

Literary Analysis

By the Shores of Silver Lake

In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura Ingalls Wilder focuses on the theme of coming of age, especially as it relates to her main character, Laura. Although this theme runs throughout the novel, it's especially apparent as Laura's role in the family changes. The novel begins with Laura's older sister, Mary, losing her sight due to scarlet fever. This directly affects Laura, who must go from being a middle child to suddenly assuming the role of the oldest and acting as Mary's eyes. It's a role she has had no experience with, and as she learns to accept it and grow to meet her responsibilities, she begins to leave childhood behind.

In previous novels in the "Little House" series, Laura and Mary have a typical sibling relationship. Mary is the oldest and is often placed in charge of Laura, such as when Pa and Ma go to town and leave them alone together in the chapter "Keeping House" in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. The two sometimes fight, and Laura plainly resents Mary's bossiness while at the same time looking up to her sister. This relationship changes at the beginning of *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, which opens with a simple description of Mary's rapidly fading eyesight and eventual blindness.

Throughout the first chapters, the reader sees the impact of Mary's blindness on the family's daily life. Mary can no longer see to care for herself, and as the family sets out on a journey to their new homestead in South Dakota, Laura's responsibilities increase. She must guide Mary carefully at the depot as they board the train. In the boarding house, she must cut Mary's meat for her at dinner and help her find her silverware and food. In the wagon that takes them farther west, she must sit on the uncomfortable end of a board seat to give Mary the safer spot in the middle. At the age of 12, Laura must suddenly make countless small adjustments to show she is responsible for Mary's safety and well-being.

Even more significantly, Laura must “see out loud” for Mary, as is described in the chapter “Riding the Cars”: “On that dreadful morning when Mary could not see even sunshine full in her eyes, Pa had said that Laura must see for her.” Being Mary’s eyes is perhaps one of the most essential duties Laura takes on. She is not only responsible for Mary’s safety and practical needs, but she must also share her outlook on the world in a way that allows Mary to experience it too. This is no light burden, although Laura carries it well.

By the end of the novel, Laura has taken on the role of eldest. She even takes over Mary’s dream of becoming a school teacher. Laura swears to Mary that she will study hard and become a teacher so she can help finance Mary’s college education. She no longer has the option of sitting back and allowing her sister to lead. Instead, she must literally guide her sister from place to place. She must offer direction with her vision and words, and she must provide a means for her sister to achieve her dreams. Although Laura is only 13 at the end of the novel, she has grown significantly in maturity due to her changing role within the family.