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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Animal Figure in and Around the Little House: Tame-Wild Liminality in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*

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Abstract

This essay deploys an animal studies, posthumanist approach to Laura's identification with Jack and horses throughout the *Little House* series. Part wolf and partly domesticated, Jack mediates the impossible longings within Laura to be free and yet under control—to be independent yet maintain the approval of her parents, especially her mother. Jack is replaced by horses later in the series, and horses take over Jack's function in negotiating as transitional objects between Laura's paradoxical longings to be wild and civilized, free and socially acceptable. Horses lead her to Almanzo, who becomes the final negotiation between Laura's longings for freedom and domestication. Animal studies frameworks have recently challenged the model of domestication as subjugation, arguing for coevolution as a more appropriate theory in which both "domesticator" and "domesticated" animal bring agency to the process of collaboration. Through both Jack and other animals in *Little House*, Wilder promotes this model not only for animals but for women, pioneering not only a landscape but a new model for expressing the agency of the silenced, marginalized subject. Not only does this model hold value for understanding women's literature, but it also defines children's literature as fostering deep identification with posthumanist inquiry.

Keywords Laura Ingalls Wilder · Animal studies · Horses · American literature · Posthumanism · Domestication

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The *Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder paradoxically depicts the *Künstlerroman* of a budding writer in the terms of a girl who becomes increasingly silenced and inwardly rebellious, but outwardly conforming. As the series progresses, Laura Ingalls is often edited by Mary and her mother. She is not even allowed to feel emotions or cry. But the narrator reveals how *inwardly* Laura is feeling "naughty." The gradual silencing of Laura fuels Louise Mowder's sense that the *Little House* series is sad, "[y]et the project of domestication is always in danger because, as Laura enters the wilderness, the wilderness enters her. This double movement, figured as circling, is most prominent in *Little House on the Prairie*" (1992, p. 17). A scene in *Little House on the Prairie* demonstrates this circling by enacting an animal figure's liminality between boundaries of wildness and domestication, when the family's faithful pet bull dog, Jack, is mistaken for a wolf as he circles the boundary of the campfire. Having trotted underneath the covered wagon for the whole of the trip, Jack has been presumed lost after the family crosses a rushing river in their wagon. When he returns, Laura is the only one who recognizes that it is his eyes shining in the dark, and she uses her grief for his loss to reflect inwardly on Pa's mistake crossing the river. A surface reading of Jack suggests he functions as Pa's surrogate, protecting the female family whenever Pa is away and indeed duplicating Pa, who plays mad dog with his girls in *Little House in the Big Woods* and who is linked with wildness and animals throughout the series. However, a closer reading of Jack reveals that he expresses Laura's liminality between feelings of rebellion, in resistance to female domesticity and settlement, and acceptable conformity, as her relationships with her parents shift with age.

Throughout the series, Jack acts as a projective vessel to express what the maturing girl increasingly cannot, from his discontent at being chained to his ungovernable and dangerous resistance to Pa's commands in *Little House in the Prairie*. The relationship of pets to animals has been a vexed question in the field of animal studies (Weil, 2012, pp. 53–62): are pets merely bound to disciplinary trainings or are they participants and cultural actors? These are questions poignant in studies of marginalized subjects as well, which are linked in a series that interrogates the interrelated domestication of women, animals, and Native American land. Just as Wilder destabilizes the male Western myth of taming the virgin land by rewriting it as the creation of homes governed by the Mother (Fellman, 1996, p. 105), she deploys a kind of critical posthumanism, which "is the *radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines"* (Nayar, 2014, p. 2).

The axis of tame and wild has been studied in relation to the Indian figure in the *Little House* series, a projective device to express Laura's childhood fascination with the possibility of living beyond white gentility. While Wilder participates in the idea that Ma's civility hinges upon the "not-Indian," as critiqued by Frances Kaye and Sharon Smulders, she uses Laura's perceptions of the Indian's "rank animalism" (Smulders, 2002, p. 197) to mark not simply racism but the paradoxical feelings involved in negotiating racism and the unknown as a child: the ability to believe in more than one truth at the same time. The problematic lens through which Wilder views the indigenous, whose presence is an active factor in girlhood and

womanhood, has recently resulted in the removal of Wilder's name from the American Library Association's award for children's literature legacy. Kaye takes Wilder to task for using the Indian figure as a symbol of wildness in Laura's battle against Ma, and like Smulders, unpacks the politics beyond the texts to demonstrate Wilder's participation in an American mythology that apologizes for racial cleansing. In particular, Kaye argues, the disappearance of the Indian is *naturalized* through being equated with the passing of childhood (2002, p. 124). Yet the passing of childhood is vexed and fraught with contradictions and struggles. Critics emphasizing race view Wilder as duplicating paradigms of imperialism, while critics emphasizing gender see revisions in how Wilder negotiates Manifest Destiny as a female writer; it is certainly a traditional trope for a white frontier writer to utilize the presence of the ethnic other to define freedom (Morrison, 1992). Yet neither of these polar opposite views takes into account the fields of childhood studies and animal studies, both of which situate the dependent subject in a complex web of meanings.

As such, Jack can be understood as a transitional object that helps Laura negotiate her paradoxical longings for wildness and taming, enabling the perpetuation of her liminality. In *Playing and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott discusses the way in which transitional objects such as teddy bears, blankets, or whatever a child chooses from his/her environment serve to negotiate internal and external reality (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 4–6). They can simultaneously symbolize connection and separation, easing the project of autonomy by standing for paradoxical longings. Animals in *Little House* serve as transitional objects that negotiate Laura's increasing separation from her parents and complex feelings about the project of settlement. Posthumanist frameworks for understanding animal studies enable us to view animals such as Jack as more than companionate subjects; they are also primal tools for expressing the marginalized voice and negotiating the tame-wild axis of meaning.

More than a pet and beyond a counterpart to Pa, Jack can be understood as expressing Laura's emergent feelings of rebellion, her liminality as part domestic and part wild, and her resistance to both American settlement and domesticity. Jack is particularly important in *Little House on the Prairie*. From the moment they embark on their journey West to his seeming defense of white settlement against the Osage, he opens up a space from which to challenge Pa and Pa's authority, paving the pathway for the more fully rebellious Laura of *Plum Creek*, the transitional novel in Laura's growth to moral autonomy, argues Claudia Mills (1996, pp. 131–132). His role is so important that after his death, he is replaced in Laura's life by horses, animal figures that likewise come to represent Laura's yearning for prairie freedom and need to conform to domestic womanhood. Horses pass as domesticated animals in service to others, but they also, our reading demonstrates, enable a safe sexual expression and pleasurable autonomy for Laura. The horse as a symbol for emerging and deviant sexuality is familiar, as Mary Armstrong explores in her work on animal symbolism in the lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (Armstrong, 2008). Jack's death in *Silver Lake* accompanies the release of Laura from patriarchy, when she alone turns to the figure of horses, which also symbolize paradoxical longings and explorations: mobility and stasis, commodity culture and nature, unbridled sexuality as well as the domesticity that

comes from her marriage to Almanzo Wilder. Almanzo and his fine horses are introduced in *The Long Winter*. Myriad scenes in which horses can or cannot navigate the difficult terrain of the landscape in *The Long Winter*, the novel in which Wilder casts the most doubt on the frontier project, also express an almost Gothicized incarceration of domestic life that the growing Laura must negotiate in nighttime terrors. Understanding the animals provides us with Laura's inner landscape, fears, attractions, and sense of self as she shifts in relationships. Ultimately, both the dog and the horses express the problem of Laura's wildness under the guise of an acceptable domestic stability.

Focusing on the vexed psychological negotiation between varying realities, Winnicott provides a useful framework because he reveals how children participate in paradoxical belief systems, such as valuing independence and fearing it at one and same time. Laura's vacillation in relation to animals brings her need for expression to a level of intimacy that has gone unrecognized because adults focus more on global politics. The loss and imagined kinship with the Indian, discussed by Elizabeth Segel, are far easier for adults to see than the complex negotiations between settlement myths and inner wildness that Laura undergoes with dogs and horses as she shifts in relation to the world around her (Segel, 1977). If *Little House* as a series is about a woman writer situating herself in the American mythos of the frontier and independence, and if freedom of expression emerges in her gender conservative context, then in multiple ways it is the animal familiar –poised at key transitional prairie moments for Laura—that unhinges a space for the woman writer to emerge. She is neither fully tamed nor fully wild, but forever betwixt and between *the settled* and *the roaming*. It is the "domesticated" animal that allows her to claim this space for her own.

Beyond Man's Best Friend

The first novel in the series, *Little House in the Big Woods*, offers an Edenic view of strong, traditional patriarchy, in which Pa is a sort of God; his stories structure the novel and he is what R. W. B. Lewis calls the American Adam (1959), overtly referenced when Laura is reading a version of Genesis and expresses envy for the Adam figure in the woods naming the animals. Through much of the novel depicting Laura's secure young early childhood, equated with the sound log cabin nestled in the woods, Jack is an extension of Pa:

> Laura knew that wolves would eat little girls. But she was safe inside the solid log walls. Her father's gun hung over the door and good old Jack, the brindle bulldog, lay on guard before it. Her father would say, "Go to sleep, Laura. Jack won't let the wolves in." (2004, p. 3)

The gun and Jack are extensions of patriarchal protection, standing between vulnerable "little girls" and ferocious nature. One could argue wolves would eat little boys too but the expression of gender here is traditional and political, given that the series is initiated during The Great Depression when many men were out of work and unable to protect their families. As the only two characters who can walk between the snug inside and the open outside, Janet Spaeth argues, "[h]er major champions of

security, Pa and Jack the dog, protect Laura from the outside and act as intermediaries between the outer world (unknown and unsafe) and the inner world (known and safe)" (1982, p. 20). Pa cannot do anything wrong in *Little House in the Big Woods*; this is important because as the series moves along and Pa relocates his family into more and more remote regions of the country, to the chagrin of Ma, who prefers civilized territories, he makes a series of strategic errors that demonstrate a decline in romantic Renaissance men like Pa; from settling across lines of Indian Territory in *Little House on the Prairie* to purchasing on credit before the wheat is harvested in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, to near starvation in *The Long Winter*, Pa's ability to protect his family becomes more and more suspect. This fading of Pa's stature is crucial in Laura's growing up, as she realizes his fallacies and steps into a leadership role herself. It is Jack who acts as a transitional figure to usher in this new phase. In the second novel of Laura's journey, *Little House on the Prairie*, Jack takes a starring role, functioning to challenge patriarchy and open up a critical space for Laura to see Pa as a man rather than a god. Pa's play at mad dog in *Little House in the Big Woods* is symbolic of his status as a threshold figure (Campbell, 2000, p. 112), both domestic and wild; he frightens the girls, but Laura (not her older sister Mary) stands up to him in the game and "wins," rewarded with her father's praise of her as "strong as a little French horse" (p. 36). This subtle message about using the dog as a liminal tool to challenge Pa becomes writ large in *Little House in the Prairie*.

Pa and Jack begin the series as equivalencies, but the prairie opens space for other possibilities. The beginning of *Little House on the Prairie* features the abruptness with which Pa decides to remove his family from Wisconsin to Kansas, "seeing you don't object," he says to Ma, which of course signals proper gender roles in decision making and expression of feelings. Fear of the unknown is at first expressed with the link between Pa and Jack, "All around the wagon there was nothing but empty and silent space. Laura didn't like it. But Pa was on the wagon-seat and Jack was under the wagon; she knew that nothing could hurt her while Pa and Jack were there" (2008b, p. 7). One could say Pa and Jack are one and the same, patriarchal protections in which the dog is properly subordinate to, and buttressing of, well-ordered patriarchy that justifies imperialism. However, the specific phrase "Pa and Jack" opens up some wiggle room to suggest Pa alone is insufficient against the open emptiness of uncertainty on the horizon. *Little House in the Prairie* depicts the suddenness of open space, horizons that do not end, expansiveness of self both wonderful and terrifying in its lack of boundaries; as Bosmajian explores, "Pa Ingalls and Laura hover between the values of the open prairie and the values of the house" (p. 53), which are boundaries of consciousness and possibilities (Bosmajian, 1983). It is therefore critical that Pa makes a strategic error in crossing a creek with Jack under the wagon, and that Wilder (and her co-writer Lane) build drama by dwelling continually on the fact that "all the long way from the Big Woods of Wisconsin, across Minnesota and Iowa and Missouri. All that long way, Jack and trotted under the wagon" (p. 10). Emphasizing patience, loyalty, and putting family first, the novel explains how sore Jack's paws are, that he is so tired of the journey that he barely notices jackrabbits bounding by. Right after this description of Jack's tiredness, Laura herself expresses herself to Ma, "I want to camp, now! I'm so tired." But "Then Ma said, 'Laura.' That was all, but it meant that Laura must not complain. So she did not complain any more out loud, but she was still

naughty, inside. She sat and thought complaints to herself" (p. 13). This critical projection onto Jack and identification with Jack show that projection onto the animal gives Laura both the courage to speak and the awareness of what she wants to say, as well as a lesson in her status and subordination. Jack begins to be a symbol of Laura's rebellion.

A rupture between what is going on inside Laura and what is unable to be expressed, naughty inside, becomes increasingly the case throughout the series, but the dog is critical to this rupture, tame and loyal on the outside but anthropomorphized inside. It is Laura who says when they are going to cross the river "I wish Jack could ride in the wagon, Pa," and this is important because the water rises faster than Pa anticipates and Jack is lost. Not only is this cruel, Laura feels, but also it is idiotic; Pa himself wonders what they will do without their bulldog in this new territory. Even while Ma is saying "all's well that ends well," when the family has barely gotten through the waters safely after a harrowing experience, it is Laura who says "Oh, where's Jack?" As the awfulness of abandoning Jack to drown is narrated, it is intimately associated with the fact that Laura cannot express her sentiments:

> Laura swallowed hard, to keep from crying. She knew it was shameful to cry, but there was crying inside her. All the long way from Wisconsin poor Jack had followed them so patiently and faithfully, and now they had left him to drown. He was so tired, and they might have taken him into the wagon… Pa said he wouldn't have done such a thing to Jack, not for a million dollars. If he'd known how that creek would rise when they were in midstream, he would never have let Jack try to swim it… It was no use. Jack was gone. (p. 22)

> Laura looked back all the way. She knew she wouldn't see Jack again, but she wanted to. She didn't see anything but low curves of land… (p. 23)

Here, Jack becomes a multivalent figure registering many complex feelings; he stands for a wronged figure, and will do so again when he is chained up and unable to protect the family from Indians, whom he regards as a threat. He is therefore recognized as wrongfully oppressed and mistreated. He is also a victim of Pa's miscalculation and thoughtlessness, implications never allowed in the first book of the series. He is also identified with Laura's forced duplicity in feeling things and being unable to express them, which is easily then a logic of recognizing the fallible nature of the father and space for criticizing patriarchy. Jack implies that it is wrong to be prevented from expressing the self.

Jack's dramatic return furthers identification with Laura and resistance to the idea that the self can be completely tamed by domestic governance. Laura is the one who sees green eyes on the outskirts of camp and assumes she is seeing a wolf, which Pa then gets ready to shoot, "Pa slowly walked toward those eyes. And slowly along the ground the eyes crawled toward him. Laura could see the animal in the edge of the dark" (pp. 30–31), which turns out to be Jack, again depicted as wrongfully oppressed, "when he at last reached them, Laura called him a wolf, and Pa threatened to shoot him" (p. 32). This echoes the way in which Laura is often distinguished from Mary by others who comment on Mary's beauty and good manners, while Laura gets ignored. The return of Jack signals an independence and

uncertainty about the wild-tame binary that underscores Laura's own increasing knowledge that she is only socialized on the outside and that her wildness will increasingly become a problem in the series, her mother continually trying to enforce proper manners in the wilderness.

Jack takes a critical role as Indians are perceived to be a warlike threat in the second half of the novel. One reading might suggest that Jack's ferocity toward the unfamiliar Indians is simply a defense of white settlement. Pa's relationship with Indian men and his own resistance to Ma's gentility, as argued by Donna Campbell, are complicated and evolve, but Pa wants to make friends with the Indians and Jack threatens that project and must be chained. If read against the grain, Jack can be seen as a wild, ungovernable force that Pa actually cannot control. The fascinating element is the way in which the narrator (focalized through Laura) depicts Jack's presumed feelings with such depth and passion:

> Jack wanted to go hunting, too. His eyes begged Pa to take him, and whines came up from his chest and quivered in his throat till Laura almost cried with him. But Pa chained him to the stable. … Poor Jack lay down. It was a disgrace to be chained, and he felt it deeply. He turned his head from Pa and would not watch him going away with the gun on his shoulder. Pa went farther and farther away, till the prairies swallowed him and he was gone.
>
> Laura tried to comfort Jack, but he would not be comforted. The more he thought about the chain, the worse he felt. (pp. 119–120)

Almost biblical in stature—"he would not be comforted," invoking the earlier way in which Laura keeps looking back to find him, like Lot's wife expressing regret she is not supposed to feel about leaving her home—Jack embeds the grief at being left behind in the domestic space and disallowed to roam the prairie space with Pa, which Laura prefers to women's work. The depth of Jack's disgrace is projected and mapped by Laura, because she herself feels left behind, chained to the domestic space with Ma. It is important that when both Laura and Jack are restricted, an Indian goes into the house where Ma and Carrie are, while Laura and Jack both go crazy with fear and Laura specifically considers unchaining Jack against Pa's direct commands. She does not actually do it, but just the fact that she thought about doing it later concerns Pa ("Don't you even think of disobeying me"—equating thought with action and forbidding even the *thought*). Whereas Mary says "Pa said not to" unchain Jack, Laura's argument is "He didn't know Indians would come" (p. 123). Although there is emphasis on obedience from Pa (Mills, 1996, pp. 131–132), the mistaken Pa at the creek is clearly preparation for understanding that Pa is fallible and lacks knowledge about what might happen, and in fact after Mary's insistence that Pa said not to let Jack loose, Laura ends up taking on a protective role herself and running in to help Ma. The fact that she challenges his commands at all is noteworthy, since by *On the Banks of Plum Creek* Laura disobeys his commands often, heading to the water when told not to, venturing too far out into the water, and almost drowning at one point. Ann Romines's reading of the "Indian in the House" scene emphasizes the pain Laura feels at tearing herself

away from Jack, a symbol of Pa and patriarchal protection, and taking up her position with Ma, in the house and sexually threatened (1997, p. 65), yet Jack's position in being disgracefully chained to a domestic space is uncannily similar to constricted female space, perceived as vulnerable and under attack.

Laura's vacillation between idealizing the wild and cowering from it is similarly present in her thoughts about the Osage, who likewise figure prominently in *Little House on the Prairie*. Laura at times fears the threat of Indians, who permeate the domestic boundaries of their cabin and threaten their livelihood, and at other times recognizes herself in them, as when she sees an Indian baby and wants to possess the child. She expresses wanting to be naked, like an Indian girl, because, as Ann Romines notes, "[s]he delights in the freedom—rare for a girl—of being unhoused" (Romines 82). Laura's identification with Osage children, as well as her questioning of her parents' weak explanations for why they are squatting on Osage-owned land, in Romines's view, "suggests a delight in difference that may even move toward the heightened multiplicities of jouissance," resistant to "the prohibitions on plurality and on acculturation" imposed by her parents (78). Wilder poses the Indians as a titillating and puzzling threat to the family's status quo and Laura's identity. However, although the Indians' restlessness at once duplicates white fantasies *and*, in the child's vision, threatens the settlement narrative of entitlement that Pa has articulated, Jack registers increasing anger, which can be understood as mirroring the confusion of what Laura's resistance means.

In the face of the Osage threat, Jack marks an increasing rupture between him and Pa as the Indians pass the house:

> Jack growled savagely, trying to get loose from his chain. He remembered this Indian who had pointed a gun at him. Pa said, "Be still, Jack." Jack growled again, and for the first time in their lives Pa struck him. (p. 279)

The silencing of Jack's ferocity and discontent as he rebels against Pa and is suppressed mirrors Laura's posture in patriarchy as she is silenced but experiences "naughty" discontent and vague anger. In the opening of *Plum Creek*, she shows antipathy towards the dug-out they buy, "She would rather sleep outdoors, even if she heard wolves, than be so safe in this house dug under the ground" (2008d, p. 17), for she has Pa's restless mad dog spirit but is disallowed from fully expressing it. Laura increasingly struggles in *Plum Creek* with her naughtiness and disobedience, in comparison to the perfect Mary, as she explores her environment actively and even occasionally becomes quite outspoken:

> "I think I like wolves better than cattle," she said.
> "Cattle are more useful, Laura," Pa said.
> She thought about that a while. Then she said, "Anyway, I like wolves better."
> She was not contradicting; she was only saying what she thought. (p. 79)

> Laura said, "I wish I was an Indian and didn't have to wear clothes."
> "Laura!" said Ma. "And on Sunday!"
> Laura thought, "Well, I do!" (p. 219)

Pa's sentiments are usually more on the side of letting Laura explore herself and articulate her thought, whereas she has to behave better with Ma, but nevertheless by *Plum Creek* a far more independent spirit has been born, largely by means of Jack as a negotiating tool in *Little House on the Prairie* as she navigates patriarchy, space, and her confused relationship to settlement.

Jack dies at the beginning of *By The Shores of Silver Lake*, marking a series of multiple losses as Laura's childhood comes to an end. The sad beginning of *Silver Lake* was a point of controversy between Wilder and Lane, but Wilder insisted that Laura's adolescence was the theme and readers had to grow realistically with her. A long illness has left Mary blind, the house is untidy, Jack is neglected, and the family is forced to give up private residence and move to a railroad camp where Pa is to be manager; appropriately, the family separates and Ma and the girls take a train to the camp, marking likewise the shift to industrialized lands and the closing of the frontier. It is a transition Jack will not make.

Right before his death is narrated, Aunt Docia from Wisconsin, who has arranged the position for Pa, reports on how the cat Black Susan is thriving with her many children in Wisconsin, the Edenic land of plenty and early childhood, and Jack by now "was especially Laura's own dog" (p. 11). Laura carefully prepares his bed for his last night alive, and a long meditation on his death and potential resurrection in "Happy Hunting Grounds" is intensely symbolic because Laura now has to be a caretaker especially for Mary and Carrie, serving as Mary's eyes and taking Mary's place in the house now that Mary is disabled. Jack's death is in some ways the death of Laura's overt rebelliousness and independence as she faces maturity and responsibility, although the dominant theme of *Silver Lake* is Laura coming into her own as an artist of words. But when Jack dies, Laura not only mourns the death of her companion, the dog that she has made especially her own, but also the departure of the piece of her that could be selfish in concern—that could attend to the world beyond the confines of the home:

> [She] was not a little girl anymore. Now she was alone; she must take care of herself. When you must do that, then you do it and you are grown up. Laura was not very big, but she was almost thirteen years old, and no one was there to depend on. Pa and Jack had gone, and Ma needed help to take care of Mary and the little girls, and somehow to get them all safely to the west on a train. (2008a, p. 14)

Becoming a protector instead of having one, Laura has a new relationship to the animal world.

Laura's role as a caretaker is particularly evident when she and Carrie take a solo night walk and wander to a "moon path" to slide on frozen ice, where they encounter a buffalo wolf. Taking the same posture as Ma did in the first novel when she encountered a bear and quietly told Laura to head back to the house, Laura says nothing about the wolf but merely challenges Carrie to see who can get back to the house faster. Laura repeats her assertion to her father that the wolf *chose* not to chase them, clearly accrediting her totem animal with the capacity for rational thought—with the will to act against its own nature. This contrasts with Pa's stance towards the buffalo wolf, whom he tracks and theorizes, almost mystically, as an

animal wanting to visit its former home—looking backwards and primarily emotional rather than rational. Ma of course shuns Laura's concern for "wild beasts" (p. 172), and Pa uses the wolves' leave-taking to claim his homestead, much as he used Indians in the prior novel, whereas Laura feels empathy for the wolf's loss of home and displacement yet focuses on his current choices. This focus means she recognizes that an independent subject can either act on its nature or transcend it.

Also in *Silver Lake*, Laura briefly identifies with birds, as wild birds (geese, duck, cranes, pelicans, heron) are plentiful in the landscape and their movement makes Laura restless and desirous to go West. Pa answers and says "I know, little Half-pint… you and I want to fly like the birds" (p. 126). Birds, however, are never a sufficient metaphor for Laura, and in fact are more associated with the men at camp, likewise vocal, and Ma. Throughout the series, Ma presents the boundaries and guidelines for domestic tranquility that both shape and confine Laura. Ma's powerful socialization practices appear throughout the text in relationship to birds that she cooks, rejects, or transforms into feather beds or clothing. Pa brings Ma a pelican and the gift is rejected because it stinks of fish. Pa accidentally shoots a swan and Ma makes it into a coat for baby Grace; in it, she looks like a doll, a living embodiment of the China shepherdess thanks to the sacrifice of nature and the offering Pa makes to Ma's domestic shrine. Birds do not cross boundaries of wild and tame alive, which is why the symbols for negotiating boundaries of settlement for Laura take the form of animals that do. As her world expands, horses are used to explore and negotiate mastery of space, body, sexuality, work, relationships, commodity culture/wealth, and pairings or teams.

Without Jack and with significant loss of faith in the profitability of patriarchy, Laura is forced to look outward as an independent entity. In the same manner in which Jack and Pa once protected her from the outside world as a child, the symbol of the horse replaces them with a protected capacity for circulation. We see horses appear as the animals with which the repressed and often burdened Laura can identify and also look toward for inspiration. Horses represent transcendence, travel, and mobility toward the future. If Jack and Pa once grounded Laura and kept her sealed into the cozy space of the home, thwarting off dangers, a horse is meant to transport her beyond the scope of her immediate surroundings. A horse is never entirely reliable and never entirely subject to its rider; a relationship with a horse varies. In fact, in Laura's marriage and final identity as a farmer, we see the complicated tension between domestic and wild that the horses represent. Therefore the transitional phenomena exercised by Jack as Laura separates from her mother and father become part and parcel of how she negotiates sexual maturity, adolescence, and nineteenth-century womanhood.

Beyond Pets

The companion dog is frequently a developmental vehicle for boy characters, as Eric Tribunella argues. The pet dog represents "intensely passionate attachments, but also eminently disposable ones," sites of "projective fantasies" (Tribunella,

2004, p. 153). The death of a dog, then, is the kind of trauma that initiates the child into adulthood, clearly seen in Laura's sorrow over Jack's death. Jack's death falls in the fulcrum between two physical places (the family's shanty claim house and Silver Lake, a railroad settlement), as well as a juncture between movement and settlement, which divides the Ingalls family and moves them from agricultural to industrial life. Similarly, horses come to symbolize the transition between developmental stages. In a Winnicottian reading, the animals can be read both as transitional objects and relational building blocks for Laura.

The solemnness of Jack's death is followed by a period of uprootedness and relative chaos for Laura, who has just turned thirteen and been thrust in a new role as caretaker as well as new space. Horses take on a new role to suggest the paradox between Laura's desire for adolescent rebellion and connection to others. Horses appear in earlier books as working animals, managed and cared for by Pa, an extension of him, like Jack. In *Plum Creek*, the family sacrifices Christmas presents to buy a new pair of ponies, and in anticipation Laura dreams of "horses sleek and shining, of how their manes and tails blew in the wind, how they picked up their swift feet and sniffed the air with velvety noses and looked at everything with bright, soft eyes. And Pa would let her ride them." She marvels at the way the horse's "aliveness [carries] her" (p. 88). Pa's control of Laura's interaction with horses shifts in *Silver Lake*, when Pa is preoccupied or absent, and Laura meets her bold and independent cousin, Lena, who lets Laura ride her pony, something Pa had never let Laura do alone.

Silver Lake is a space of chaos, a rupture of the domestic sanctity Ma had created in earlier books. This breaking open creates a space for pleasure but also for danger: as the girls ride, they meet the mother of a thirteen-year girl who has just been married off, a frightening prospect for the girls of the same age. As if in reaction to this fear, Laura steps onto the "warm slippery, moving mass of pony" and rides the galloping animal in a scene that is overt with sexual physicality:

> She was jolting so that she couldn't think…Then everything smoothed into the smoothest rippling motion. This motion went through the pony and through Laura and kept them sailing over waves in rushing air… She and the pony were going too fast but they were going like music and nothing could happen to her until the music stopped. (pp. 53–54)

The ride produces a Laura who is disheveled and unbound, prompting Ma to forbid Laura from seeing Lena and protecting Laura and her sisters from the threat of sexuality that the railroad men bring, even locking them in the attic at one point to keep them from the throngs of men downstairs. Like Jack's growing ferocity and Laura's previous rebellion against Pa, the horses are a vehicle for an exploration of adolescence and sexuality, a flirtation with mobility and autonomy for Laura. The horse continues to evolve into a vehicle for wildness and mobility for Laura, when she is introduced to her future husband Almanzo through his beautiful Morgan horses. Tison Pugh has examined the "equine love triangle" of Laura, Almanzo, and the horses, contending that the horses act as symbolic gestures to help outwardly normalize the couple because both Laura and Almanzo deviate from traditional

gender roles (Pugh, 2011). As transitional objects, the horses act as a literal vehicle to cross the border from home, childhood, and family to the exterior of adulthood.

These borders are approached and crossed with immense anxiety, however, expressed through a winter of fear as Wilder uses Pa's and Almanzo's horses to negotiate Laura's liminality between ways of seeing and being. In the book that introduces Almanzo, *The Long Winter*, Laura first sees him when she and Carrie are lost in a maze of wheat, separated from Pa and frantic. Almanzo appears in the midst to help them locate Pa, and Laura recognizes him from his beautiful Morgan horses, recalling them in distinctly physical sensuality: their arched necks, round haunches, and glossy black manes attract Laura's attention and hint at a future attraction to Almanzo. Yet in this novel, the horses figure prominently as negotiating tools that register serious questions about the myth of settlement and dependence on patriarchy. After the blizzards hit Pa, once the bridge to all things wild and organic, he struggles with his team Sam and David, who fail because they cannot work together. David "follows me like a dog," Pa says, but Sam continually falls through the snow, unable to navigate the snowy terrain (p. 157). Pa is forced to keep Sam locked up and use David alone, although it makes more work, demonstrating the cost of individualism and recognizing the need for dependency. The horses' struggle registers the chaos of the landscape, again showing the anxiety Laura herself cannot outwardly express.

The boundary between inside and outside proves to be tenuous in this book. Snow and rain literally invade the Ingalls' shanty house, until they move to a storefront house in town, which is all too public for Laura and cramped. And while Almanzo's horses catch Laura's attention by sailing over the snow at the level of her window, they likewise often prove ungovernable and in need of negotiation when he overtaxes them, as when Lady runs away with an antelope herd and Almanzo thinks he has lost her. The settlers have likewise been overtaxed with endless blizzards, and the horses register both the chaos of the landscape and the inexperience of their owners. Negotiating between instinctive behavior and taming, the horses show the precariousness of the settlers' mastery of nature. In the same novel, the new character Almanzo invades the point of view of Laura with his own chapters, which has an abrupt and unsettling effect as if the writer ceded control.

Significantly, of the entire series, *The Long Winter* is most akin to a Gothic text in which Laura is buried alive, incarcerated in the domestic. The term Gothic, traditionally associated in literature with sharp fear expressed in settings and persecuted heroines, is useful to describe the radical terror of this novel, in which Laura is buried alive. She experiences night-terrors and imagines the wind and snow as penetrating forces. The wind assailing Laura in the night evokes terrors and fascinations from *all* the prior books—the scream of the panther in the woods, the wolves circling her house, the "Indian war whoops" in Kansas, and the mutinous crowd of the railroad (2008c, p. 187). These hauntings swirl inside Laura and she knows it, chiding herself for the rupture she feels between inside fears and outside reality, "But she knew she heard only the voices of the blizzard wind" (p. 187). Perceiving all threats to her security as ungovernable chaos embodied by the wind, Laura imagines it breaking through her roof "squealing, chuckling, laughing a deep Ha! Ha!" (p. 225) At once signaling Laura's growth into and fear of sexual

maturity, registered by the entrance of Almanzo and her shifting attention to his horses, the vacillation of the horses in this book between obedience and rebellion to the men tells the story of facets occurring in Laura, as the family almost starves due to Pa's settlement dreams. Laura is entirely inside in this novel, and the novel bears the effect of a Gothic nightmare in the tradition of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Almanzo takes the narrative outside while Laura is buried inside, both reproducing and altering patterns of Pa and Ma from the beginning of the series. In fact, like a Gothic novel such as *Jane Eyre*, by the end of the series Almanzo is physically debilitated and his dreams of independent farming, critiqued by Laura, are shown to be just that: dreams.

As she transitions from Pa to Almanzo in both external and internal blizzards, Laura sees Almanzo as a ticket to the outside and a more mobile existence. Replicating her view of his horses skating by her family's cramped and threatened house in *The Long Winter*, in *These Happy Golden Years* she spots Almanzo and his horses through a blizzard encircling the schoolhouse where she teaches, which is another enclosed space for Laura (Wilder, 1971a). Quite literally, Almanzo represents a transition from the cramped domestic sphere, shuttling her between her temporary home stay while teaching and her family's home. Prince and Lady facilitate their courtship throughout this book, and Laura and Almanzo form a marriage notably egalitarian in their decision-making. The relationship appears to answer the difficulty of horses working together in *The Long Winter*, which could symbolize questions about Ma and Pa in their fixed roles even though on the surface their skill sets, from button lamps to grinding wheat with a coffee mill, pull the family through. *The Long Winter* presents a real crisis for Laura both in terms of the failure of the settlement myth and her sense of Gothic terror at being buried alive in domestic space, a symbol for dependence on men if she uncritically imbibes domesticity. But rather than express this or reservations about her parents directly, her awakening sexual maturity and questions about couples are expressed by animals that simultaneously represent her need for material success and a good match or team.

The horses are also a tool to negotiate a safe sexual pathway for the maturing Laura, while still maintaining moments of wildness and essential personality. Once safely married, Almanzo presents his new bride with a horse of her own, "something for you to play with." Laura and Trixy spend many hours "making friends" and learning to fox trot together. Laura and Almanzo even race their horses, and Trixy wins, allowing a flirtatious play between the newlyweds as they become acquainted. Trixy is faster and therefore a challenge. Under the capable and watchful eye of her husband, who both replicates and revises the role of Pa, Laura is able to exercise her increasing vigor while riding Trixy, a vigor that has at times been suppressed by her mother and father. If we read the horse as a symbol of sexuality, we can see that she is able to explore a sensual relationship in a safe and respectful realm, unlike the chaotic and dangerous sphere of Lena's bareback riding experience. The couple also breeds Lady and Prince, a foregrounding of their own future offspring.

Laura is seldom very sentimental, except when it comes to the landscape she loves and to her family's survival. Therefore, an overt, sexual or physical attraction

to or desire for Almanzo would not be fitting for the practical Laura; an attraction and association with Almanzo based on his material strengths—represented by the horses—does. As Laura approaches adolescence, she begins to consider her options in a practical way. The horses wed the notion of freedom and escape from Pa's poverty with the realistic promise of wealth and prosperity. However, the series actually ends where it begins in many ways. In *The First Four Years*, Almanzo has inherited Pa's restless spirit and obedience to the Western myth of independence, while Laura questions this, saying, "a farm is such a hard place for a woman… I don't always want to be poor and work hard while the people in town take it easy and make money off us" (Wilder, 1971b, p. 4). Almanzo counters this, insisting that the farmer is more independent, controlling his income through labor; Laura agrees to try farming for three years as a trial. But Almanzo's faith turns out to be challenged when he contracts diphtheria and becomes disabled because he works despite the doctor's orders. In other words, it is blind obedience to the myth of independence that disables him, suggesting another failure of faith in the untempered ideology of Manifest Destiny. The moment Almanzo is paralyzed, though, the two complete the indoor chores together, suggesting a balance possible but yet to be achieved and negotiated in the context of farming roles. If the *Little House* series demonstrates one thing for certain, it is that homes are always porous and can be invaded from within or without, from nature or from culture, from grasshoppers or governments. The trope of being "unhoused," as Romines put it, is therefore a recurrent feature of the series, both idealized and feared; animals who are simultaneously "self" and "not self" effectively bear the brunt of the wife and mother in need of settlement by definition yet deeply unsatisfied by both its practical problems and ideology.

Conclusion: An Unsettling Series

If Jack provides a comfort for Laura as she learns that she needs to embrace settlement on the outside and hide inside excitements, griefs, and fears, then through the socially acceptable working animal of a horse, Laura finds a means of expression and resistance. Just as Jack expresses what Laura cannot, the horses articulate an unspoken need for both freedom and stability, independence and dependence; these are paradoxical needs that need not be given up. As Charles Frey articulates, "Laura becomes such an interesting child protagonist not only because of her spread-out gender affiliations or interests but also because she inhabits so intensely both the child's instinctive longing for comfy securities and a daring drive toward mystery and change" (Frey, 1987, p. 127). The adult Laura is no different but she knows how to negotiate her paradoxical drives. The *Little House* series negotiates the tensions between inside and outside, mobility and stagnation, open and closed spaces, all of which occur inside Laura. The series portrays the inner journey upon which a young woman embarks as an unexplored frontier.

Laura is a prime example of the new field of posthumanist inquiry because "Laura comes to the realization that she is not separated from nature, that as a human being she is, instead, a part of it. Through her growth and perception of the

prairie world, she has come to know herself, and her position in relation to the world" (Spaeth, 1982, p. 23). Although the status of pets in animal studies has come under attack, many critics feel the picture of domesticated animals is more complicated than simple subjection:

> [T]he Marxist framework that regards domestication as a process of intentional shaping and oppression has become less tenable… The thesis published by Lynn Margulis in 1966 that symbiosis is a driving force of evolution, despite its initial rejection by mainstream biologists, has recently become a central idea of evolutionary biology. Drawing on these biological models, anthropologists have promoted a model of coevolution that views domestication as a symbiotic and dynamic relationship between human and animals independent of either's forethought or conscious intent and that potentially ascribes agency to both. (Weil, 2012, pp. 57–58)

The horse as a symbol and an extension of Laura is especially potent because of the ways that the horse itself embodies many binaries: a domestic animal that is meant for work, yet a wild thing that wants to run and not be tamed. In the settling of the series in Laura's marriage and life as a farmer, there is a sacrifice, a putting away of childish dreams and rebellions. In moving from the symbol of Jack to the symbol of the horse, the text provides a resolution to the question of Laura's rebellions, satiating her within the domestic sphere, while allowing for her continual depiction of the settlement myth as an idea more than a possibility. This is, in fact, symbiotic coevolution that likely applies to the genre of children's literature as it negotiates the paradox between autonomy and acculturation.

Although the fields of race and gender studies enact a struggle in reading the *Little House* series because Wilder cannot adequately capture the humanity of non-whites, the fields of disability, childhood, and animal studies shift the boundaries of study to reveal Laura's active negotiations of the world she inherits and sorts. In the end of *The First Four Years*, the disabled Almanzo is challenged to answer whether farming is a success and he cannot answer Laura's question; all he can do is list their many species of animals and discuss getting more (Wilder, 1971b). Animals anchor them while the land cannot. This is because in our view it is the animal figure, never fully settled and never fully under human control, that best expresses Wilder's position in relation to the frontier myth, just as it is the animal that pushes forth our critical inquiry in the concept of the humanities today.

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