

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Little Town on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie
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Interest Level: MG

Pa's homestead thrives, Laura gets her first job in town, blackbirds eat the crops, Mary goes to college, and Laura gets into trouble at school but becomes a certified schoolteacher.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Family Life, Sisters; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Series, Little House

Main Characters

- Almanzo Wilder Miss Wilder's brother; he has been homesteading and takes a liking to Laura
- Cap Garland one of the "big boys" in Laura's class
- Caroline Ingalls (Ma) Laura's mother; she is trying to bring up her daughters properly while doing all the hard work required to maintain a frontier household
- Carrie Ingalls Laura's younger sister; she admires Laura
- Charles Ingalls (Pa) Laura's father; he works hard to care for his family
- Ida Wright Brown Laura's friend and classmate; she is adopted by the Reverend and Mrs. Brown
- Laura Ingalls the main character of the story; she plans to become a teacher to help support her family
- Mary Ingalls Laura's older sister; she is blind and hopes the family can afford to send her to a special college for the blind
- Mary Power Laura's close friend and classmate
- Miss Wilder Laura's schoolteacher; she does not like Laura
- Nellie Oleson a girl whom Laura knew when she lived in Minnesota; she is not liked by the other girls because she is snobbish

Vocabulary

- affable** friendly and good-natured
- atheist** one who does not believe in the existence of God
- deportment** behavior
- hypocrite** one who deceives others; a fraud
- impudently** boldly, unashamedly
- pullets** young chickens
- reprove** to scold or disapprove

Synopsis

It is the spring of 1881, and Laura Ingalls and her family are living on a claim in the Dakota prairie. The nearby town of De Smet is growing rapidly as people come from the East to stake claims. The rapid growth is creating a town that looks crowded and ugly in contrast to the beautiful, open prairie. Laura, who is almost fifteen years old, takes a sewing job in town, hoping the money she earns will help pay for college for her blind sister, Mary. As summer turns to fall, the family prepares to move to town, where they have another building in which to live during the hard Dakota winters. Gophers and blackbirds ruin most of their crops. Laura loses her job, and Pa finishes his extra carpentry work as well. Pa sells the heifer in order to have enough money for Mary to go to college in Iowa. Everyone is sad to see her go, yet it is a time of hope and joy for Mary's sake.

Laura attends the school in town with some of her friends. She knows she must study hard if she is to become a teacher when she turns sixteen. Laura does not want to be a teacher, but she knows that her family is relying on her to help them financially. The new schoolteacher, Miss Wilder, resents Laura because Mr. Ingalls is on the school board. Nellie, a girl whom Laura knew and disliked when living in Minnesota, moves with her family to a nearby claim and also attends the school. Miss Wilder is completely unable to control the students. She blames Laura for causing the students to act up and for encouraging their unruly behavior. Eventually, Miss Wilder moves back to Minnesota, and Laura's

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school life becomes less complicated. However, she is unable to concentrate on her studies because of all the other exciting activities going on in the town. Her grades are no longer perfect, yet she is confident she will be able to pass the examination to become a teacher.

A young man, Almanzo Wilder, who is Miss Wilder's brother, begins to take an interest in Laura and escorts her home at night after town activities. Laura cannot understand why he is interested in her, but nonetheless she feels excited over his attention. Just before Christmas, the students put on an exhibition for the townspeople, in which recitations of lessons are given in front of the audience. Laura has the hardest and most important part: recounting the history of America from its discovery in 1492 through the time that the first settlers reached Kansas. She recites her part perfectly. The next day a gentleman from another town comes to ask her to be the teacher in his community. The superintendent of schools gives her the examination required for teacher certification, which she passes. The story ends with Laura, not quite sixteen years old, accepting the teaching position and preparing to leave her family by the end of the week. She is proud of her accomplishment and excited that her salary will enable Mary to have everything she needs in school.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

As the Ingalls family is packing for the move to town, Laura accidentally discovers a beautiful poetry book. As she leafs through the book and begins to read a passage, she suddenly realizes that Ma must have bought the book as a Christmas gift for Laura. Why does Laura consider confessing to Ma what she has found yet decide not to tell her?

Laura feels a deep sense of honesty and loyalty to her parents. She knows that she is expected to be forthright and honest with them at all times. Thus, she feels she would be dishonest if she does not tell them of her discovery. On the other hand, she loves Ma so deeply that she does not want to spoil the surprise that Ma is planning in giving Laura the book. Before she actually makes her decision, Ma enters the room, probably aware that Laura might accidentally find the book, and quickly shoos her out of the room. By not saying anything to Ma, her decision is made to keep the discovery a secret.

Literary Analysis

From the first day of school, Laura knows she does not like Miss Wilder, and it becomes obvious to the reader that Miss Wilder also does not like Laura. Why is Laura's relationship with Miss Wilder so difficult?

Laura has high hopes that Miss Wilder will be a good teacher. When Miss Wilder treats Carrie unfairly, Laura begins to dislike Miss Wilder. The relationship is further strained when Nellie seems to bond with Miss Wilder. Both of them are from the East and chat in the classroom during lunch while the other students play outside. Also, Miss Wilder resents Laura because Mr. Ingalls is on the school board. However, Laura realizes she must try to overlook her hatred toward Miss Wilder; she needs to do well in school in order to obtain her teaching certificate.

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Inferential Comprehension

Ma takes great pains to ensure that her daughters are dressed stylishly and neatly. Laura is very self-conscious about her appearance. Why is being stylish and fashionable important to Laura and Ma?

It is likely that the hardships of pioneer life that the family has to endure cause Ma to want to at least bring happiness to her daughters in dressing them in the style of the day. As more and more people come from the East, it is probably important to Ma to appear prosperous for the newcomers. As Laura grows older and tries to fit in and impress her peers, her appearance and styles become even more important to her.

Constructing Meaning

In chapter six, Laura is walking to town to her job sewing shirts. She describes the town as looking "like a sore on the beautiful, wild prairie." Explain how a town can look like a sore on a beautiful prairie.

Laura loves how the prairie looks and smells as she walks through it to get to her job in town. As she approaches the town, she sees the contrast of the ugly buildings, worn grass between buildings, and the piles of manure and straw rotting near the stables. On the prairie she can smell the roses and the grasses, but the town smells stale and smoky. She smells the odors of saloons and the fats from cooking. Amidst the vast expanse of the beautiful, sweet-smelling prairie, the ugly, smelly town thus looks like a blemish on the landscape.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The more Laura sees of the town, the more she notices how it is growing. As she looks at the town, she notices the false fronts, the sidewalks with hitching posts, the hotel, and the furniture store. Have the students work in pairs or threes to create a diorama of how the town might have looked at the time of the story. They can get ideas and clues from the book. The diorama can be built in a box, using construction paper for the buildings, or the

students can develop other creative ideas to construct the town. When the displays are complete, each group should point out highlights of the diorama and the reasons for designing it in that way.

Recognizing Feelings Because Mary is blind, Laura describes the beauty of sunsets and the countryside to her. Laura's heart aches that Mary sees only black. Have the students work in pairs. Each student should select an interesting picture from a magazine without letting the partner see it. Have one partner describe the picture to the other without letting the picture be seen. After the verbal description, the picture should be shown and the partners should discuss the difference between how it was described and how it was perceived. The partners should then change roles and repeat the exercise. After each partner has described and imagined, have them write down the feelings they experienced during the exercise in both roles.

Responding to Literature Laura and her friends have autograph albums and name cards. They exchange the name cards with each other and write meaningful short poems or sayings in each other's books. Have each student make an autograph album and name cards. The autograph album can be made of colored construction paper, stapled in book form with an attractive cover. The name cards should contain an image that is representative of the student and should display the student's name in an attractive style. The cards can be made on card stock, construction paper, or plain paper using a computer, crayons, or other medium. Have the students exchange cards with one another and write autographs with meaningful poems or sayings in each other's albums. After each student signs all the other autograph albums, allow for quiet time to read them silently and reflect on what they see and read.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The war of 1812 is mentioned twice in the story. Have the students do research on the war and write a two-part report. Part I should describe important elements of the war such as where the war was

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fought, who fought the war, what the issues of the war were, and who the victors and losers were. Part II should describe how that war might have affected some of the characters in the story.