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Plenary Paper: The Magic Circle of Laura Ingalls Wilder

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Plenary Paper

The Magic Circle of Laura Ingalls Wilder

Virginia Wolf (bio)

Seven years ago I left Kansas, where I grew up some twenty-five or so

miles from where the little house on the prairie once stood, to come to Wisconsin, where I now live some twenty-five or so miles from where the little house in the big woods once stood. I was glad to leave the drab plainness of Kansas for the green or white, tree-filled beauty of Wisconsin, and my gladness found expression when I wrote "The Symbolic Center: *Little House in the Big Woods*." In the first Little House book, Wilder admirably captures my feeling for the Wisconsin landscape, especially for the north woods where every winter I retreat to a rented cabin for a week of skiing and rest. Whenever I have read "The Symbolic Center," however, someone in the audience has inevitably asked me to speak about the parallels between *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie*. Finally, curiosity led me to reread the second novel, and I came full circle back to Kansas only to discover, as I continued to read the remaining five books about Wilder's growing up, how central the circle is to the meaning and structure of Wilder's series.

In "The Symbolic Center," I have, of course, already suggested that in the first Little House book a center for the circle exists in Wilder's synthesis of house and big woods, a vision of harmony arising from the fluid status of oppositions. And I note there that the novel is cyclical, moving from autumn to autumn and from Chapter 1, "Little House in the Big Woods," to Chapter 13, "The Deer in the Wood." Wilder, in other words, uses style and structure to unite the oppositions characteristic of human existence: home and universe, domesticity and wildness, light and dark, big and little, play and work, reality and dream, time and eternity. But the fundamental vehicle for this union is place—the image of a little house in the big woods.

What I did not perhaps sufficiently stress in "The Symbolic Center," on the other hand, is that the house is the focal point, the exact center in Wilder's first novel. The primary experience here is one of safety, snugness, and enclosure. The big woods are remote. We are less aware of them than of the little house. They, in fact, contribute to our sense of enclosure, blocking our view of what's distant from the little house and sheltering—even hiding—the little house from foes and strangers. We

are, therefore, less aware of the circle than of the center.

But when we turn to *Little House on the Prairie*, the situation is the exact reverse. Our attention is focused on the circle, and the center, paradoxically, becomes a moving house, a covered wagon, or a skeleton house open to the light, air, and danger of the wild, endless prairie. As Dolores Rosenblum points out, *Little House on the Prairie* is no less visionary than *Little House in the Big Woods*. Here Wilder focuses on big rather than little, universe rather than home, wildness rather than domesticity. But in both books oppositions are held in tension so that if in the second one we experience what Gaston Bachelard calls "intimate immensity," we might very well say the first one offers immense intimacy. As *Little House in the Big Woods* nurtures Laura and the reader, then, engendering the bliss of security within, *Little House on the Prairie* releases them into the universe, evoking the bliss of freedom without. The image of freedom creates the most powerful of Wilder's many magic circles. In her words, "Kansas was an endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind. Day after day they traveled in Kansas, and saw nothing but rippling grass and the enormous sky. In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the wagon was in the circle's exact middle" (13).

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by Virginia Wolf

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In "The Symbolic Center," I have, of course, already suggested that in the first *Little House* book a center for the circle exists in Wilder's synthesis of house and big woods, a vision of harmony arising from the fluid states of opposition. And I note there that the novel is cyclical, moving from autumn to autumn and from Chapter 1, "Little House in the Big Woods," to Chapter 13, "The Deer in the Wood." Wilder, in other words, uses style and structure to unite the oppositions characteristic of human existence: home and nature, domesticity and wildness, light and dark, big and little, play and work, reality and dream, time and eternity. But the fundamental vehicle for this union is place—the image of a little house in the big woods.

What I did not perhaps sufficiently stress in "The Symbolic Center," on the other hand, is that the house is the focal point, the exact center in Wilder's first novel. The primary experience here is one of safety, enclosure and enclosure. The big woods are remote. We are less aware of them than of the little house. They, in fact, contribute to our sense of enclosure, blinding our view of what's distant from

the little house and sheltering—even hiding—the little house from loss and strangers. We are, therefore, less aware of the circle than of the center.

But when we turn to *Little House on the Prairie*, the situation is the exact reverse. Our attention is focused on the circle, and the center, paradoxically, becomes a moving house, a covered wagon, or a skeleton house open to the light, air, and danger of the wild, endless prairie. As Dolores Rosenblum points out, *Little House on the Prairie* is no less visionary than *Little House on the Big Woods*. Here Wilder focuses on big rather than little, or vice versa rather than home, wildness rather than domesticity. But in both books opposites are held in tension so that in the second one we experience what Gaston Bachelard calls "intimate immensity," we might very well say the first one offers immense intimacy. As *Little House on the Big Woods* nurtures Laura and the reader, too, suspending the bliss of security within, *Little House on the Prairie* releases them into the universe, evoking the bliss of freedom without. The image of freedom creates the most powerful of Wilder's many magic circles. In his words, "Kansas was an endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind. Day after day they traveled in Kansas, and saw nothing but rippling grass and the enormous sky. In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the wagon was in the circle's exact middle" (13).

As Bachelard suggests (Chapter 10), the circle as an archetype is evocative in its capacity to suggest both movement and stasis, security and freedom. As a finite form it confines and keeps safe, but as an infinite one it frees us into the timeless eternal realm of dreams. In *Little House on the Prairie*, the circle of grass pulled from around the wagon each night prevents the possibility of prairie fire, the circle of buffalo wolves surrounding the skeleton house never attempt to get in, and the circle of bucklers around the house protects it from prairie fire. Clearly, the prairie is wild. Its inhabitants are fire, panthers, wolves, and Indians. The English are in danger as they never were in the big woods. But repeatedly the magic circle keeps them safe. The prairie, furthermore, centers Pa because "no matter how thick and close the neighbors

get, this country'll never feel crowded" (74). It, on the other hand, presents Laura with that side of life which exists in opposition to the values symbolized by the many little houses. She sees the necessity of the wolf and wants to be an Indian child. Her experience will lead her increasingly to share Pa's love for the wild and free spaces of this earth. Inarticulate as she is, we see the seeds of this love when the Indians leave the territory and Laura shames herself because she cannot suppress her desire for an Indian raposo whose "eyes are so black" (308). The eye, the circle of the soul, reflects the spaces both within and without the human being. We call the poet or the visionary a seer because we see the eye as the vehicle of the imagination. And so Laura learns "to drift over the endless waves of prairie grass" (335), staring visions of solitude, space, and freedom.

In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Wilder's purposes change. The first two books, the only ones in the series actually titled "Little House," set up the myth, the symbolic landscapes of home and wilderness yielding Wilder's vision of ideal reality. The center and circle establish the ideal dimensions of enclosure and freedom. But with *Plum Creek* both center and circle contract and fade. As Rosenblum comments, "the tendency of the series as a whole is to modulate from the narration of a mythic experience to a 'critical' reading of the myth as a cultural sign system" (78). Inner space rather than outer space, in other words, is finally Wilder's focus. In *Plum Creek* experience replaces vision as Laura's actions rather than her view of the landscape occupy Wilder's attention. Point of view begins to replace setting as a structural tool, as Wilder shifts from myth to adventure story. Setting, however, continues to function symbolically, images introducing the dramatic sense of existence to the extent that they distort and fragment the ideal image of the first two books.

Nothing is quite right in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. To be sure, moments of joy occur when, for example, Pa dunks Laura in the hole of deep water or when he returns on Christmas Eve after being out in a blizzard. The hole is, of course, a miniature circle, and any return implies a circle. What's more, the image that ends



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