# SHATTERING THE MYTH: MARY AND LAURA AS ANTAGONISTS IN *LITTLE HOUSE IN THE BIG WOODS, LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE,* AND *ON THE BANKS OF PLUM CREEK*

**by**

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Although the traditional critical approach establishes the Mary-Laura relationship in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series as idyllic, the realism of the sister-sister relationship in these novels cannot be dismissed. Closer textual examination of *Little House in the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie,* and *On the Banks of Plum Creek* indicates that Wilder was conscious of, and responded to, the subtle antagonisms which necessarily and naturally occur between any siblings, even sisters. These rivalous behaviors are typically misread, ignored, or overlooked by androcentric critics, who do not recognize as valid the connectedness between sisters and instead view such relationships as sentimental, fragmentary, or some form of deviation from the male norm. Laura's experience is often not accepted as realistic because it does not fit the male norm. For example, Virginia L. Wolf, Professor of Children's and Adolescent Literature and a Wilder enthusiast, insists: "Nothing is quite right in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*"; the images of disorder and formlessness "introducing the demonic side of existence . . . distort and fragment the ideal image of the first two books."[1] Such a negative assumption of sibling rivalry as "disorderly" denies a natural occurrence among female siblings. Analyzed this way, Wilder's Little House series appears deficient in its portrayal of human growth, offering instead a sentimental facade. On the other hand, applying a theory of sisterhood reveals an alternative understanding, offering a realistic portrayal of the Laura-Mary relationship.

Basic theory regarding sister-sister relationships emphasizes the importance and development of sister-sister relationships. Although the dynamics of sister-sister relationships fluctuate throughout life, sisters progress through

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several basic stages including mirroring, rivaling, and caretaking. And basic theory regarding any sibling relationships emphasizes the strong influence of various sibling pairings. High-access siblings are those siblings who "have often had intense involvement with one another and have played an important role in the formation of one another."[2] "Similarity in age and sex" intensifies the sibling bond, increasing "access to common life events."[3] The isolation of the Ingalls family through Mary's and Laura's childhood has drawn these sisters close together. High access siblings, Laura and Mary spend virtually all of their time in one another's company; they sleep, wake, dress, eat, and play almost exclusively with one another, thus acting as models for one another. Mentally, Mary is part of the same group as Laura herself. Because adults (Ma and Pa) and babies (Carrie) constitute other, non-child groups, they are less relevant to Laura's psyche than is Mary, so they will not be discussed as much.

After initially identifying closely with sisters, young girls naturally begin to feel antagonistic toward one another, especially during pre-teen years as they seek individually differentiated identities separate from sister and family. Thus, a new sense of self evolves. However, given their primary identification of self in connection to others, "women portray autonomy rather than attachment as the illusory and danger quest."[4] Here, for females, there is a crisis of conscience—a conflict of values between separation and integration, integrity and care. Laura's dilemma, likewise, involves her need to reconcile her rivalous feelings toward Mary with an intimate sense of connection to her sister. Paralleled twice on a broader scale, Laura must reconcile her family's attitudes toward both race and gender to her sense of self. This tension affects Laura deeply, altering her thoughts and behaviors. It disrupts her sense of self as same, inviting a sense of self as other because she now has difficulty identifying with Ma and Mary—her teachers, models, protectors, and socializers.

According to research, all sister-sister relationships feel the sting of antagonistic rivalry sooner or later,[5] yet sisters'

> lifelong rivalry is intrinsic to their chiseling of separate identities and, paradoxically, the fuel to their individuality.
>
> For just as the central tug between mothers and daughters is the need for dependence versus the pull toward independence, the pull between sisters is the realization of similarity versus difference. On the one hand is the comfort and familiarity of being similar; looking the same, speaking with the same voices, liking the same things. On the other hand—and partly in defense against the sameness . . .—is a deep-rooted need to be different;

> developing different values and styles, talents and friends, strengths and foibles. So the rivalry enhances the process of differentiation and individuation, and in a profound sense is therefore not a barrier to friendship, but in many cases, a necessary and natural part of it.[6]

Toni McNaron's article "*Little Women* and 'Cinderella': Sisters and Competition," presents "three specific patterns" of sisterly competition:

> (1) sisters deciding, albeit unconsciously, not to develop all of their potential, letting one sister have the field in certain respects, minimizing competition; (2) sisters bonding strongly at an early age in order to resist family or outside pressure toward competition; (3) sisters simply competing, openly or indirectly, for parental affection, peer approval, and worldly recognition.[7]

Shattering the misconception of non-competitive women, McNaron shows that women, especially sisters, compete, but sometimes in ways which seem noncompetitive in androcentric terms. "Girls growing up in the same house are presented with ample opportunities to compete. Sometimes these are quite overt . . . more often, the lures toward competition rather than cooperation are covert, even invisible."[8]

Interestingly, fewer examples of rivalry occur in *Little House on the Prairie* than in *Little House in the Big Woods*, in which Laura has arrived at the fictional age at which sisters' rivalry should be most evident. An investigation of this apparent discrepancy reveals that the incidents of Wilder's childhood which are recorded in *Little House in the Big Woods* actually postdated the events of *Little House on the Prairie*.[9] Thus, an inversion of actual experience is played out in the fictional setting in which ages do not necessarily correspond to the historically accurate sister relationships which are most dominant.

In *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura had not yet left her wooded homeland; her concept of the world remained unchallenged. Early in *Little House on the Prairie*, however, Laura is "forced to examine a larger part of the world than she has before acknowledged as being part of her own,"[10] notes Janet Spaeth, the foremost Wilder scholar:

> The enormous lake stretched flat and smooth and white all the way to the edge of the gray sky. Wagon tracks went away across it, so far that you could not see where they went; they

> ended in nothing at all. . . . All around the wagon there was nothing but empty and silent space. Laura didn't like it.[11]

While living in the Big Woods, Laura perceived the outside as cold, lonely, and unsafe and the inside as snug, cozy, and safe. In her new prairie perspective, the sky seems bigger, the land larger, and "suddenly Laura and her family seem smaller."[12] For example: "On the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there. In all that space of land and sky stood the lonely, small, covered wagon. And close to it sat Pa and Ma and Laura and Mary and Baby Carrie, eating their breakfasts."[13] Laura finds consolation in the face of the awesomeness of the prairie by assuring herself that all the securities of home are present and that life continues as usual. However, as she reconciles herself to the prairie through her daily adventures within it, Laura's sense of "self emerges from the sheltered security that dominated"[14] *Little House in the Big Woods*: "All around them, to the very edge of the world, there was nothing but grasses waving in the wind. . . . Laura was very happy. The wind sang a low, rustling song in the grass. . . . Laura had never seen a place she liked so much as this place."[15] With the prairie as the catalyst for her new growth, Laura experiences a self fused with nature, rather than solely with her sister Mary. This new sense of self does not abolish all connection with Mary; rather Laura establishes a new sense of connection, perceiving self in opposition to Mary.

Shattering the myth of quaint and harmonious prairie-family life in *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, "the disagreements between the two sisters are a major motif in the Little House series,"[16] even after Mary's much romanticized blindness. Fullest understanding of the antagonistic aspects of the Mary-Laura relationship comes from understanding the context in which the rivalry is played out, a context created by family roles, birth order, parental expectations and behaviors, and the influences of the sibling sub culture.

As McNaron argues, "parental influence plays a crucial role"[17] in whether sisters grow up feeling a sense of hurtful or helpful rivalries:

> If one or both adults encourage bonding between sisters, then the sisters are much more likely to find ways around or through the temptations to rival each other. But if these same adults discourage, however subtly, real connection between children, then the girls succumb all too easily to the readily available invitations to compete. An obvious extension of this pattern

> occurs when parents themselves model competitive behavior in their own interactions within the home or in the outside world.[18]

Although Ma and Pa model competitiveness by competing in the arena of providing for their daughters[19] and Ma insists that blondes must wear blue ribbons and brunettes must wear pink,[20] for the most part Laura and Mary are encouraged to bond. The parental expectations of friendliness and cooperation poses a problem, though, as Laura and Mary naturally move into an antagonistic relationship. The conflicting desires of being good (and receiving parental favor) and of being true to self pose a dilemma for Laura and Mary. To manage feelings of rivalry, they consequently establish polarized personalities and split-parent identification. Dividing the family's psychological goodies this way lessens direct competitive threats.

Despite parental influences, sooner or later any sister-sister relationship is bound to feel the sting of jealousy, resentment, unfairness, and difference. Laura and Mary are no exception. Pa, Jack (the family dog), and Ma protect Laura from the external world, but "within the little house, her security is somewhat threatened because her sister Mary is so much better than she, i.e., neat, ladylike, and blonde."[21] Laura perceives herself as having none of these traits. Sibling deidentification, or polarization, is a method of reducing sibling rivalry, and high-access siblings such as Laura and Mary "deidentified significantly more than" other sibling pairs.[22] Their deidentification, then, becomes a coping mechanism for maintaining a sense of self without destroying a sense of connectedness.

Typically, in any sibling pair obvious physical comparisons begin the process of natural differentiation. Despite enjoying their deep similarity, Laura and Mary need to recognize and differentiate self from other— "anything to secure the sense of a separate and valued identity."[23] Frequently, sibling comparisons, "whether made by others or the self, were not merely descriptive but evaluative—they translated qualitative statements into value judgments. . . . 'Better' may be defined by the standards of a significant other or those internalized by the self."[24] For example, because Laura had grown in a sense of connection with Mary (sister as self), her need to acknowledge self has long been suppressed. Laura's dilemma between separation and connection, self and other, passion and duty, stems directly from her former mirroring of Mary. Returning from town in *Little House in the Big Woods*, after misbehaving and ripping her dress, Laura compares herself to Mary:

> Nothing like that ever happened to Mary. Mary was a good little girl who always kept her dress clean and neat and minded

> her manners. Mary had lovely golden curls, and her candy heart had a poem on it [Laura's did not].
>
> Mary looked very good and sweet, unrumpled and clean, sitting on the board beside Laura. Laura did not think it was fair.[25]

Even as she was looking at Mary as the girl she would like to emulate with the clean dress and niee manners, Laura is resentful; she "did not think it was fair."[26] Now, as Laura has grown in a sense of self in opposition to Mary, her need for connection has been denied. This crisis of conscience is not fair; she wants and needs both separation and connection without feeling selfish or naughty.[27]

Such evaluative differentiation occurs when Ma fosters Laura's envy of Mary's golden curls by sending Laura and Mary to meet Aunt Lotty, whom Mary smugly questions:

> "Which do you like best, Aunt Lotty," Mary asked, "brown curls or golden curls?" Ma had told them to ask that, and Mary was a very good little girl who always did exactly as she was told.
>
> Laura waited to hear what Aunt Lotty would say, and she felt miserable.
>
> "I like both kinds best," Aunt Lotty said, smiling.[28]

Ma places Aunt Lotty in an unfavorable position, but the aunt handled the problem gracefully. Nonetheless, Mary brags to Laura later that day that "Aunt Lotty likes my hair best, anyway. Golden hair is lots prettier than brown." Then, because Laura has been taught, tacitly, that golden curls are qualitatively more worthy than brown, "she reached out quickly and slapped Mary's face."[29] After Pa punishes her, he points out that his own hair is brown: "She had not thought of that, Pa's hair was brown, and his whiskers were brown, and she thought brown was a lovely color."[30] Such identification with Pa bears significance. As Laura deidentifies self from Mary, she identifies more frequently with Pa.

"The trouble between Laura and Mary goes deeper than just hair color, however, for theirs is a basic opposition of character."[31] Mary is always obedient, never naughty. She identifies more with Ma, prefers indoors, likes to sew, wears her sunbonnet, likes to study, dislikes prairie travel and life, and freezes in a crisis. Unlike Mary, Laura is impulsive, which frequently leads her to disobedience and naughtiness. She identifies more with Pa, prefers outdoors, hates to sew, resists wearing her sunbonnet, dislikes studying, relishes prairie travel and life, and acts quickly in a crisis. Wolf gently describes such opposites in *Little House in the Big*

*Woods* as "carefully balanced; polarities . . . suspended in harmony."[32] Acknowledging psychologically realistic behavior, Lamb and Sutton-Smith describe such sibling polarization as a defense to the "Cain Complex" (the normal conflict and hatred engendered by sibling rivalry) and suggest that by polarizing, each can express herself through contrasting activities and attitudes. "Unconventional" Laura can feel superior to Mary "in originality or spontaneity," while secretly viewing Mary as too good, and confined. "Conventional" Mary, on the other hand "can feel superior in responsibility or dependability, secretly viewing [Laura] as wild or explosive."[33] For example, in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* when Mary must venture outdoors to pick plums, Mary accuses Laura:

> "I declare, you eat more plums than you pick up," . . .
>
> "I don't any such thing," Laura contradicted. "I pick up every plum I eat."
>
> You know very well what I mean," Mary said, crossly. "You just play around while I work."
>
> But Laura filled her pail as quickly as Mary filled hers. Mary was cross because she would rather sew or read than pick plums. But Laura hated to sit still; she liked picking plums.[34]

Because Laura completes as much work as does Mary, she need not feel inadequate for her plum-picking skills. In fact, Laura can smugly revel in working outdoors, which she enjoys, as she comes to understand that Mary is as miserable outdoors as Laura is indoors.

Similarly, we see the contrasting reactions of Mary and Laura to the adventures of traveling across the prairie. As the family crosses a creek, "Mary huddled down on the bed. She did not like fords; and she was afraid of the rushing water. But Laura was excited; she liked the splashing."[35] As the creek rises, endangering the family, "Mary hid her face in the blanket again, but Laura rose up further."[36] Skillfully, Wilder uses "but" in the descriptions of Mary's and Laura's opposite behaviors while using "and" within descriptions of their mirroring behavior.

Moreover, Laura's behavior is typical of second daughter behavior. The second female child "seems to have greater problems with feminine integration," often wishes she were a boy, ranks "low on the index of traditional femininity and the narcissism index," and is more likely to choose masculine models.[37] It is realistic, then, that "Wilder portrayed herself with some consistency as the family rebel," contrasting Laura unfavorably "with her sister Mary, who was temperamentally calm and quiet."[38]

Mary has more deeply internalized parental standards than Laura. Feeling as though she will "never catch up"[39] with Mary, young Laura often experiences herself as "naughty," and any comparison with Mary intensifies this. Ma and Pa Ingalls are, however, aware of the temperamental differences between the sisters. Before Mary and Laura receive a gift in *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura beats Pa with her fists, begging for her present, while Mary sits with her hands folded in her lap. Pa slowly opens the package, commenting, "You first, Mary, . . . because you are so patient.,"[40] Similarly, while traveling to Kansas, Laura is tired of riding in the wagon and wants to set camp for the night, even after Pa says no.

> "I want to camp now! I'm so tired," Laura said.
>
> Then Ma said, "Laura." That was all, but it meant that Laura must not complain any more out loud, but she was still naughty, inside. She sat and thought complaints to herself.[41]

Unlike Mary, quietly enduring covered wagon travel, Laura's usually active body dislikes remaining in the cramped confines. Pa's nickname for Laura, "flutterbudget," reflects his acknowledgment of Laura's active personality.

Another "naughty" rivalry scene occurs after searching the Indian camp for colored beads. Mary generously offers her beads to Carrie.

> Ma waited to hear what Laura would say. Laura didn't want to say anything. She wanted to keep those pretty beads. Her chest felt all hot inside, and she wished with all her might that Mary wouldn't always be such a good little girl. But she couldn't let Mary be better than she was.[42]

As the girls string beads, Laura thinks to herself that

> perhaps Mary felt sweet and good inside, but Laura didn't. When she looked at Mary she wanted to slap her. So she dared not look at Mary again. . . . And often after that Laura thought of those pretty beads and she was still naughty enough to want her beads for herself.[43]

Laura resents Mary's apparent unselfishness, and she resents having to behave like Mary. But, this alone is not a problem. Laura's dilemma is rooted in guilt over her lack of care for Mary, the sister who is so like herself—yet so different. The

dilemma between passion and duty makes Laura feel naughty, as in "The Indians Ride Away" chapter:

> Laura looked and looked at the Indian children, and they looked at her. She had a naughty wish to be a little Indian girl. Of course she didn't really mean it. She only wanted to be bare in the wind and the sunshine, and riding one of those gay little ponies.[44]

In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura, secretly disobeying Pa, goes to the swimming hole in Plum Creek and runs home after confronting a badger. "All that time, Mary had been sitting like a little lady, spelling out words in the book that Ma was teaching her to read. Mary was a good little girl. Laura had been bad and she knew it. . . . But no one had seen her." Laura feels "worse and worse" with her secret. "Everything was beautiful and good, except Laura."[45] Kathryn Adam reveals that "Laura realized that there were additional behavioral expectations placed on her because she was a girl. . . . Throughout the books we find Laura chafing mildly against those restraints."[46] But, Ma and her daughters must acquiesce to the standards of femininity, including maintaining fair skin, despite living and working in the frontier sunshine. Laura, however, "waged a childhood-long battle against wearing sunbonnets," and as Laura entered her teens, the same battle extended to corsets, bustles, hoops, and knee-length hair—more infringements upon her freedom.[47] Note that Laura's rebellious questioning of such gender restrictions in dress and behavior directly opposes Mary's unquestioning acceptance. Wilder uses the sun-bonnet as a symbol for this restriction:

> Laura's sunbonnet hung down her back. She pulled it by her strings, and its sides came past her cheeks. When her sunbonnet was on she could only see what was in front of her, and that was why she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by its strings tied around her throat. She put her sunbonnet on when Ma told her to.[48]

In contrast to Mary, Laura enjoys the scenery and life of the plains too much to restrict her view or her behavior. Wilder shows that other articles of feminine clothing and standards of feminine behavior also restrict Laura. The sunbonnet blocks her view; corsets restrict her breathing; sewing restricts her activity; the rigid social definitions, which Ma espouses, restrict her freedom by demanding passivity and submissiveness. Laura thus frequently steps beyond her

gender bounds, something Mary does not do and something which increases the subtle antipathy between the sisters.

"Mary's helplessness as the civilized and ladylike character in the family"[49] comes to the fore several times throughout the series when juxtaposed to Laura's ability to act in a crisis. For example, while the family lived in Indian Territory in Kansas, the chimney catches fire when Pa is out hunting. While Ma attempts to tear down the chimney from the outside, Laura "sees one big blazing stick [roll] on the floor under Mary's skirts. Mary couldn't move, she was so scared." Shown in direct contrast to Mary's helplessness: "Laura was too scared to think. She grabbed the back of the heavy rocking-chair and pulled with all her might. The chair with Mary and Carrie in it came sliding back across the floor. Laura grabbed up the burning stick and flung it into the fireplace just as Ma came in."[50] Laura begins to view the polarities between herself and Mary and to resist the social and gender constraints for which Mary's (and Ma's) behavior stands, despite her strong need for parental approval. In separating self from sister, Laura also separates herself from her gender.

Adam reminds us that "in spite of the constraints of feminine dress . . . Laura was active and adventurous. She helped Pa in building the claim shanty, took care of chores for chickens and cattle, and carried water and wood for Ma."[51] In *The Long Winter* Laura even helps Pa harvest the hay fields, despite Ma's reservations: [Ma] did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that. Ma and her girls were Americans, above doing men's work."[52] Interestingly, as Laura prepares to help Pa harvest hay, Mary and Carrie offer to complete Laura's chores for her: "Mary offered happily. She was proud that she could wash dishes and make beds as well as Laura, though she was blind."[53] After a back-breaking day of field work, "Laura was proud"[54] even though her arms, back, and legs ached. The last time Laura "was proud to be helping Ma" was in *Little House in the Big Woods*. Pa had gone to town, so Laura helped by holding the lantern while Ma completed the chores—still man's work. One scene in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* is rather telling. Laura helps Pa fix the dugout roof. Pa says:

> "There's nothing like help when a man has a big job to do." Pa often said he did not know how he could manage without Laura. She had helped him make the doors for the log house in Indian Territory. Now she helped him carry the leafy willow boughs and spread them in the dugout.[55]

According to Adam,

> in a family of sisters, [Laura] functioned by necessity (and often by preference) as her father's "right-hand-man" in the arduous tasks of homesteading. The family's history and Laura's role in it meant that she lived a life typical, and in a few ways unique, to western pioneer women.[56]

In helping Pa, Laura learns of her own strength, and human potential; she can contribute significantly in ways other than housekeeping, valuable as that may be. "Laura's identification with her adventurous and creative father, and his mutually high regard for her and her abilities was one source of her confidence and self-esteem."[57] At the same time, Laura's emergent and masculine individualism reflects her purposeful separation from a sister who embodies all she is not, the epitome of femaleness.

Laura's identification with Pa is not unusual. "Split-parent identification, like sibling deidentification, is a defense against sibling rivalry. . . . With each sibling in the pair identified with a different parent, neither child need feel that the other is favored by a special relationship to the parents."[58] Or, split-parent identification may result from a "complimentary 'split the children' defense on the part of the parents. . . . Each parent can have one child who seems to prefer him or her when competition arises."[59] Typical of the constellation of female sibling identification patterns, Mary identifies mostly with Ma, and Laura identifies mostly with Pa. Establishing "favorites" of this sort reduces the stress of sister-sister rivalry by carving equal territory for each sister, allowing for relative friendship within the framework of rivalry.

Each of these rivalry coping mechanisms, deidentification/polarization and split-parent identification, may hinder the full development of siblings. That is, sisters may manage competition by agreeing "albeit unconsciously, that no one of them will try to do or be everything."[60] Instead sisters polarize and live half of a life vicariously through their sibling's experiences. Thus, sisters can become very close. However, this pattern can quickly become very limiting as "there is a tendency to focus on the label instead of the whole person, so that what emerges is a 'type' rather than a multifaceted human."[61] Such a pattern is especially acute for females, and since rivalry is socially less acceptable between sisters than between brothers, sisters are more likely to utilize these coping mechanisms. This closeness may be mistaken for incomplete separation, although it is an effective mode of interaction as sisters find managed rivalry freeing, whereas unbridled opposition can be stifling.[62]

Laura is perplexed by the conflict of being true to sister or self. Laura loves her sister, yet feels naturally competitive toward Mary as she keeps Laura from fulfilling her own emotional needs. "Between sister and sister, the central struggle is the comforting yet threatening realization of similarity versus the threatening yet comforting need for difference, the fascination with the mirror versus the lure of the opposite, adventurous unknown."[63]

Indeed, Laura has grown; her last perception of the little house on the prairie ("The snug log house looked just as it always had. It did not seem to know they were going away"[64]) is more mature than her perception of the little house in the big woods ("The shutters were over the windows, so the little house could not see them go"[65]). Her sense of familial connection has matured; she now understands that love and security exist within (and travel with) the web of family and do not reside solely within the little houses. Realizing that her security stems principally from the familial bond and not from a sense of place, geography, or locale, Laura is freed to express self in open defiance of sister as self. She then moves toward differentiation. Thus, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the subsequent novel, most fully demonstrates a realistic view of sister as rival.

While Wolf accurately asserts that in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* "experience replaces vision as Laura's actions rather than her view of the landscape occupy Wilder's attention," she inaccurately labels this as a shift "from the myth to the adventure story." An "adventure story" implies that Wilder is writing romance. She is not. Laura's anger and naughtiness are not "experiences of disorder and formlessness," as Wolf contends.[66] Rather, they are psychologically complex and realistic emotions experienced by a growing female child as she struggles to expand a sense of self without destroying a sense of connection to others, especially her sister.

That "nothing is quite right in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*," as Wolf states, is correct, but not because "the circle does not structure the novel," as she charges."[67] Rather, Laura's disorientation from sister as same to a reorientation of sister as opposite portrays a realistic feminine dilemma concerning issues of connection and separation. Laura has fully separated self from other in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, hence her lack of concern for safety.

As a child, Laura attempted to emulate Mary's behavior. But Laura gained little satisfaction from such behavior because Mary was too good. So when Mary's goodness weakens, Laura steals Mary's show, so to speak. For instance when the family needs a team of horses but cannot afford both Christmas gifts and horses, Ma suggests that the girls give up their gifts so that Pa can buy a team. Laura notices that "even Mary, who was always so good, did not say a word." Later that evening, Laura expresses her wish that Pa buy horses as the family Christmas

present. "'So do I!' said Mary. But Laura had said it first."[68] The next Christmas, Reverend Alden surprises the entire parish with gifts donated from his more wealthy parish. Laura responds, "Thank you, sir" but immediately compares herself to Mary. "For when she could speak, her manners were as nice as Mary's."[69]

Emulative of parental behavior to a tiring point, Mary continually seeks favor from Ma by chastising Laura's behavior. During a spring rain shower Laura runs outdoors in her nightgown, thoroughly enjoying her view of the "roaring," "swirling," "fearful and fascinating" creek. "Suddenly Ma jerked Laura into the dugout, asking her 'Didn't you hear me call you?'" And Mary exclaims, "I'm surprised at you, Laura. I wouldn't go out in the rain and get all wet like that." Unhampered, "Laura was glowing warm. She had never felt so fine and frisky," and responds "Oh, Mary, you just ought to see the creek!"[70] Another time, Mary and Laura are left alone while Pa and Ma go to town. Mary attempts to curb Laura's behavior: "When Ma's not here, you have to do as I say because I'm older." Laura responds that "Ma can make me, but you can't" and darts outdoors.[71] Mary's smug responses to Laura's unbounded behavior could be interpreted as mothering (Ma probably views them this way), but these remarks are more likely a vehicle for enacting her antagonism toward Laura's self-assertive freedom.

Laura's rejection of Mary's opinions as valuable criticism is apparent elsewhere in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. For instance, when Laura and Mary begin school, Laura becomes friends with Christy, another girl who dislikes sunbonnets. After Nellie Oleson's rude behavior at a birthday party, Christy says to Laura: "I wish you'd slapped that Nellie Oleson," and Laura shares her plans: "But I'm going to get even with her. Sh! Don't let Mary know I said that."[72] Keeping a secret from Mary is new assertion of self for Laura. Rejecting Mary's code of behavior, Laura seeks a more satisfying justice, of which Mary would clearly disapprove. After the revenge (Laura leads Nellie into a leech-ridden stream), "Nellie was still mad. Laura did not care. Christy squeezed her and said in her ear, 'I never had such a good time! And it served Nellie right!' Deep down inside her Laura felt satisfied when she thought of Nellie."[73] Laura's sense of right and wrong has exceeded the boundaries of Mary's morality. Laura does not feel "naughty," as she used to when she failed to meet Mary's standards. Rather, she is content, satisfied with herself, and assured that justice has been served.

Their antagonism continues even after Mary's blindness. Interestingly, blind Mary spurs the opposition more often than not. Probably seeking Ma's affirmation or attempting to avoid her sisters' sympathy for her illness, Mary denounces even Carrie's behavior:

> "Don't fidget, Carrie, you'll muss your dress."
>
> . . . [Carrie] flushed miserably because Mary had found fault with her, and Laura was going to say, "You come over by me, Carrie, and fidget all you want to!"
>
> Just then Mary's face lighted up with joy and she said, "Ma, Laura's fidgeting, too! I can tell she is, without seeing!"
>
> So she is Mary," Ma said, and Mary smiled in satisfaction.[74]

Laura feels the keen sting of Mary's indictment, then quickly feels "ashamed that in her thoughts she had been cross with Mary." However, she mildly asserts her own antagonistic response by moving her seat next to Carrie's.[75]

Because "Pa had said that she must be eyes for Mary,"[76] Laura sees out loud for Mary, describing the activity and landscape about them. Yet, even this role becomes a stage for demonstrating sister rivalry. Usually Mary appreciates Laura's efforts; however, she engages any opportunity to contradict, correct, or otherwise counsel Laura:

> The road pushes against the grassy land and breaks off short. And that's the end of it," said Laura.
>
> "It can't be," Mary objected. "The road goes all the way to Silver Lake."
>
> "I know it does," Laura answered.
>
> "Well, then I don't think you ought to say things like that," Mary told her gently. "We should always be careful to say exactly what we mean."
>
> "I was saying what I meant," Laura protested. But she could not explain. There were so many ways of seeing things and so many ways of saying them.[77]

Another time, Pa takes Laura to the railroad worksite so that Laura can see for herself how the road is built. She is impressed with the "movement of men and horses in such perfect time that she could almost sing the tune to which they moved." Laura "did her best" to tell Mary about everything she had seen, but Mary only said, "I really don't know, Laura, why you'd rather watch those rough men working in the dirt than stay here in the nice clean shanty. I've finished another quilt patch while you've been idling."[78] Mary's accusation is quite uncalled for considering that Laura's outing was parentally sanctioned and supervised.

Mary's smug gratification with her behavior, especially when compared to Laura's, continues even in *The Long Winter*. As a young adult, Mary confesses

that always behaving was her way of "showing off. I wasn't really wanting to be good."[79] Here the realism is perhaps more noticeable to the reader, since rivalry is considered less romantic in the first place, but this realism is precisely what some critics overlook.

Spaeth, the only Wilder critic to recognize and acknowledge the sibling rivalry of Laura and Mary, declares that "intensely alert, Laura is always listening, watching, absorbing. The reader knows how she feels, which is frequently not the way good little girls are 'supposed' to feel. She is spirited and can be angry, naughty, envious—all very real emotions, thus making her character multifaceted or multidimensional and always interesting."[80]

The myth of romanticism is established because Wilder communicates "the complexities of personal, [sororal], familial, and national life . . . in such a way as to never gain dominance over the image of the nurturing mother, the protective father, the shared meals and special occasions, and most of all, the little houses . . . Though the text itself shatters the myth by giving to the house as many ambiguities as it gives to the prairie," among others.[81] "Beneath the analysis, the inner debate continues to sizzle: the pervasiveness of similarity versus the deep need for difference, the passion to separate versus the deep need for closeness."[82] The romanticism commonly accepted by critics as Wilder's principal approach to the relationship of Mary and Laura is, in fact, not supported by the texts themselves. Specifically, the texts *Little House in the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie*, and *On the Banks of Plum Creek* point to particular aspects of adversarial relationships between real sisters.

## NOTES

1. Virginia Wolf, "Plenary Paper: The Magic Circle of Laura Ingalls Wilder," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 9(4) (1984-1985), 168.
2. Stephen P. Bank and Michael D. Kahn, *The Sibling Bond* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 11-12.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 48.
5. Elizabeth Fishel, *Sisters: Love and Rivalry Inside the Family and Beyond* (New York: Morrow, 1979), 152.
6. Ibid., 154-5.
7. Toni A. H. McNaron, "Little Women and 'Cinderella': Sisters and Competition," in *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?*, eds. Valerie Miner and Helen E. Longino (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), 121.
8. Ibid., 122.
9. William T. Anderson, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 40.

10. Janet L. Spaeth, "Language of Vision and Growth in the Little House Books," *Great Lakes Review: A Journal of Midwest Culture* 8(1) (1982), 21.
11. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935; reprint 1953), 7.
12. Janet L. Spaeth, *Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 56.
13. Wilder, *LHP*, 40-41.
14. Sarah Gilead, "Emigrant Selves: Narrative Strategies in Three Women's Autobiographies," *Criticism* 30(1) (1988), 47.
15. Wilder, *LHP*, 48-9.
16. Spaeth, *Wilder*, 84.
17. McNaron, 126.
18. Ibid., 128.
19. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937; reprint 1953), 242; Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1941; reprint 1953), 102-6. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1940; reprint 1953), 29-30.
20. Wilder, *OBPC*, 179-80.
21. Virginia Wolf, "The Symbolic Center: Little House in the Big Woods." *Children's Literature in Education* 13 (1982), 107-14, 111.
22. Michael Lamb and Brian Sutton-Smith, *Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance Across the Lifespan* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1982), 371.
23. Bank and Kahn, 53.
24. Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 237.
25. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1932; reprint 1953), 175.
26. Ibid.
27. Hamida Bosmajian, "Vastness and Contraction of Space in Little House on the Prairie," *Children's Literature* 11 (1983), 52:

> According to Bosmajian, Laura's internal struggle with the fairness of distributing care equally between herself and Mary is directly paralleled in her dilemma with issues of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream. Laura's malarial fever hallucinations of ego threatening vastness (absolute selfishness) and contraction (stifling care) in the "Fever 'N' Ague" chapter radically express her inner struggle for growth and understanding as they apply to both the "typography of the little house and the prairie as well as to the tensions within and between characters." Similar experiences of sleeping, dreaming, drifting helplessly, and etc. occur in *The Long Winter* as Laura again struggles with issues of distributing care.

28. Wilder, *LHBW*, 181-2.
29. Ibid., 183.
30. Ibid., 184.
31. Spaeth, *Wilder*, 84.
32. Wolf, "Symbolic Center," 108.
33. Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 129-130.
34. Wilder, *OBPC*, 64.
35. Wilder, *LHP*, 20.
36. Ibid., 21.
37. Elizabeth Douvan and Joseph Adelson, *The Adolescent Experience* (New York: Wiley, 1966), 290.

38. Kathryn Adam, "Laura, Ma, Mary, Carrie, and Grace: Western Women as Portrayed by Laura Ingalls Wilder," in *Women's West*, eds. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 102.
39. Fishel, 71.
40. Wilder, *LHP*, 270.
41. Ibid., 15.
42. Ibid., 179.
43. Ibid., 180-1.
44. Ibid., 307.
45. Wilder, *OBPC*, 32-3.
46. Adam, 103.
47. Wilder, *LTP*, 93-4.
48. Wilder, *LHP*, 123.
49. Bosmajian, 203.
50. Wilder, *LHP*, 203.
51. Adam, 103.
52. Wilder, *LW*, 4.
53. Ibid., 4-5.
54. Ibid., 9.
55. Wilder, *OBPC*, 14.
56. Adam, 96.
57. Ibid., 106.
58. Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 148.
59. Ibid., 149.
60. McNaron, 124.
61. Dale V. Atkins, *Sisters* (New York: Arbor House, 1984), 51.
62. McNaron, 125.
63. Fishel, 217.
64. Wilder, *LHP*, 324.
65. Ibid., 6.
66. Wolf "Magic Circle," 168-9.
67. Ibid.
68. Wilder, *OBPC*, 86-7.
69. Ibid., 257.
70. Ibid., 98-9.
71. Ibid., 69.
72. Ibid., 168.
73. Ibid., 176.
74. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1939; reprint 1953), 17.
75. Ibid., 17-8.
76. Ibid., 2.
77. Ibid., 58.
78. Ibid., 107.
79. Wilder, *LTP*, 12.
80. Spaeth, *Wilder*, 65.
81. Bosmajian, 58.
82. Fishel, 189.