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Laura Ingalls Wilder

Laura Ingalls Wilder is considered one of the most widely acclaimed authors of children's literature. Her life was a combination of hardship, triumph, entertainment, and love. By portraying her experiences through words she grasps the interests of people young and old from all parts of the world. Wilder's work possesses many qualities. One would be how "Laura Ingalls Wilder brought the life of the plains pioneers to generations of young readers in her nine Little House books" (Sher 13).

You learn how to slaughter a pig, how to train oxen, milk-feed a pumpkin, build a door with a latchkey, dig a well. There are blizzards in which you can't see your hand in front of your face, hailstones that strip off a boy's clothes. You know what it's like to sleep on the floor of a one-room schoolhouse, to treasure glass windows, to go hungry. (Bagg 117)

Along with the history of the frontier, Wilder's series puts forth the importance of good family morality. No matter what the Ingalls family was going through they always managed to put each other first and make the best of every situation. "The family is carried on by the rare independence of Pa's spirit" (Bagg 117).

Living a life as Wilder did would not make just anyone write the story. It took someone with the character that Wilder possessed. Even at an early age Wilder demonstrated leadership,

responsibility, and a special sense that made her realize that she was different than many around her (Osborne 2).

This gift brought Wilder success. Her Little House Series were sold by the millions. They were translated into a total of twenty different languages. The novels were even adapted into a Broadway musical, Prairie, and the television series, Little House on the Prairie (Piehl 354).

To understand the genius behind Wilder's works, one must understand a little bit about her history. She was born February 7, 1867 in Pepin, Wisconsin. She was the daughter of Charles Ingalls and Caroline Lake. She lived in various places including the prairies of Kansas and Plum Creek (Anderson 1). Education was important to the Ingalls family. Laura walked miles to Walnut Grove School and then repeated her lesson to her sister Mary, who was now blind from a long sickness. Laura excelled as a student and soon after became a teacher. Around this time she was courted by Almanzo Wilder. She married Almanzo and had one daughter, Rose. After many misfortunes she settled on a farm in Rocky Ridge (Anderson 2).

At this point in Wilder's life people who knew her could see she was a firm leader. Even when she married Almanzo, she made most of the family decisions. She ran her farm, participated in various clubs, was treasurer of the National Farm Loan Association, and was superintendent in poultry. At age forty-four Wilder began writing articles for the Missouri Ruralist (Osborne 2). Soon Laura found her calling life in the writing of her childhood stories (Bagg 120).

Laura was now past sixty, but she had never forgotten her days as pioneer girl. She realized how much she missed those times with Pa and Ma and her three sisters in the Big Woods of Wisconsin and on the western prairies. So Laura decided to write down her memories of her childhood. (Anderson 26)

Rose, Laura's daughter, saw this interest in her mother. As a writer herself she pushed Laura to get her stories published. "The two were alike in so many ways, writes Miller, 'intelligent, self-disciplined, perfectionist, critical of other people's foibles and shortcomings, capable of bursts of energy, and highly ambitious to achieve something significant'" (Osburne 3).

Children especially, for a variety of reasons, instantly loved Wilder's first book, Little House in the Big Woods. As stated by Jameson, "Wilder's novels grasp young reader's interest with exciting stories of an American pioneer family in the late 1800's. It is easily perceived due to its being written through young Laura's eyes" (1). The series first came into print during the 1930's. Since there was a depression going on during this time, Wilder's tales gave children a window into another world where hardworking people found warmth in things such as a fiddle or a family story by the fire (Piehl 352). Adults as well as children saw the value a Little House book had to offer. One mother wrote, "I didn't read these books when I was young, but came to them for the first time when I read them aloud to my daughter. I understood at once how intensely a child would respond to Laura's life (Bagg 117).

From all across America she received letters that begged her to write more (Anderson 28). One child wrote that she inspired her to write outside the boundaries that she normally would. She enjoyed the detail that Wilder portrayed in everyone and everything. A girl read the whole set over and over and loved each and every one. She admired the Ingalls family and wanted to lead a simple life like them. She thought the series was the best in the world. Another said she gets lost in Wilder's books every night before she goes to sleep. She likes that they are told by a girl like her. She sends many thanks to the author for sharing her stories (Irby 1). With this kind

of feedback from the public, Laura continued to write books that eventually amounted to The Little House Series.

These initial reactions can be stemmed from a variety of unique qualities, in which depending on the individual, can leave an impression and be greatly beneficial. Wilder had two main intentions when it came to her writing. They were to vividly convey pioneer life and present strong morality through family relations (Piehl 355).

Although Laura's series is considered fiction, many of the events follow her life exactly. one can see the connection with basic comparison of her personal life to some of her books. Her first book Little House in the Big Woods includes events from Laura's place of birth, Wisconsin and from her childhood years. Little House on the Prairie depicts how she moved westward to Kansas to spend time on the open plains. The majority of Laura's teenager years and her interaction amongst a community is portrayed in Little Town in the Prairie. Lastly, in These Happy Golden Years, Laura has matured into a married woman and eventually passes away (Mayer 1).

Wilder's gift of history excites educators as it does children. "Laura Ingalls's books have been enchanting children for generations and are an excellent way to introduce classrooms to pioneer life" (Jameson 1). To understand this, one must be accustomed to the raw facts Wilder puts forth. First and foremost, it is important to know what an actual pioneer is.

Thousands of pioneers settled the American west. A pioneer would be classified as someone who holds open a new area of research or helps others by giving them opportunities. Today, proof of their hard work is found in many aspects, such as The Little House Series. The Ingalls family was classified as plains pioneers. They moved westward in hopes of fertile farmland and a fresh start. This land included anywhere from California to directly across the

Appalachian Mountains. These brave adventurers were willing to make the perilous journey due to the east coast being overcrowded and costly (Scher 3).

When the Ingalls first came to the prairie, readers get the sensation as if they too arrived. Jameson notes the reader feels a delightful and him as the book progresses. Many stories, he states, are based solely on fact, but Mrs. Wilder's truth has something history books lack her gift to put in an artistic twist to draw the reader in the reader. One might feel the sweat as Pa builds the log cabin or the love shared between Pa and Laura.

As soon as possible pioneers would build permanent housing when they came to a desired area. Pa had to haul logs from the creek. He put notches on the ends and lifted the logs on top of each other. Higher and higher it got until the only thing left was the roof and windows (Wilder 58). Here Wilder shows the hard work and dedication one man had to put into making a home for his family.

Wilder also stressed that everything they ate was a result of long, tedious labor (Bagg 118). Ma, Mary, and Laura took turns churning the fresh cream. After some time it began to turn grainy. Then on the dash tiny grains of butter began to appear. The grains formed a lump, than Ma washed and salted it. Now the butter was complete (Anderson 33).

The Native Americans had a great impact in the settlement of America as they did in Wilder's novels. The land the settlers moved onto was not empty. Native Americans inhabited much of it. The United States government constantly pushed their territory further westward. Many feared these red-skinned people would rebel violently (Scher 1). "She was shaking all over and she felt sick in her middle. She heard the drums pounding and the wild yipping yells and she felt Ma holding her safe. Pa said, 'It's the Indian war cry, Laura'" (Wilder 291).

Despite the prejudice and the rumors of Native Americans being cruel and savage, they rarely ever attacked the pioneers (Scher 7).

In The Long Winter, the town of DeSmet, South Dakota-where the Ingalls homesteaded-endures seven months of blizzards, unrelieved by the supply train. The Ingalls family twists hay for the stove because they have run out of other fuel; they parcel out potatoes, salt pork, and finally just flour until spring. But every morning, Ma, Pa, and their daughters rise, wash, dress themselves properly, comb and arrange their hair, sweep, and make their beds, only to sit and wait for another day to pass (Bagg 117).

Along with heavy labor and awkward interaction with the Native Americans, disaster was another burden pioneers faced on the plains. Mass locusts would invest the plains and destroy. The crops the pioneers depended on. Fire would arouse from the dry prairie grass and consume miles in its path. Snowstorms were severe and arose so quickly that people froze from walking from the barn to the house (Scher 15). The Ingalls family undergoes many of these misfortunes, but a lesson is taught throughout each one. At the end of The Long Winter, Laura finally feels she is now brave enough to stand beside her parents through hard times (Piehl 176).

Although the Ingalls family were hard working people and dealt with many hardships, they never let that drive them into despair. Constant love between Laura and her parents and sisters made happiness and joy emerge (Bagg 118). Laura recalls in Little House in the Big Woods a dance she had at her grandmother's. Everyone dragged Grandma out on the dance floor. She looked very beautiful in her calico dress. As she jigged, everyone yelled and cheered. Family and friends from all corners of the room were smiling, laughing, and having a good time (Wilder 150). "Here are real people sharing joys and sorrows within an atmosphere of emotional security" (Sleg 5).

Nights by the fire left the reader with a magical feeling. Here the family comes together and Pa shares stories of long ago. All the burdens of the past and following day are placed aside (Piehl 99).

She was glad that the cozy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago. (Wilder 238)

The excellence Wilder's novels contain caused her to accumulate a widespread of devoted fans. Following her death, three books were published concerning some of the major accounts of her life. The First Four Years describes Laura's early-married life. On the Way Home is a warm collection of Wilder's letters and journal entries over the span of her life. The last major book, West From Home, are messages Laura sent to Almanzo while she was exploring San Francisco with their daughter, Rose (Mayer 1).

Although the majority of Little House fans did not publish works about Laura, many expressed their appreciation by means of letters, reviews, and various criticisms. One woman wrote the Washington Post stating that there is something very touching about a woman that works on a farm, leads a simple lifestyle, and is independent within a conventional framework, that she found so much success in the literary (Osborne 3). Along with the author herself, individual pieces of the collection were acclaimed.

Laura was fourteen, young enough to get into trouble at school, to worry about her first party; old enough to earn money, and to walk home from church with Almanzo Wilder. This is a story full of life and variety; one of the most vigorous of this series. (Jameson 273)

The main audience of the Little House books is American girls. This is not because the novels are easy reading, filled with cool information, and charmingly illustrated. Rather, young females gravitate to them because they can recognize and relate to the pressures that young Laura is brought to endure. For this reason the series will be continually appealing (Romines 2). Romines later quotes the books are, “potent as a drug” (1).

Various online sites offer readers the satisfaction of further information on Wilder. Education World has a site called Frontier Girl. Fans can log on and have an easy navigation to Laura’s history, a listing of all her literature, and the airing of the adapted television series, Little House on the Prairie. One can also find reviews concerning her work. A recent one states that Wilder’s books have been enchanting the youth for generations and are a great way to introduce the life of the pioneers in school (Jameson 272).

“The only object now of reviewing a book by Laura Ingalls Wilder is to pay homage to a unique genius. These books of the far-off pioneer days in America are beyond criticism.” (Jameson 272). To get an ideal account of Laura’s literature, one must go beyond plain mere critiquing. William Anderson is a noted researcher and author of novels concerning Laura Ingalls Wilder (Slegg 1). When interviewed by scholar Jennifer Slegg, one can see the knowledge and dedication in which one man professes towards Laura and her work.

Anderson first became interested in Wilder in the third grade. He liked history and found he could learn about his past in a fun way by reading the Little House Series. Growing older, he studied Wilder into depth and read everything she has ever published. When asked what his favorite Little House book was, Anderson replied that it is difficult to choose just one. When questioned about his favorite character, he claims all the characters have their place on the

frontier and each serves a purpose, although Laura is the most admirable (Slegg 2). He finds every aspect of the series vital in producing the kind of quality Wilder desired.

In the future Anderson hopes to write a biography on Wilder for adult readers. He claims it will be a major job, but it will be very interesting researching more on such a magnificent literary figure (Slegg 4).

Despite the fact many people treasured her books she was surprised with all the success the Little House Series brought her. She was asked to speak at schools and on the radio. . Libraries were named to honor her. She received many awards and honors. Children all over sent her presents and stories thanking her for her series (Anderson 28).

Through many years of being highly praised by children, teachers, and scholars, proof of Laura Ingalls Wilder's excellence can be seen through her many awards. She received the Newberry Honor Book Award for the following: On the Banks of Plum Creek, By the Shores of Silver Lake, The Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, and These Happy Golden Years. In 1942 she was honored with the Pacific Northwest Library Association Young Readers' Choice Award for By the Shores of Silver Lake and in 1943 for These Happy Golden Years. Also, for These Happy Golden Years the Children's Spring Book Festival Award was given to her in 1943 (Piehl 354).

In 1954, she received the first Laura Ingalls Wilder Award from the American Library Association. Since then, every five years this award is given out to an author or illustrator of children's novels in Wilder's honor. Along with her many awards she was elected into the Ozark Hall of Fame in 1977 and inducted into the South Dakota Cowboy and Western Hall of Fame in 1978 (Piehl 354).

Combining gifts of observation, memory, and storytelling, Wilder created a legacy in

children's literature. More than just the account of one life, her books became a record of a dynamic period of American history and a testament to the courage, resourcefulness, family values, and optimism that shaped a young nation. (Piehl 355)

Along with being a plains pioneer, Laura Ingalls Wilder has proven herself a pioneer of literature as well. By sharing her stories with others, she has become one of the most cherished writers of the twentieth century (Anderson 29).

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