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# Little Bruised Backsides on the Prairie

**Abstract:** The Little House series of children's novels by the American writer Laura Ingalls Wilder is one of the most memorable literary explorations of pioneer life on the American frontier. The eight novels in the series celebrate self-reliance and initiative, and as previous research has shown, are in keeping with the Libertarian attitudes of both Wilder and her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, who is generally considered to have been her editor if not collaborator. This study applies the work of theorists Michel Foucault and Elaine Scarry to argue that the ambiguous treatment of corporal punishment in the novels tends to inadvertently question whether the American Dream as depicted by Wilder is really as free from the hand of authority as it purports to be.

**Keywords**: Laura Ingalls Wilder, Corporal Punishment, the American Frontier, *Little House on the Prairie*, Michel Foucault, Elaine Scarry.

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# Little Bruised Backsides on the Prairie

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Readers of Laura Ingalls Wilder's celebrated *Little House series* would be hard-pressed to recall any major setback for one of the principal characters that couldn't be resolved with a bit of determination and good character. There are essentially no significant defeats for any of the Ingalls family – and especially not the Wilder family, whose story of Laura Ingalls's husband Almanzo is told in the more materially upbeat novel Farmer Boy. The discipline required to keep this cornucopia of material bounty and occasional capital profit flowing is undermined several times in an interesting way. And not only does the discipline tend to direct the "worthy" scions to their destined places high in society, but also tends to inadvertently weed out those who are "unworthy."

The discipline I am referring to is the corporal punishment that Almanzo's father, James Wilder, would readily impose with a horsewhip on his nine-year-old son if the transgression were to merit the consummation, as well as that imposed on various others in the Ingalls orbit of characters. Although the threat is always implied throughout Farmer Boy, and young Almanzo seems to visualize precisely the pain that he will endure if he falters, he never actually receives a whipping in the course of the novel. James Wilder is shown as being quite adept with both horsewhips and bullwhips, not only because he raises both horses and cattle to wring a profit out of the family's upstate New York farm, but also because in a noteworthy instance he advises an acquaintance that the implement normally intended for large livestock can also be employed in the effect disciplining of recalcitrant young males.

Crucially to my argument, the elder Wilder is somewhat less inclined to apply the horsewhip occasionally to the horses and cattle which will only be spoiled if beaten than to his own sons, he essentially admits. As for the other books of the Little House series, corporal punishment is less of a presence. One might argue that this is primarily because most of the characters are girls who are relatively free of behavior problems, but I argue that there may be another explanation that can effectively tie up such seeming aporias as James Wilder's insistence that beating spoils livestock, but can nonetheless be applied with good effect to certain young people. Thus, various incidents in the Little House series reveal an overarching

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attitude toward keeping children in line on the American frontier, but may also point to a deeper insight about the nature of the American enterprise. This would explain why corporal punishment has a complicated and at times contradictory presence in the Little House series. I argue that these very contradictions demonstrate precisely how certain individuals were warmly invited to partake of the American enterprise and particularly the self-sufficiency that was praised far and wide across the fruited American plain by the late 1800s, while others were seemingly eliminated from the competition. To fuse the economic message of the Little House series with the notion of corporal punishment, I shall invoke the philosophy of Michel Foucault, and particularly his notion of the panopticon as it applies to the necessity of a harsh and painful punishment being observed by others in order to enforce conformity. Also, I will apply the insights of Elaine Scarry The Body in Pain to highlight the consequences of bodily suffering to the economic enterprise. But it is first necessary to provide a fair amount of background information on the Wilder philosophy itself.

Many longtime fans would argue that the Little House series has little agenda other than exemplifying the ways that a good child can grow up to become an integral component of American society. However, as several scholars have noted, Laura Ingalls Wilder indeed had a political agenda as part of her motivation in writing the Little House series, so we will at least need to consider whether the characters in the series are especially conservative in terms of economic outlook, and whether Almanzo and his family, as well as Laura and the Ingalls family, are all simply generic "invisible-handers" who believe that the dross of the bountiful table will fall into the laps of those who work hard enough to shake it loose from the tablecloth. But in order to delve into the economic underpinnings that the aforementioned scholars have identified as primary motivators for Wilder, we must first address the ongoing controversy about authorship.

Scholarship of the past few years has turned particularly on the question of the extent to which Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, contributed to her mother's works for children. William Holtz's 1993 biography, The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane, weighs considerably on this issue. A more recent overview of the existing opinion may be found in John E. Miller's book Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture. There is little point in rehashing the evidence other than to underscore Miller's primary argument, which seems to be that that any collaboration resulted in a final product in which the whole was arguably superior to the individual contributions. Thus, the

Little House series has inspired generations of readers, both young and adult, and if a mother and daughter's collaboration was the necessary ingredient, then the reading world is better for it.

Still, I would proffer that the question as it impacts my own thesis is essentially moot. However interesting the question may be of Lane's contributions to the Little House books, it seems certain at this point that both Wilder and her daughter were not only avid supporters of a self-sufficient lifestyle, but also that they were also passionate advocates of the notion that individual self-determination should be deemed an inherent right that should generally trump governmental machinations. As Woodside writes in a 1996 article featured on the Website politico.com, the Little House books may have been "conceived during the Great Depression as a family project to honor the nation's tough old pioneers," but soon encompassed "then-new ideas about the value of individual freedom, unfettered markets and limited government" ("How Little House"). In a separate article, Woodside eloquently outlines what the Wilders considered to be the stakes involved in Depression-era America: "[a]t a time when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was introducing the major federal initiatives of the New Deal and Social Security as a way out of the Depression, the Little House books lulled children to sleep with the opposite message" ("Little Libertarians").

In fact, Lane may have been the individual in the collaboration more steeped in political philosophy, but as Woodside writes, "[b]oth women believed fervently that the nation in the depths of the Depression had become too soft ("Little Libertarians"). Cynics might even cite a bit of hypocrisy on the part of one or both of the women, for Woodside also notes that the celebrated decision by the then-teenaged Laura Ingalls to become a schoolteacher to pay for the education of her visually impaired sister Mary was fiction and not in step with the original facts. "In reality it was the government of Dakota Territory – and not the family's hard work – that covered the bills" ("Little Libertarians").

Nonetheless, a reader of the Little House books can readily infer that American individualism and self-sufficiency are celebrated without reservation. This self-actualization may be seen clearly in light of Farmer Boy within the context of the Little House pantheon. The sense of self-reliance is every bit as strong in Farmer Boy as in any other Wilder novels, and often the material outcomes are far more successful. Although it would be unnecessary to provide a thorough enumeration, the Wilders in the course of the 340 pages engage in a number of farming, animal-raising, and textile projects to not only provide their own needs, but also in

many cases to generate a profit that can be put in the bank at a four-percent interest rate. The general term for the former activity is "subsistence farming," but Farmer Boy depicts a level of activity far beyond the mere growing and gathering of commodities for personal consumption. In fact, the Wilders seem to be involved in three types of overlapping work-related activities: those that are intended to meet their own needs, such as crop-and animal-farming, clothes-making, berry-picking, and so on; those that can also result in items that can be used for barter; and those that can result in an abundance of commodity that can be sold outright for a profit. Mrs. Wilder, for instance, makes virtually all of the family's clothes from the wool they shear from their sheep, and is also able to generate enough woven material (or "rags," as she calls them) to trade with the traveling tin-maker to meet the family's annual need for utensils. Likewise, she churns the milk of the family cows to make butter, and in fact produces so much butter in excess of the family needs that she is able to sell 500 pounds for a clear profit of $250, which she promptly deposits in the Malone bank. Considering that $250 is about $5,330 in 2024 purchasing power, and that Mrs. Wilder and her two daughters were engaged in various other money-making activities, it is clear that domestic farm activities were an integral part of the family capitalist profit.

That said, it is necessary to be cautious in employing the term "capitalist profit," because the novel does not make clear precisely how much of the money must necessarily be used to pay for things that are simply unavailable by barter. The two elder Wilder children, Royal and Eliza Jane, are sent away to boarding school in the course of the year, and no mention is made of the sort of family sacrifice that is so much a part of the Ingalls's struggles to provide for their visually impaired daughter Mary in Little Town on the Prairie by matriculating her in a special school in Iowa. A few other "store-boughten" items are mentioned, such as the pocket-knife that Almanzo receives for Christmas, but the implication is that the Wilders are successful enough to set back money that can perhaps be used for expansion of their holdings. In fact, the $1,500 that Almanzo finds toward the end of Farmer Boy was the money that the miserly Mr. Thompson gained from the sale of farm acreage, so it is clear that the Wilders are in a position to widen their estate if they should choose to use the approximately $1,350 (or almost $29,000 today, by the reckoning of in2013dollars.com) that they have banked away in the course of the novel to the acquisition of additional real property.

The Wilder family circumstances are in sharp contrast to those of the Ingalls family, who struggle to eke out an existence in all of the seven book of the Little House series in which

they are the focus. Therefore, I suggest that Farmer Boy is the novel from the series that solely celebrates the monetary gains that can come from honest but shrewd endeavor, but it is more accurate to say that the Wilders have more of a Midas-touch than the Ingalls family. In The Long Winter, the most dramatic and gripping novel of the series, the townspeople of De Smet are in acute danger of starving to death in one of the most brutal winters in recorded South Dakota history, but the newly-arrived Wilder brothers are doing quite well, eating a huge feast of barley pancakes with molasses and bacon each morning. In fact, Almanzo has managed to store a large quantity of wheat-seed for the spring planting, and though he will readily deplete his stock in order to save lives, is so reluctant to do so that he literally risks his life to make a dangerous 40-mile run in a driving blizzard to purchase 60 bushels of wheat from an isolated settler who is snowed in for the winter. Almanzo thus saves the other residents of the village (he and his brother having what they need to not only survive but thrive), and he also preserves his wheat-seed so that he can produce the sort of bountiful harvest the following year to which the Wilders had been so accustomed in Farmer Boy.

As for the situation of the Ingalls family – and ultimately Laura Ingalls and Almanzo Wilder as a newly-married couple – Holtz provides a very insightful overview in a 1984 journal article titled "Closing the Circle: The American Optimism of Laura Ingalls Wilder." In the article, Holtz notes that homesteading was considerably more difficult and liable to failure in the Great Plains than in the greener and wetter climes back East. One may infer that the Wilders were inherently more likely to succeed with subsistence farming than the Ingalls in the Midwest, and various dyspeptic comments by characters in The Long Winter assert or imply that the U.S. Government had been clueless and invasive in creating the Homestead Act with a number of self-defeating provisions. Almanzo, for one, is particularly incensed by the requirement that homesteaders be at least 21 years old. However, Holtz asserts in the aforementioned article that 160 acres was simply not adequate for subsistence farming in the Midwest, whereas it had been appropriate in the East. A case can certainly be made that the government was short-sighted at best in enacting the Homestead Act requirements, and that Wilder readily reinforces this argument. As an aside, a much better case can be made that corporate and individual corruption were even more a problem, but this was not necessarily a target of the Wilders' critique. As one might surmise, a daughter who wrote a positive biography of Henry Ford, and a mother-and-daughter team who has James Wilder preach in Farmer Boy that the only real difference between large-scale enterprise and independent

farming is that the practitioner of the latter avoids having a boss, would not specifically find issues with the American corporation.

As Christine Woodside and other critics argue, the Little House series is at the very least a ringing endorsement for individual freedom. In Farmer Boy, James Wilder is the most articulate proponent of self-sufficiency in the entire series, not only that farming is a worthwhile endeavor that allows for individual freedom, but also that the role of the farmer has been crucial in the building of America as a free and independent country.

> Well, son, the Spaniards were soldiers, and high-and-mighty gentlemen that only wanted gold. And the French were fur-traders, wanting to make quick money. And England was busy fighting wars. But we were farmers, son; we wanted the land. It was farmers that went over the mountains, and cleared the land, an settled it, and farmed it, and hung on to their farms. (Farmer 170)

The James Wilder interpretation of Western history may be a bit naïve, but he holds to his case for an independent lifestyle. When Almanzo is invited to work in an apprenticeship at the end of the novel, his father agrees that a sedate and comfortable life inside an office would indeed be more secure in many ways, and probably more lucrative, but at a cost.

> A farmer depends on himself, and the land and the weather. If you're a farmer, you raise what you eat, you raise what you wear, and you keep warm with wood out of your own timber. You work hard, but you work as you please, and no man can tell you to go or come. You'll be free and independent, son, on a farm. (Farmer 337)

Almanzo freely echoes these sentiments in the subsequent novels, and various other characters, including Laura's father, Charles Ingalls, echo them as well.

Although the experiences of the Wilder family in upstate New York and the Ingalls family in the Upper Midwest are in contrast, I would argue that their overall activities in both instances are intended to exemplify the American Dream for a contemporary audience looking back from the sobering viewpoint of the Great Depression toward the presumed bounties of their grandparents. How precisely this self-actualization fits in with the impetus to punish transgressors is my primary topic.

The primary topic is, of course, the mere question of whether corporal punishment is an effective means of discipline. Because my interest is literary analysis and not child psychology, I will limit my literature review as much as possible. I certainly do not intend to

minimize the importance of debating corporal punishment as it is employed in the adjustment of the individual child, but I do wish to focus on whether the practice (especially as it pertains to social institutions such as the school) has the effect of aligning the future "Horatio Algers" of the world into a version of the American Dream in which certain recalcitrants have been torqued into nonparticipation. But even a cursory review shows that existing research demonstrates the practice to be problematic at best. A 2006 study of corporal punishment in southern schools conducted by Katherine Aucoin and her collaborators concluded "that use of corporal punishment was associated with problems in both emotional and behavioral adjustment" and further, that "these associations were strongest for children who experienced high levels of corporal punishment, for children who were impulsive, and for children who did not experience a warm and supportive family climate" (527). Rather than cite a myriad of papers addressing empirical evidence involving corporal punishment, I'll sum up by referring to "Corporal Punishment in Schools: Position Paper of the Society for Adolescent Medicine." According to the 2003 statement, the society "concludes that corporal punishment in schools is an ineffective, dangerous, and unacceptable method of discipline" and further calls for the practice to "be banned" (Greydanus 391). While the purpose of this paper is not to question whether corporal punishment damages the individual child, but rather to ponder whether a celebrated children's writer seems to designate corporal punishment as an inadvertent means of fine-tuning a society that purportedly values the American Dream, I would nonetheless propose that the latter ponderance is beyond the reach of data-driven observations and in fact is precisely the sort of question that imaginative literature can address. Whether corporal punishment has a deleterious effect on a child is well-attested; whether it can be applied in such a way as to sort the "up-and-comers" from the "less-desirables" is probably confined to the realm of philosophical debate. And that doesn't even touch the Sisyphean task of determining who is to be designated an "up-and-comer" and who should be a "less-desirable."

But again, the question is how the Wilder novels address corporal punishment, and what precisely happens to the young boys in the fictional world of Little House who suffer its application. I will begin with corporal punishment as it is practiced in Farmer Boy, in part because Wilder's second novel in the Little House series is chronologically the first. For another thing, the main character is a male, and young males seem to be the primary recipients of beatings around the buttocks in not only its rare occurrences in the Little House series, but in many other Western novels, if not in Western society as a whole. The gender difference in

the application of corporal punishment in literature is well worth exploring, but in the present case I wish to focus entirely on the use of punishment in furtherance of the American economic enterprise. The logic is fairly simple: given that the "invisible hand" argument holds that free enterprise is better and more efficient than the intervention of the State, and that children will be the future free-enterprisers, then the entire system of education as well as the unfortunate but necessary procedures for punishment should reinforce the American way of self-determination and free enterprise. This logic pervades the Little House series, and although my initial focus will be on Farmer Boy, I will also discuss the only two cases of characters being soundly whipped in the Little House series. One of these beatings occurs in Little Town on the Prairie, when the younger brother of Laura's arch-nemesis Nellie Oleson is whipped in school by the new teacher Mr. Owen. The nature of the beating segues nicely into my discussion of Farmer Boy with respect to the panopticon of Michel Foucault, so I will begin with this episode.

"For some time, Laura did not quite know what she thought about that whipping," the episode begins (Little Town 269). Willie Oleson has gained a certain degree of status with his classmates by taunting his former teacher, Eliza Jane Wilder, who by coincidence is the older sister of Almanzo. Eliza Jane has previously failed as a teacher in De Smet, at least partially because of her ambivalent and contradictory attitude toward punishment. Willie has previously gotten laughs for rolling his eyes and acting like a buffoon when called upon to recite, and continues the practice with the next teacher in succession, Mr. Clewett, who dismisses Willie as a "halfwit" and simply ignores him (269). However, Mr. Owen brooks no such nonsense and takes Willie into the next room for a sound whipping on his third day at the school:

> He had a pointer in his hand. With the other hand firmly on Willie's shoulder, he took Willie into the entry and shut the door. He did not say anything. From their seat nearest the door, Ida and Laura heard the swish and thud of the pointer. Everyone heard Willie's howls. (Little Town 270)

The beating of Willie Oleson is thus a vehicle to shoehorn the young malefactor into conformity. After all, the entire Little House series has harped on and frequently reinforced the theme that education is a viable preparation for a successful life. However, the Wilder philosophy also assumes that anyone falling short of the mark, and certainly anyone attempting to subvert the system, should be brought into compliance not only for his own good, but for the good of an America that is still growing and expanding westward. The only problem is that

the two male characters who actually receive such punishment both disappear entirely from the narrative:

> Willie stopped blubbering and went to his seat. After that, one look from Mr. Owen cleared some of the idiot look from Willie's face. He seemed to be trying to think, and to act like other boys. Laura often wondered whether he could pull his mind together after he had let it go to pieces so, but at least Willie was trying. He was afraid not to try. (Little Town 270)

If the Willie Oleson incident is the prototypical instance of corporal punishment in the Little House series, then the implications are that (1) painful and humiliating punishment can potentially work, although not necessarily well, and that (2) the necessity of punishing individuals at all is indeed lamentable. The second point is strongly implied, given that the good and diligent Laura in the very same chapter is paraded at an educational exposition as an exemplary young scholar, is consequently recruited as a young teacher before she even turns 16, and is depicted at this point and at every other point in the series as being on her way to a brilliant future. However, I would add that a more deeply embedded implication is that (3) the punishee is forever eliminated from the management of the state.

In fact, Laura's initial experience as a 15-year-old teacher involves another episode in which a male adolescent was practically begging for a dose of physical attitude adjustment. Clarence Brewster, who is a year or two older than Laura and physically much larger, seems determined to test her resolve when the school term begins:

> All the trouble came from Clarence. He could make Ruby and Tommy behave, if he would; he was their older brother. He could learn his lessons; he was much smarter than Martha and Charles. How she wished that she were big enough to give Clarence the whipping he deserved (Those Happy 49-50).

Thus, Clarence is depicted as a young person of promise. Not a mewling clown like Little Town on the Prairie's Willie Olesen, Clarence is depicted as a future achiever who merely needs some gentle re-direction. We likewise never hear again of Clarence, but the reason may simply be that These Happy Golden Years is the terminus of the Little House series, and that we simply never have the chance to see the subsequent mention of Clarence as he takes his position in society. Nonetheless, he escapes any sort of punishment, and seems to have learned the errors of his ways before his active participation in the American enterprise is cancelled.

In fact, Laura's father Charles Ingalls has precisely the free-market approach to nudging Clarence toward better behavior. Rather than resort to corporal punishment, Pa suggests an alternative:

> You might not get far with Clarence, even if you were big enough to punish him as he deserves. Brute force can't do much. Everybody's born free, you know, like it says in the Declaration of Independence. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink, and good or bad, nobody but Clarence can ever boss Clarence. You better just manage. (Those Happy 54)

Laura's mother Caroline Ingalls chimes in at this point and suggests that simply ignoring Clarence while congratulating the other students for their good performances might do the trick. Indeed, she is correct, for Clarence comes around without ever even realizing that he has been disciplined, however indirectly.

By contrast, the beating of Willie Oleson also implies that the observer is implicated in the punishment, however indirectly. As Michel Foucault says in Discipline and Punish, the public pageantry of punishment was the very first thing to fall by the wayside when the West began reforming the institutions of punishment in the past two-to-three-hundred years (8). This is not to say that punishment was to become an entirely private affair. Now, of course, Foucault is writing about far more serious transgressions than classroom misbehavior, but a case can be made that the same dynamics are at work. In the case of the vicious murderer as well as the young student trying the patience of the teacher, the aim has evolved from a "spectacle" with "theatrical elements" to a state of affairs in which punishment "leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness" (Discipline 9). The panopticon that I previously referred to is the thought-experiment by the nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham which speculates that a means could perhaps be devised whereby an entire community of prisoners could be viewed easily and simultaneously with a minimum of effort by guard strategically placed in an ideal viewing locale. The overall implications for society are the direction toward which Foucault wishes to point the reader.

In a different tack, the excellent work by Elaine Scarry in her landmark 1985 book The Body in Pain underscores the fact that severe punishment is often employed when words fail. Again, it would be an exaggeration to equate the beating of schoolchildren with the torture of political prisoners – much less with the all-out war that Scarry also discusses at length – but the end result in both cases is arguably that "the contents of the world are cancelled and the

path is clear for the entry of an unworldly, contentless force" (34). Scarry's subtitle The Making and Unmaking of the World especially demonstrates the relevance of the manner in which one world is "made" (that is, the world of the entity in power), while the other is "unmade" (the underling in the power matrix who is divested of his or her material potency). As Scarry writes, "the more completely the object expresses and fulfills (objectifies) the state, the more it permits a self-transformation out of that embodied state; conversely, the more the state is deprived of an adequate object, the more it approaches the condition of physical pain" (261).

By extension, I argue that modern corporal punishment such as that depicted in the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder is imbricated in the American economic enterprise. Furthermore, the effect is a direct result of redistribution, in Foucauldian parlance. In other words, "it is the conviction itself that marks the offender with the unequivocally negative sign" (Discipline 9). Gone at some point in time, depending on the region and on numerous social factors, was the practice of Ichabod Crane bringing down a wooden cane upon the body of a child brought to the front of the classroom (Irving). Of course, the spectacle of Willie Oleson's punishment is obvious to Laura and her friend Ida, and to say that there is no public performance would be ludicrous. But the fact remains that Little House typically illustrates a corporal punishment that is always looming at the fringes of the narrative. Laura and Ida may be obliged (or forced) to peek through a Benthamite panoptical keyhole to observe Willie receiving his beating, but it is quite clear that the passive observation of punishment, and particularly the inevitability of punishment from certain parties who are keeping an eye on their young charges, has become more pointed than ever.

Again, it would be invidious to equate the physical disciplining of arrant schoolchildren with the severe forms of torture that Scarry describes, but I nonetheless maintain that the former may be viewed as a warm-up for the latter. That "the capitalist suffers in his money; the worker suffers in his very existence" is an elegant explanation of how some children are disciplined while others are for all intents and purposes immune. By this I mean that the fate of Willie Oleson demonstrates that there is no inevitable punishment looming in the lives of the "more worthy" children (my own quotation marks and phrasing), because Willie has engaged in his antics through the tenures of at least two previous teachers and previously has suffered no punishment whatsoever. The punishment is thus arbitrary in its inevitability, but nonetheless certain in its application for eliminating certain undesirables from the body of the "State,"

which in a capitalist society is essentially those "haves" who have a certain power of "making and unmaking," in Scarrian parlance, over the "have-nots."

Such is the case with the other school whipping in the Little House series, which occurs in the opening episode in Farmer Boy. A new teacher at the upstate New York school is greeted with very dim expectations of success by most of the parents and virtually all of the students. The previous teacher, rather than inflicting punishment on the older teenage boys who still attended school from time to time, was in fact beaten so severely by the boys that he had died of his injuries. All the children expect more of the same from the bully-boys from Hardscrabble Settlement when the new winter term begins with Mr. Corse as the new teacher, especially when they observe that "Mr. Corse wasn't big enough to fight them" (Farmer 5).

Within a couple of days, the Hardscrabble boys have decided to pick a fight with their new teacher, but when Mr. Corse calls the first to the front of the classroom for punishment, he unleashes an unanticipated weapon. Producing a fifteen-foot-long blacksnake ox-whip, Corse proceeds to work over the oldest and biggest boy with repeated strikes, slashing both his shirt and pants and actually drawing blood before slinging him out the door with the whip. The second boy gets even more efficient treatment, and the remaining three toughs elect to exercise the better part of valor by escaping through a nearby window (Farmer 40-42). However, as in the case of Willie Olesen, we never hear another word about Bill Ritchie, who, in his own case, has literally had his blood beaten out. He simply disappears, and thus – again in Scarrian parlance – "suffers in his very existence" (261).

In fact, the lesson is such that it impressed even Mr. Ritchie, the father of the first young tough to receive the bullwhip. Mr. Wilder later informs Almanzo that Mr. Ritchie was bragging earlier in the day about the boys' threat to beat the teacher.

> Mr. Ritchie thought it was a good joke. He was so sure that the boys would do it that he told everyone in town they had done it, and on his way home he had stopped to tell Father that Bill had thrashed Mr. Corse and broken up the school again. (Farmer 44)

Instead, Mr. Ritchie returns home to find that his son has unexpectedly been reduced to a whimpering and docile shadow of his former rambunctious self. Presumably, not only Mr. Wilder but the other townspeople as well have determined that the most effective punishment is often vague in its provenance, but inevitable all the same. And what's more, the townspeople

have learned that there are forces in their microcosm that "[engender] a self-transformation out of that embodied state" (Scarry 261).

In sum, the corporal punishment depicted in the entire Little House series comprises two separate beatings in the second and seventh of the eight novels, but a looming sense that transgressions will be punished if the offense merits the outcome. By "looming sense" I do not mean an omniscient knowledge on the part of the adults that the children have committed some peccadillo or other, but rather that the Foucauldian sense of redistribution. Like laboratory animals in a Skinner-box, perhaps the youth of the Little House books have learned that reinforcement of the message does not necessarily involve constant and inevitable reward or punishment, but rather that the system is geared to demonstrate the desirability of compliance. Even more noteworthy is Wilder's undermining of the old criticism that corporal punishment merely instructs the recipient that size and strength are the qualities which allow one to make the rules and enforce them. Mr. Corse is outmatched in terms of size and strength, and perhaps even fighting ability, but the fact that he has received the anonymous but powerful help of a society committed to supporting him is the crucial factor that allows him to switch from intended victim to triumphant disciplinarian. In sum, the Little House books arguably make the case that corporal punishment is lamentable and is to be used as a last resort, but is effective if properly executed.

Nonetheless, certain instances in the various novels – particularly The Long Winter, in which the townspeople are moved to engage in civil disobedience because a much-needed train shipment has been held up by winter, first, and bureaucratic inefficiency, second – raise the question of precisely where the line is drawn when instructing children in proper behavior. As we have seen, there is a threat of punishment for the child who breaks the rules, but how is this threat articulated if the enforcers themselves reserve the right to define the rules as they see fit?

Again, the problem for the Wilders is one of consistency in philosophic vision. What happened to individual freedom and the right to flout the rules when one makes an individual judgment in good faith that the rules are unfair? Isn't this looming authority essentially a governing body? What happened to the principle that the government is usually an unnecessary nuisance that makes poor decisions?

It would seem that the Wilder and Lane are undone by their own Libertarian philosophy because they have inadvertently validated a situation in which might makes right. After carefully articulating a system by which a misbehaving child will receive harsh punishment

only if truly deserved – and then only a punishment that is distributed in such a manner as not to favor the application of simple size and force – they have undermined the system by arguing that the "free" individual has a right to resist the rules in certain instances. Well and good, but what about the child who has concluded that his or her own self-actualization involves a certain amount of acting-out in class? This question by no means approves of behavioral disruption, but merely asks whether the philosophic vision is to be consistent.

In regard to the girls who seemingly escape physical punishment in juvenile fiction, the issue works somewhat differently, but with the same ultimate goal in mind. A good example arises in the case of the aforementioned Eliza Jane Wilder's brief tenure as the De Smet teacher. Eliza Jane has told her students on the first day of class that she does not believe in punishment, and that she wants to be considered a friend rather than an authority figure:

> I am sure that not one of you will ever be unruly, so there need be no thought of punishments here in our happy school. We shall all be friends together and love and help each other. (Little Town 132)

The classroom situation quickly degenerates, and several students are soon testing the limits of their teacher's endurance. But rather than deal with the boys, Eliza Jane seemingly has a predilection to address the behavior of the girls, and often due to mistaken assumptions. Laura discovers to her consternation that Eliza Jane not only enforces a certain brand of punishment, but that she is the prime target. After defending her frail young sister Carrie against an unreasonable punishment, Laura is sent home for the day.

It later turns out that the problem has arisen from Eliza Jane's poor judgment in befriending Laura's arch-enemy Nellie Oleson, who is portrayed throughout the series as having certain character defects. Nellie has apparently convinced Eliza Jane that Laura is the source of all discord in the classroom, and Eliza Jane states her grievances against Laura when a delegation from the school board headed by Charles Ingalls visits the school to determine the problem:

> It is Laura Ingalls who makes all the trouble in this school. She thinks she can run the school because her father is on the school board. Yes, Mr. Ingalls, that is the truth! She brags that she can run this school. She didn't think I would hear of it, but I did! (Little Town 180)

The information has come from Nellie, of course, but Charles Ingalls motions to her daughter to remain silent and then speaks in support of the teacher.

> "Miss Wilder, we want you to know that the school board stands with you to keep order in this school." He looked sternly over the whole room. "All you scholars must obey Miss Wilder, behave yourselves, and learn your lessons. We want a good school, and we are going to have it." (Little Town 180)

The visit accomplishes its intended effect, because the discipline problems effectively disappear for the remainder of the term. Eliza Jane's lack of maturity and judgment have been the inadvertent cause of the breakdown, but the threat of punishment from other entities is the controlling factor that allows her to restore order when she has long since compromised her own authority. Eliza Jane returns to Minnesota when the term is finished, and the new teacher Mr. Clewett is "quiet but firm, a good disciplinarian" (Little Town 185). Mr. Owen, as already noted, is an even harsher taskmaster.

The rules of engagement therefore seem to be the following: the teacher is expected to maintain discipline in his or her own classroom, and is apparently given fairly wide latitude in enforcing the rules. When the teacher cannot maintain discipline, or for especially problematic individual cases, the school board acts as the "principal" that is so familiar to modern Americans in virtually all classrooms today – that is, as a disciplinarian of last resort.

Again, the problem for the Wilders is one of consistency in philosophic vision. What happened to individual freedom and the right to flout the rules when one makes an individual judgment in good faith that the rules are unfair? It would seem that Laura has been treated blatantly unfairly, but she is shushed and compelled to defer to the authority which has the final say. Of course, the real Laura grows up to publish successful children's novels, so we can only conclude that the specific dynamics and severity of the "shushing" will determine whether she is able to eventually partake of the American Dream, or whether she will be consigned to a life on the work detail.

Still, isn't this looming authority essentially a governing body? What happened to the principle that the government is usually an unnecessary nuisance that makes poor decisions? After all, it was Eliza Jane's poor individual decisions that caused the problems in the classroom.

In conclusion, Laura Ingalls Wilder and her daughter Rose, apparently, proffer an appealing overview of corporal punishment in the course of constructing one of the most compelling juvenile stories in American literature. Ultimately, however, they muddy their own

argument by demonstrating that punishment is ultimately an arbitrary matter that relies not only upon might, but also upon governmental organization.

Still, the philosophical confusion over corporal punishment in Little House reflects a greater concern that American society has been and remains ambivalent about the fairness and efficacy of the practice. We may better understand the underlying mechanisms with the help of Michel Foucault and Elaine Scarry, whose Discipline and Punishment and The Body in Pain, respectively, are arguably the most significant statements on the topic as it impacts literature, but the analysis of fiction is also quite enlightening. In addition to Little House, one may also consider that Charles Dicken's comic use of the term "brought up by hand," as well as Mark Twain's hapless whipping boy from The Prince and the Pauper, demonstrate that the very concept of corporal punishment is so vague and ambivalent that it can lead to literary mockery. Laura Ingalls Wilder's books are juvenile fiction and thus avoid such irony, but the breadth or the problem should be apparent when even a writer of children's fiction cannot deal with a very minor theme in her works without the matter getting out of narrative control. But the control is lost only in the sense that not everyone is invited to partake of the American enterprise; for the competing vision that some are to manage the State while others are destined to serve it, the narrative works fine.

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