are courageous and admirable, and are what he considers to be his patriarchal duty.



Likewise, Pa also considers it his own responsibility to do backbreaking farm work. For example, it is Pa who plows the earth and plants crops, rather than Ma and their daughters. He is aware that no young girl should have to commit to such intensive labor, and his desire to protect and provide for his family motivates him to undertake such difficult work. Likewise, when Pa must go away to work for a second year in a row, he plants a turnip crop so that his family will have an easy crop to harvest, and an easy source of food while he is away.

Gratefulness

Gratefulness is an important theme in the novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Gratefulness is essentially the ability and act of being thankful for a situation, event, item, or occurrence. Gratefulness is very important for the Ingalls family, especially for Laura, and helps to define their moral character as human beings. This is especially true when it comes to simple things. It allows the family to place emphasis on the things that truly matter.

When the novel begins, the family is grateful for being able to find a homestead upon which they can settle after a long journey. They are likewise grateful to have all made the journey safely and successfully. It is something they have worked hard to earn, and now that they have earned it, they intend to make the most out of it. Pa is especially grateful for the chance to give his family a better life, and the possibility of a better future.

As the family undertakes homesteading, they are incredibly grateful for Pa’s hard work, and are incredibly grateful for the things that are earned along the way. Laura and the others are very grateful for the house that Pa and Mr. Nelson built. Laura and Mary are given the attic bedroom, and finally have a space of their own, for which they are especially thankful. The house has more than one room, which is a blessing for privacy and demonstrates the fact that the family is succeeding, bit by bit. For this, the family is very appreciative. Ma herself is incredibly grateful for the cookstove and oven that Pa has purchased for her, though she worries about its cost.

When the wheat crop is ruined by grasshoppers, Ma seeks small things to be thankful for. For example, the fact that no feed will have to be purchased for the hens since they are feasting on grasshoppers is something for which to be thankful. That Pa is healthy and willing to travel hundreds of miles away in order to work to provide for his family financially is also something that Laura and the rest of the family are incredibly thankful for.

The greatest illustration of thanks and gratefulness ultimately comes from Pa’s being lost in the blizzard just before Christmas. His safe return home is the source of great appreciation among Laura, Ma, Carrie, and Mary. Though the family cannot afford to exchange gifts for this particular Christmas, Laura is not concerned. She knows the greatest gift that she could possibly have received is her father’s safety, and she is immensely grateful for this.



Nature

Nature is an important theme in the novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Nature involves both the natural world (including plants and animals) and weather and physical events beyond the control of people (such as storms and insect infestations). Nature proves to be quite a challenge for Laura and her family in many places in the novel, and directly affects the fortunes of the family.

When the family first arrives along Plum Creek, they are thrilled with the setting, none more so than Laura. Laura loves the setting of the creek, the open meadows, the crops, trees, and abundant wildlife and plant life. She and Mary love to go exploring, and discover all sorts of things in nature. This includes wild plums, willow trees, cattails, badgers, freshwater crabs, and less than picturesque things like leeches. Laura quickly learns not to test nature, as Plum Creek is flooded after heavy spring rains. Laura nearly drowns in the swollen creek while playing.

The first year the family is at the homestead, the winter is late and the warm weather keeps on strong through the end of autumn. Mr. Nelson refers to this as “grasshopper weather”, but Pa and his family have no idea what to make of this. The following summer, it is clear what “grasshopper weather” means: a grasshopper infestation predicted by the ominous late and mild winter. Millions upon millions of grasshoppers descend on an area hundreds of miles around, destroying wildlife and ruining crops.

The grasshopper infestation has wide reaching consequences. Many families that have moved West pack up and return East. Pa must walk hundreds of miles in order to find work to support the family financially. Laura, Mary, Ma, and Carrie must deal with stepping on, killing, and driving hundreds of grasshoppers out of the house. Millions of eggs are laid, and millions of grasshoppers hatch the following year, preventing new crops from being sown, and necessitating that Pa travel once more to seek work.

Through the second summer and autumn Pa is gone, Laura, Mary, and Ma must rush out into the prairie with Mr. Nelson to put out fires caused by a firestorm generated by wildfires on the prairie. Immediately after this, blizzard conditions set in where the Ingalls family is essentially trapped in their house. Ma courageously braves the horrible weather to tend to the animals in the barn, and exhausting and bone-chilling effort.

When Pa returns from working hundreds of miles away, he chances things by heading into town on what seems to be a mild day. On the way home, Pa is caught in a new blizzard, where he almost loses his life. It teaches Pa not to second-guess nature, and not to risk his own life for something like a town visit. It also demonstrates that nature can be unpredictable, and will always be unforgiving.

Styles

Point of View

Laura Ingalls Wilder tells her novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek” from the third-person limited-omniscient perspective in a reflective manner as though the narrator were relating a past story or family history to a good friend. The third-person narrator traces the life of Laura Ingalls from the age of seven through the age of eight. The third-person narrative mode allows the narrator to take opportunities as the plot unfolds in order to explain certain things to the reader. For example, when Laura and her family first come to Plum Creek, the reason why is not readily revealed. Only the narrator, reflecting on Pa’s search for a landowner willing to trade a homestead for a wagon team, is able to fill in the gap. The limited-omniscient aspect of the narrative adds a sense of suspense and drama to the novel, denying the reader knowledge of unfolding events until the characters in the novel also become aware of such information. For example, Pa’s fate in the blizzard is not revealed until Pa returns home and recounts his story.

Language and Meaning

Laura Ingalls Wilder tells her novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek” in language that is simple, straightforward, and occasionally dotted 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. Because of this, the language employed by the author reflects their age and level of education. Secondly, because the novel is about a young girl homesteading in Minnesota who doesn’t begin school until the age of eight, the language is reflective of her age and level of education as well. Third, the language is dotted with historical references and terms due to the setting of the novel – the mid-to-late 1870s. Numerous historical terms and phrases, such as “boughten”, “cookstove”, “dugout house”, and “pussy-in-the-corner”, add a sense of historical authenticity and realism to the novel.

Structure

Laura Ingalls Wilder divides her novel “On the Banks of Plum Creek” into 41 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 age of the main character of the novel (Laura, who is a small child). It allows the reader to easily follow the plot of the novel, and each chapter becomes like a vignette, or short novel unto itself. Each chapter is given a title respective to the events and parts of the plot found within that chapter. For example, “Strange Animal” recounts Laura’s first sighting of a badger, while “Moving In” refers to the family’s moving into the newly-constructed house built by Pa and Mr. Nelson.



Quotes

There's nothing like help when a man has a big job to do.
-- Pa (The House in the Ground paragraph 34)

Importance: Here, the Ingalls family is settling into life in their dugout house. Pa has gone out to collect willow boughs for use in elevating their beds, and Laura insists she come along. Here, the love and loyalty of family are present in Laura's desire to help, and in Pa's accepting of her help. Pa's remark is not to be taken as sexist, but rather as an affirmation of equality between the members of the family as they struggle together on their new homestead.

I do wish I had a team of horses.
-- Pa (The Christmas Horses paragraph 11)

Importance: Here, Pa reflects on how spring planting will be incredibly difficult without a team of horses. With Christmas coming up, it is clear that the girls in the family must either wish for their own gifts, or wish for horses in an unselfish fashion. It is a life lesson in survival versus material comforts.

This was not like wolves or cattle. The creek was not alive. It was only strong and terrible and never stopping.
-- Narrator (The Footbridge paragraph 10)

Importance: Here, following some flooding, Laura dangerously decides to go into Plum Creek. The current is strong, she is barely able to hold onto the footbridge. This quote demonstrates just how serious living on the land and the frontier can be. Nothing can be taken for granted, and even simple things – such as swimming – can be made deadly by bad conditions, such as floods and currents. It makes Laura realize that some things are stronger than people, such as nature.

We're going to have a whole house built of sawed lumber. And it's going to have glass windows!
-- Pa (The Wonderful Horse paragraph 14)

Importance: Here, the family is thrilled to learn that Pa will be constructing a house of lumber with glass windows. This underscores two very important points. First, things Americans take for granted today, such as glass windows, were luxuries on the frontier in the 1800s. Second, the only way Pa can afford the lumber is to purchase it on credit with hopes that the wheat crop will come in well, and sell well.

Please don't make me go to school. I can read.
-- Laura (The Fish-Trap paragraph 3)

Importance: Here, Laura protests her parents' decision to want to send her to school. They believe that she is old enough to attend now, for she is almost eight. Laura



disagrees, pretending she can read. Ma reminds Laura that she needs to learn more than just reading, and that school will teach her important skills and subjects. Education, no matter what one does in life, or where one lives, is very important.

There's no great loss without some gain.
-- Ma (The Glittering Cloud paragraph 30)

Importance: When the grasshopper swarm descends on the Ingalls' land, Ma and Pa must rush to save the wheat crop. However, the hens happily eat the grasshoppers. This causes Ma to remark that they will not need to purchase grain for the hens, and that there is a good side to everything, even when it seems bad. It is reflective of the theme of gratefulness found in the novel.

All day long Laura missed Pa, and at night when the wind blew lonesomely over the dark land, she felt hollow and aching.
-- Narrator (The Letter paragraph 1)

Importance: With the wheat crop destroyed, Pa travels hundreds of miles east to help harvest unaffected crops to earn money for his family. While he is gone, Laura and the others miss him terribly. It demonstrates just how much they truly love Pa, and how much he means to them.

We've got to bring in wood before the storm gets here.
-- Laura (Keeping House paragraph 36)

Importance: With Ma and Pa gone to town for the day, Laura and Mary are worried to see a snowstorm coming on. Laura decides they must hurry up and bring the firewood in before it is too late. While Laura and Mary disobey the rules set down by the parents by leaving the house, it is for a good cause. This demonstrates intelligence, survival, and responsibility on the part of the girls. It also shows how much they are beginning to grow. Pa later approves of the decision the girls have made.

You are good girls.
-- Ma (The Day of Games paragraph 14)

Importance: With Pa gone in the blizzard, it is up to Ma to travel to the barn to tend to the animals. It becomes a life-and-death struggle in the bitter blizzard. When Ma returns from the exhausting trip to the barn, Laura and Mary tend to her, warming her by the fire, taking care of her sopping clothes and cleaning the house. It is evidence of their kindness and their maturity, and Ma is right to comment on the fact that Laura and Mary are good girls. Each member of the family does their part to help one another where they can.

Look Caroline," he said, "how Laura's eyes are shining."
-- Pa (Christmas Eve paragraph 17)

Importance: Though it is an unusual Christmas for the Ingalls family because no

material gifts are exchange, Laura is not unhappy. She is thrilled to have her father home, safe and sound and alive. It is the best gift she could have asked for, and it is clearly reflected in the joy in Laura's eyes at seeing her family together and happy.