

CHILDHOOD, NATURE, AND THE EVOLVING FRONTIER IN LAURA INGALLS WILDER'S *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE* BOOK SERIES

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between children and nature in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* Book Series within the context of changing American frontier and the pioneer life. The article draws on ecocriticism, ecofeminism and posthumanism to trace the changing lives of young female characters in the series particularly focusing on the development of environmental awareness and renewed understanding of nature as they mature, become resilient and independent. The article argues that through its portrayal of childhood encounters with an unpredictable natural environment and an evolving American frontier, the series reveals how ecological adversity simultaneously cultivates children's resilience, practical maturity, environmental consciousness, and ethical sensitivity towards non-human life, while exposing the complex interplay between human dependence on nature, the transformative pressures of settlement and technological advancement.

INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism of children's environmental literature began with the special issue of *The lion and the Unicorn* in 1995 and later with the publication of Sid I Dobin and Kenneth B Kidd's *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Eco-criticism* in 2004. The purpose of these publications was pedagogic: to bring children into awareness of their relationship with the environment. Ecocritical perspectives on children and young adult literature narratives are of central importance to our relationships with other humans and non-humans as well as the broader environment. With the Ecocritical theory many environmental themes and concerns come to surface which show how children engage with the physical environment like weather, location and consequently what moral choices towards nature do they make. Apart from ecological issues, it also explores the types of environment experienced by children, and the role children can play in protecting the environment. This article investigates the extent to which the novel *The Long Winter* written for children and young adults by Laura Ingalls Wilder reflect environmental concerns with a detailed focus on environmental crisis and the intersecting perspectives on animals and women in relation to their environment.

The nineteenth century setting of Laura Ingalls Wilder's pastoral Series marks the early era of literature around the world. Her novels can rightly be studied as the stepping stone towards the modern green theories like Naturalism and Ecocriticism which are profusely applied to late nineteenth century literary narratives. Laura Ingall's novels rightly depict America's historical conception of the environment. By the late eighteenth

century, the fondness for American frontiers by the English entrepreneurs and elite is a proof itself that American land is promising for its fertility and abundance. “Environment is extremely important to American Naturalism, providing not only the backdrop for action but functioning as a central force that shapes and limits characters” (Buell, 1989, p. 36). Environment has captured American imagination since the time of Emerson and Thoreau. One of the biggest influences was the prominent movement of Naturalism in America that began from around 1885 and lasted roughly till 1925. The movement was an attempt to lessen the gap between the American Renaissance and the Modernist period. The basic tenet of Naturalism was the effect of physical factors in shaping the fate of the characters. In this regard the interest in Determinism increased. Determinism as a sub branch of Naturalism that studies how particular set of environmental factors give rise to a specific outcome. Nature plays a very important role in determining the destiny of the people living on the land. Physical factors like weather, geography, and quality of land affect the living standard of the settlers which ultimately has an impact on the economics of the family. *The Long Winter* as the title is self-suggestive, centers around the climatic change that does not only bring out man’s affinity with nature but also foregrounds man’s ability to cope with unfavourable circumstances.

The main plot of the novel *The Long Winter* revolves around the hardships faced by the Ingalls family in the wake of seven months long oppressive coldness and biting frost. Snow blizzards create a havoc for the settlers. The girls have to assist Pa in bringing twisted hay inside the house from getting wet and to be used for keeping the house warm. The girls couldn’t go to school. There is an acute shortage of food to an extent that after five months of howling snow, the Ingalls family could only afford to have one biscuit with a cup of tea as a meal. During hard winter, the prices of wheat and kerosene become very high. As a sack of wheat flour is sold for 50 dollars, Pa brings raw wheat home to be grinded manually by the women. The normal flow of life is constantly disrupted by the blizzards. As snow has covered the prairies, it is difficult to find ways. Due to grass slough, the horses constantly fall through the snow and it becomes difficult for Pa to hitch them back onto the sled. Sometimes the family has to dig the hay out of the snow drift. On the question of environmental crisis, John Gray writes “The destruction of the natural world is not the result of the global capitalism, industrialization, western civilization or any flaw in human institutions. It is the consequence of the evolutionary success of an extremely rapacious primate. Throughout history and prehistory, human advancement has coincided with ecological devastation” (2002, p. 7). In *The Long Winter*, Pa is really glad that there are no trees on the Dakota prairies not even sprouts, unlike *The Big Woods* where Pa has to “grub many sprouts from the clearing” (p. 161). Everywhere around the prairies trees are cut down to build towns and railway tracks. New settlements and markets for the supply of essential items are continuously being constructed.

The practical problems of agricultural living owing to environmental changes, illicit a different response from the children as compared to the assumed response of children belonging to the Romantic and Classical period. In the novel *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the swarm of grasshoppers chop down every blade of grass in the wheat fields. The Ingalls family has to face a major financial set back as Pa is relying on the harvest of wheat to pay off the house loan and to feed his cattle. The unexpected changes in the environment change the fortune of the humans. After the grasshopper attack on the fields, Pa’s crop is chopped to the ground. The cattle that was “eating a deal dry grass left from last Summer” (p. 181) after the grasshopper storm when it rained, “stopped bawling ...and gave more milk” (p. 190). When the hard frost comes, the train ceases to arrive in the prairie town. The town people find it very difficult to get food for their survival. Almanzo and his brother go to the nearby town to fetch grain on their horses. The task of train is done by the horses.

Nature fills the gaps left by the machine. However humans are living constantly at the mercy of nature. They have to keep adjusting to and coping up with the sudden changes in the weather.

Stacy Alaimo's observes that Ecocriticism has ignored monstrous natures, directing its attention towards texts that portray nature more favourably. However, the ecocritical reading of *The Long Winter* reveals that Laura Ingalls presents nature in the most disquieting ways for the settlers as well. Natural calamities like the hard frost destabilise human control. Nature's violence and inhospitable occurrences weaken man's interest in nature emotionally and physically. However such harsh encounters with nature unleash man's capacity to tame nature and bring it down to his own use in any way possible. Since *The Long Winter* is a historic fiction, the hard frost is a reality and not a backdrop or a framing device in the novel as Lawrence Buell puts it in *Environmental Imagination*. Nature by turns becomes a delight and an environmental threat, challenge for the Ingalls and the rest of the settlers and thus this character of nature portrayed has "the potential to challenge normative relationships between humans and the natural world" (Marx, 1964, p. 9). This developing consciousness and investigation into the shifting relation between man and his environment owing to natural disasters as well as man's use of nature raise assumptions about the supremacy of nature over man and vice versa.

Cicero explains the post-industrial relation between man and his environment in these words "We are the absolute masters of what the earth produces. We enjoy the mountains and the plains....We sow the seeds and plant the trees....in short, by our hands and various operations in this world we endeavor to make it another nature." (Jacques, 2015, p. 122) This statement invites debate on nature's subservience to humans. Ever since Industrialization, man's complete harmony with nature has been in direct clash with his battle for survival. Human consumption of nature puts them at odds with his natural environment. Considering plants and animals as natural resources, and the whole natural world as raw material, develops into a hierarchy whereby the natural world is at the service of human beings. However, Lynn White Jr. in his essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" argues, We shall have continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man" (Jacques, 2015, p. 113). This love for nature for its own sake can only be found in child fiction. No selfish motive and use of physical environment is done solely for the purpose of consumption and exploitation. If natural objects are made use of, the children reciprocate by loving, caring and acknowledging pastoral surroundings. Various child fictions negate this idea, showing an innocent affinity and respect for nature. *The Secret Garden* and *The Little House Series* show similarity in the presentation of nature which is placed on a high pedestal. When the Ingalls family stations at Silver Lake as shown in the novel *By the Shores of Silver Lake* , Laura and Mary strolls around Big Slough that near the Lake. As Laura pushes herself into the slough grasses, "she wanted to go on and on, into the slough among the wild ducks" (p.78). In the novel *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, a ten years old girl Mary Lennox, is led to a secret garden in her uncle's house. When she is in the garden "She had been actually happy all the time ...and felt as if she had found a world all her own" (p. 77). Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* writes, "Nature is only valued in terms of its usefulness to us" (p. 21). For an emerging entrepreneur, and capitalists this might be true, but what differentiates children from adults is their capacity and innocence to attach selflessly to physical nature. At the same time, these narratives for children also inculcate in them reverence for nature as something which they can make use of but can't take complete control of. After analyzing ecological texts such as Harry Potter series, Zoe Jacques considers these texts as "reinforcing to young readers the limitations of human power over their environment" (p.178).

Stalin's government from 1928 to 1932 started a propaganda to popularize ecological doctrine advocating the maximum but safe use of nature to promote socialist concerns for the public. Maxim Gorky, the Stalinist and

the leading novelist who had a keen interest in child fiction, coined the slogan “man, in transforming nature, transforms himself.” (p. 301 book in reference) The basic premise of *Laura Ingalls and Stalin* is the same which accepts the justification of integrating nature and technology but where the Stalinists make a conquest for nature a priority over its protection, *Laura Ingalls* seems to reject nature’s subordination to humans. Her depiction of natural landscape is not dispassionate and demeaning towards nature. *Laura Ingalls* is a firm believer in the fact that nature’s value cannot be measured and limit only in relation to its usefulness for humans nor for her nature is a hindrance which is to be overcome. Though winter is oppressive and harsh, the child characters do not become resentful of it. They still express a deep respect for nature.

George Session in his book *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* believes that “The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes....The flourishing of nonhuman life requires a smaller human population” (1995, p. 68). The statement by Session performs two-fold purpose. It does not only reinforce the idea of non-human world having a value irrespective of human use, it also considers pastoral living as a way of protecting nature. More human population means for Session, more destruction of nature. Turning wilderness into an agrarian land, is an act that ensures and preserves natural environment. In the *Little House Series*, the young farmer and *Laura* male counterpart, *Almanzo Wilder* has a thriving farmland. He keeps on growing more crops and trees. Like other settlers and the local farmers, *Almanzo* plants acres of land for a plentiful harvest. *Almanzo* at the age of seventeen raises wheat in Minnesota and makes a good crop. In order to claim a Homestead, he also farms crops in Plum Creek prairies and invests in acres of land to grow vineyards in the novel *These Happy Golden Years*.

Over pouring rains, scorching heat, bright spring, keep on changing the facet of the pastoral landscape from brown to green to colourful hues. Children experiencing nature in all its forms: from friendliness to hostility, from productivity to scarcity. The ideal of nature as an object of worship is broken. At the same time, nature always retains its capacity to provide subsistence. In *The Long Winter*, Pa kills a wild rabbit for dinner when the family has no penny to arrange food. When Pa asks Ma on his return from threshing as to what is needed from the town, she replies “They had eaten so many fish and potatoes that the flour still holding out and the sugar and even the tea” (p. 239). *Laura’s* family hunts rabbits and slaughters roosters and sheep for domestic meals. They sow wheat and raise corn to feed themselves. Nature is central to their life, a means for survival and sustenance. However as it is already discussed that if nature is used for a living, it is in return also safeguarded by *Laura* and her family. In analyzing man’s relation with nature, the theory of Posthumanism like Ecocriticism, provides answers to many queries and attempts to establish the idea that nature and man in existing together, leave behind the question of supremacy. Kathy Rudy explains that Posthuman as “newest rubbing born into the family of continental philosophy” works to “chase down the mystery of communication between organism and environment and to detail exactly how humans are a part of nature, not above or beyond it” (Jacques, 2015, p. 10).

The preservation of the natural environment is quintessential to ecological studies. *Laura Ingall’s* portrayal of nature inadvertently stands up for saving nature. Though the *Little House Series* is written many years before the introduction of the theory of Eco-criticism, her novels provide a great insight and information as to how important it is to preserve natural resources including animals. The preservation of animals in their natural habitat forms one of the remarkable standpoints of her novels, which rightly promote ecological concerns. In rural areas, building of towns takes place when the trees are cut which is detrimental to the existence of different species of animals. Since the late 19th century marks the early phase of industrialization, these environmental and zoological issues have been cropping up and are made part of the fiction of the time. In

On *The Banks of Plum Creek*, Pa sets up traps for muskrat, mink, otter and fox to keep his woodpile safe for winter but he doesn't do so for the beaver meadows "because so few beavers were left" (p. 241). Laura and Carrie stroll around in the snowy weather by the railroad camp in the novel *On the Shores of Silver Lake*. To her surprise, Laura encounters an old buffalo wolf sitting on the cliff top. Pa, later next morning, goes out hunting the wolves but finds them nowhere. He reasons out with his family saying "Buffalo wolves were all over this country once, but there's not many left now, even around here. The railroads and settlements kept driving them farther west" (p. 172). While Laura is sitting in the hay field in *The Long Winter* all at one place she sees gophers, gesters, dragon-fly, hawks, and snakes: the creatures which are almost extinct from the human settlements due to constant devastation of the wilderness. It is the process of industrialization that most animals are on the verge of extinction.

Animals are a common feature of childhood stories. Ecology speaks of kindness to animals. Greg Garrard *Ecocriticism*, discusses the man-animal relation in an essay entitled "Animals". He writes "Study of the relation between animals and humans in the humanities is split between the analysis of the representation of animals in history and culture, or animal studies, and the philosophical consideration of animal rights" (p. 146). Greg Garrard in a very subtle manner highlights the indifference of humans towards animals as the portrayal of animals does not advocate their rights. But as a child fiction writer, Laura Ingalls's depiction of animals is quite profuse since animals are part of nature, existing freely in wilderness. In the context of animal rights, it becomes pertinent to look at Pa's attitude towards wild animals in the novel which has the impact on children. In *The Long Winter*, during the period of long blizzards, a few red steers' heads freeze under the blowing snow and Pa breaks the ice off their heads, so they could breathe and drift away. Pa also finds a little auk that happens to fall in their shed. He keeps the bird for a few days till it gets back to flying. In fact the basic love and interest in animals of different species is instilled by Pa in the minds of the children. In the novel *By the Shores Of Silver Lake* Laura's favourite pastime is to hear the Biblical story in which Adam is naming the animals. Pa often carries little girls on his lap telling them about the stories of ferocious animals to create excitement and amusement for the children. "Sitting before the oven, he took Grace on his knee and hugged Carrie close to him, and he told them the stories of beards and panthers that he used to tell Laura and Mary" (p. 161).

The distinctive feature of Laura Ingalls's representation of animals in her child fiction is that it is non-anthropomorphic. Greg Garrard writes, "The most popular form of crude anthropomorphism is found in children's books. Anthropomorphic animal narratives are generally denigrated as childish, thereby associating a dispassionate, even alienated perspective with maturity" (p. 155). Since *The Little House Series* is a historical fiction, Laura Ingalls presents reality. Though the depiction of talking animals is a work of imagination, it nonetheless serves the purpose of showing the innate connection between animals and children on the basis of childlikeness. Instead of Anthropomorphic technique, Laura Ingalls however shows this connection on the basis of compassion. Laura and Mary take care of the animals in the shed. Laura secretly nurtures the desire of keeping the ducks to the lake throughout the year in *On the Shores of Silver Lake*. Furthermore as Greg Garrard highlights that anthropomorphic narratives entail the element of immaturity, therefore it does not align with Laura Ingalls's take on a pastoral child. She maintains that as these pastoral children are so drawn towards the matter of sustenance and survival that their sense of practicality prevents them from being childishly sentimental. With the changing times, the children's attitude towards animals also evolve into one of maturity.

In his book *Children's literature and the Posthuman*, Zoe Jacques writes "It is perhaps no accident that children and animals share a rhetorical and restrictive linguistic stereotype: the expressions "behaving like an animal"

or “acting childishly” operate as negative ...which operates outside of the civilized or socially acceptable” (2015, p. 26). Animals and children are universally considered untamed, uncultivated like wilderness itself. Laura Wilder’s description of animals does the same to animals what it does for children: never lowering them in stature and importance. Laura Wilder advocates compassion for animals by not positioning them inferior. She shows children becoming more benevolent towards non-human others. Her child characters are resourceful and successively become wiser in assisting adults. Likewise, her presentation of animals evoke sympathy and concern. There is no such instance in her novels where the children Laura, Mary and Carrie beating or teasing animals. Rather the girls are always chasing and observing little animal species wherever they happen to find them. In *The Long Winter*, Laura urges her father not to kill jackrabbits that have come to their stable to live on their hay. She says, imploring “When they came because they had to, they had to find shelter” (p. 53). Laura has a pet dog Jack that stays with the family for seven years. When the family is preparing to leave to Dakota Territory in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura knows that the old dog is too tired to walk all the way under the wagon. Jack dies on the morning of departure and Pa has to console Laura saying “Don’t cry. He has gone to the Happy Hunting Grounds” (p. 13). Bradford says “an ecological democracy in which human subjects listen to what the non-human world has to say ...the child is constructed as an environmental subject open to reformulation and change through intersection and empathy” (p. 119). Laura Ingall’s presentation of animals is evidently sympathetic. What makes it seem faintly paradoxical is Pa’s hunting excursions when placed alongside the idea of moral considerations for animals. Pa often goes out to kill geese or rabbits in order to feed themselves. On the Christmas Eve, “(Pa) intended to have the biggest jack rabbit in the territory for the Christmas dinner” (Wilder, p. 177). Furthermore everyday Laura and Ma scald the skin of the ducks and geese that Pa kills for dinner at the Silver Lake. Hunting being a traditional pastoral activity comes in direct contradiction with the ecological pursuit of saving animals and Laura Ingalls’ text in a light hearted manner, draws attention to this issue. Greg Garrard refers to John Berger’s essay “Why Look at Animals?” in which Berger believes that when we look at animals, they may return our gaze, and in that moment we are aware of both likeness and difference. Hence the peasant “becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away his pork” (p. 152).

Another Eco critical concern that comes to the forefront in the novel *The Long Winter* is Ecofeminism. The term emerged in 1974, with the coining of the term ‘l’eco f’eminisme’ by Francoise d’Eaubonne. The study encompasses the status of women in relation to nature. Alice Curry calls it “a strategic response” to all those practices that result in the demeaning treatment of women, the natural environment and other marginalized categories. Curry’s account of Ecofeminism is seconded by Cecilia Harles as she believes that the underlying association between women and the natural world “can operate as a source of both subjugation and resistance, exploitation and inspiration.” (Garrard p. 109) Greta Garrard writes, “Children’s Environmental Literature” writes “Ecofeminism is a perspective that sees social and environmental problems as fundamentally interconnected. Beginning with a recognition that the position and treatment of women, animals and nature are not separable” (2009, p. 323). The various perspectives by the writers and Eco feminists seem to converge to the common standpoint that women and the natural environment need to be valued and acknowledged with as much importance as patriarchy and science. Laura Ingalls penning down her Series during the early twentieth century, already entered the phase of second wave of Feminism. Her novels yield a new insight into the changing dynamics of gender binary as a result of changing socio-economic milieu of the American pastoral frontiers. Her female characters whether young or adult are invested with strength and wisdom to carry out and support their families. The new responsibilities dawned upon the Kansas settlers form an

enigmatic view of females. The females find themselves at the cross section of economics and conventional pastoral set up that put them in a changing sphere of gender roles.

Males are often associated with wilderness and females with the frontier experience. Leslie Fielder writes, "Wilderness in American writing serves as a liminal site for male self-fulfillment in recoil from adult responsibility associated with female-dominated culture in the settlements." (Garrard, p. 67) With the new arrangement of pioneer settlements, men become more accustomed to finding means of livelihood as well as self-fulfillment out in the open fields and prairies, whereby empowering women and entrusting them with the authority within the settlements. Ecofeminism reading of the text *The Long Winter* seems to break the conventional pattern of patriarchal domination which always manifests itself in downright violence and exploitation. Laura's father is the central figure of the family. Every chapter of the novel ends with Pa's singing over a fiddle. Every day the whole family makes preparations for Pa's meals and travels to different prairies and shanties. From cutting the hay to protecting the animals, Pa is the guide, and the mentor. However as Fielder points out, at the domestic level, Ma is the decision maker. The personality of their Mother, Caroline, called Ma in the novel, is the role model for the Ingalls sister to follow. Her housekeeping skills and sagacity is the backbone of the family amid varied crisis that the family has to go through. She compels her daughters to take admission in the nearby school. She manages the meals and gives a listening ear to her husband. Ma in *The Long Winter* is an epitome of a traditional female role who also urges her daughters to keep up this culture. According to Holly Blackford, "The cooking goddess of Big Woods represents an important rival to Pa's artistry- his storytelling, his fiddling." (p. 149). Annette Kolodny argues that many women writers produced fiction showing the dream of Arcadia emerging out of frontier experience. She writes "The mid-nineteenth century American Adam and Eve, turning wilderness or prairie into a communal garden of domesticity" ("Unsettling Ma", p. 226)

Ma exercises great authority at the domestic front which affects the way the girls are trained and brought up. From a passive, evasive children of the pre-industrial age, the girls show more maturity and knowledge that ushers in a different and as Holly Blackford calls "adultified children" (p. 152). Belen Martin Lucas uses the term "pioneer heroic survival" (2011, p. 156) for females like Laura when she has to face hunger and dislocation as a migrant. Poverty of their childhood along with hunger for adventure develop endurance and initiative in Laura as a little girl. Though the gender roles are still specifically demarcated in these novels, their domain becomes wider and less restrictive. Laura and Mary are readily sent to the prairie schools for getting education. The exigencies of frontier living force the sisters into tasks that are associated with males. They help Pa in shearing and cutting of the wheat, in looking after the cattle. Laura helps in milking the cows at the age of seven in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and even in later novels like *The Happy Golden Years*, which is seventh in the Series, Laura becomes a school teacher and supports her family financially. In this way the androcentric control of the text loses its grip, endowing young female characters with alacrity and juvenile discretion. The environment favours the female characters to step out of the limited confines of the homesteads and be the participants in the workforce of the family. By utilizing their mental domain of reason and rational, these young women dissolve many long standing gender binaries that have been sustained by the culture of domination.

The construction of childhood nature relate has long been taken as male specific. Owain Jones discusses the very nature of childhood itself in his article "Tomboy Tales: The Rural, Nature and the Gender of Childhood". He writes "The claim that childhood is constructed as natural and male, leads quickly to problematic encounters with some aspects of (eco)feminism where associations of women and women area strong theoretical theme"(1991, p. 118). Another practical aspect of child-nature relationship comes to the

forefront which pertains to the upbringing of young females. The outdoor activities that often young female characters are shown to take up, makes these female characters identified as “quasi boys through the label tomboy” (p. 118). He further says “My proposition is that male children are constructed as ‘natural’ and able to beat one with nature, and therefore that childhood itself is male” (p. 119). Laura conforms to the gender norms yet has a liminal status. The concept of ‘tomboy’ that came with *Little Women* can be aptly applied to the personality of Laura. Laura like Jo in *The Little Women* is courageous, a quality that qualifies a girl as masculine. However it is to be noted that the idea of tomboyishness is not perceived here in terms of physical aspect. It is the taking up and reconciling with the new and outdoor chores that the new settler women had to go through. Pa is an inspiration for the girls as they appear to take great delight in Pa’s presence and activities. For Bich Nguyen “While Mary is Ma’s daughter, Laura is Pa’s Like her father Laura has an itchy wandering foot, a desire to keep pushing on to see what lands lie beyond the horizon” (Lucas, p. 157). Laura envies Adam. Her favourite preoccupation on Sundays is to read the book *The Wonders of the Animal World* in which Adam names different animals. When her mother tells her that Adam would wear nothing else but skins, “Laura did not pity Adam. She wished she had nothing to wear but skins” (Wilder, p. 146). Laura when she is confined to her house because of extreme winter, contemplates on the limits she has as a woman, and admires the exploits of Almanzo Wilder, a young man with a promising agrarian set up. Almanzo emerges as a hero of the novel as he journeys across a frozen prairie in order to get wheat from some other land owner. Laura is often seen outdoors, having a deep attraction for all that is part of nature to the minutest details. At the start of the novel, *The Long Winter*, Laura takes a water pail to the wheat crop where Pa is mowing the grass. She observes nature minutely “swarms of little white butterflies hovered over the path. A dragon-fly with gauzy wings swiftly chased a gnat, On the stubble grass the gophers were scampering” (p. 1).

In the article “American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised” Lawrence Buell writes, “Writers of both sexes commonly picture the early childhood stage of both sexes as a stage of natural piety” (1989, p. 29). William Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode, W.B. Yeats’ Songs of Innocence and many child fiction works like *The Secret Garden*, *The Railway Children* make no distinction between girls and boys and their attachment and likeness to nature. What makes child fiction distinct from adult fiction is its capacity to surpass various gender issues that are confronted by mature women. During the course of the novel *The Long Winter*, Laura as a child though feels fatigued but never loses her interest and capacity to derive pleasure from nature.

Annia Prat marks that the females at the onset of adolescence, feel special attraction in natural surroundings. Taking possession of nature, she possesses herself” (Lucas, p. 17). For Laura Ingalls, this connection of nature with adolescent girls is quite similar to the bond shared by nature with children. The children wallow in childlike fantasy amidst nature. The pastoral landscape for them is a place for living which provides food as well as pleasure. The family orientation which emerges with the blend of technology and pastoral dissolves false divides between the categories of man and woman, nature and culture, human and non-human. The basic tenet that is instrumental in loosing these strict binaries is children. However it is noticeable that the realization of the actual difficulties faced by the women make them feel constricted to the environment. *The Long Winter* is abound with female realities: food and housekeeping. As a gender counterpart of Almanzo, Laura’s confinement to the house with the burden of household chores, attests the gender boundaries. As these girls are growing up into young ladies, these pubescent females Laura and Mary realize their true space which is within the four walls of their house. This shows that children feel freer to engage with nature in any way they like and are made of as far as they are children. But as they grow up, they become more acutely aware of the essential difference between male and female and the cultural constructions that confine them to certain limits.

In lieu of the difference between child and adult association with nature, Shel Silverstein's narrative *The Giving Tree* reinforces the idea of children being closer to nature as compared to adults. Moreover, the story also aligns with both feminism and ecology since it seems to be drawn on the ecological thought of preserving forests. A little boy is deeply attached to a big apple tree, "the boy loved the tree" (2015, p. 127). The boy would eat her apples and make a crown of her leaves. But the strong bond would become distanced as the boy grows up. The Edenic relationship is reduced only to his coming to his native town from the city once a while, so "the tress was often alone" (p. 128). When the boy reaches his middle age, he wants the stump of the tree to build a house for his family. The consumptive desire of the boy is destructive for the natural environment. Now that he is an adult, he values the tree not as a source for comfort but a resource to be used as a commodity. Greta Garrard figures out the informative concern of the writer here, saying that "Part of the point is that nature cannot show man when he is being pitiful in his negotiations with the natural world-man, and by implication the child reader, must be able to determine that on his own" (p. 129).

Another ecological theme that the story implicitly exhibits is the total disregard of man towards women as well as nature. The title the giving tree itself gives the stature of Mother Nature to the tree. At one place, when the young boy is a complete destitute, the tree offers its fruit to him "Take my apples Boy, and sell them in the city" (p. 128). This gendering of the relationship clearly places nature like women, on an inferior position, one that is to be dominated and effaced. Greta Garrard writes that *The Giving Tree* "stands in for all-sacrificing mother in a hetero-patriarchal culture, and the narrative constructs humanity as a narcissistic little boy who keeps asking more and more of nature until there's nothing left" (p. 128). The tress here serves as the representation of nature universally being exploited by humanity like women who are constantly being subjugated by men. In comparison to Silverstein's story where the setting keeps on shifting between the rural and the urban set up. *The Long Winter* presents an agrarian living where the pastoral land though undergoes immense topographical transition, never loses its importance and fascination for the settlers. Pastoral resources are utilized and preserved simultaneously by the farmers. Though the female characters are shown to be still holding on to traditional housework, their domain of responsibility and freedom is wider to an extent that these women don't feel exploited. Pa's constant appreciation for Laura and Ma's influential presence for the daughters prevent creating the atmosphere of estrangement and repression. Pa often seems to appreciate Ma on her way of thinking as in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Ma disapproves of not having any school down Plum Creek, to which Pa replies "You're right, Caroline. You usually are" (242). Furthermore, Pa only asks Ma to take a walk down with him after dinner and children "watched Ma and Pa starting gaily away...and (Ma) looked up at Pa so merrily that Laura thought she was like a bird" (p. 242).

According to Lawrence Buell, an ecologically oriented text is one that shows "Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least given in the text" (p. 8). *The Long Winter* justly qualifies as an ecological text. The pastoral land she portrays keeps on going through environmental changes which involve weather and most importantly the structural change that comes with modern means of production and the railway. This eco-centric way of approaching green writing contributes in finding new and lasting ways to understand nature and humanity's relation to it. By grounding her environmental vision in protecting the environment and animals and the recognition of women's participation and presence, Laura Ingalls clearly shows "a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis," (p. 430) which work as Lawrence Buell puts it.

In conclusion, the texts explore the capacity in children at the early adolescence to analyze ecological problems in a holistic way which can be achieved through connection with and a joy in nature. By doing so, the thesis tries to establish the importance of pastoral for children which can be supported by Qwain Jones' belief that

“The countryside or any pastoral setting becomes a childhood idyll. It’s been really great bringing up kids in a natural environment. They’re sort of natural kids, and I think that’s better. I wouldn’t want to have brought them up inside [a city]. And they’re real happy kids. They love it” (p. 93).

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