STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

Lance Weldy

Seeking a Felicitous Space on the Frontier

The Progression of the Modern American Woman in O. E. Rölvaag, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Willa Cather

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ISBN 978-3-89821-593-0

5 *David Ellis*
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Black Writing in Britain Since the War
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Spenser and the Psychology of Despair
ISBN 978-3-89821-567-1

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Essays on Writing from Africa
ISBN 978-3-89821-867-2

12 *Thomas F. Halloran*
James Joyce: Developing Irish Identity
A Study of the Development of Postcolonial Irish Identity in the Novels of James Joyce
ISBN 978-3-89821-571-8

13 *Pablo Armellino*
Ob-scene Spaces in Australian Narrative
An Account of the Socio-topographic Construction of Space in Australian Literature
ISBN 978-3-89821-873-3

Lance Weldy

SEEKING A FELICITOUS SPACE ON THE FRONTIER

The Progression of the Modern American Woman
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Table of Contents

Foreword

The bulk of this study is a close reading of O. E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (trans. 1927), Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), and Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) from a feminist point of view with a definite inquiry into the concept of space. Marilyn R. Chandler rightly notes that "Space is an ideologically weighted 'product,' and the idea of space is a highly charged issue for theorists and artists" (3). It is important to highlight this point early on in this study for at least two reasons. First, this connection between space and ideology denotes a politically liminal place wherein questions of identity, in this study specifically with gender, complicate and influence the socio-cultural hierarchy. By referring to space as a "product," Chandler implies that this entity becomes ideological as a result of a dominant, active agent that relegates behavior, both subtly and overtly. Second, as the latter half of Chandler's sentence suggests, scholars and authors have scrutinized the politics of space through essays and novels: writers of fiction which could include Rölvaag, Wilder, and Cather, and scholars of spatial and feminist criticism such as Bachelard, Showalter, and Irigaray. As Elaine Showalter states, "feminist criticism has shown that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experiences, [indicating] that women have also told the important stories of our culture" (introduction 3). An obvious question here is, as Rowena Fowler asks, "Should men practice feminist criticism?" (51). I believe this is a legitimate question requiring more than a single-sentence response. In the following explanation, I focus first on feminism itself and then discuss where men fit into feminist criticism.

According to Victoria Walker, "There is no single, comprehensive definition of feminism; feminism knows neither 'founding mothers' [. . .] nor a distinctive methodology. At best, we may speak of feminisms" which "have touched upon a vast array of critical problems," such as "the reconstruction of women's history and of a female liter-

ary tradition" ("Feminist Criticism, Anglo-American"). For the purposes of my study, I will be incoroporating Anglo-American feminist critique. Before moving on to the specific focus of feminism, I want to stop here and recognize two points. First, the essence of feminism's multivalence does not preclude, but actually *invites* participation from diverse viewpoints, including perspectives from unlikely candidates such as men. Second, this lack of an established definition inhibits a gatekeeper, elitist mentality. Walker points to the purpose that Anglo-American feminist studies has in common with the rest of feminist criticisms: "that of exposing the mechanisms upon which patriarchal society rests and by which it is maintained, with the ultimate aim of transforming social relations." She goes on to say that this goal of transformation is common among all feminists because "they believe patriarchal society operates to the advantage of men and serves men's interests above all others." What we can surmise from Walker's conciseness is that, essentially, feminism considers mainstream society as "man-based" and desires to provide sexual equality.

Again, the question arises: "What place does a man have pointing out patriarchal insensibilities?" Fowler summarizes some of the scholarly controversy about men entering the feminist criticism conversation, noting that, while teaching women's texts to women students, it could be problematic for men to (consciously or unconsciously) elect themselves as the authority figure in the classroom and leaving little room for input from the women. She also says that "There is also a tendency for male feminists to absorb women's insights and research findings without properly acknowledging them [. . .]. The problem has been that the terms on which men are to join the debate are not clear" (52). In other words, men who venture into feminist criticism are not always sure if they have a legitimate voice, yet at the end of this passage Fowler suggests that breaking down gender barriers has been a positive byproduct of feminist criticism: "one of the most enviable achievements of feminist criticism has been to mix and merge or bypass the tired binary symbologies of male head and female heart" (55).

She concludes: "The debate must be carried on not between men and about women, not among women only, but between and among women and men as peers" (60). Elaine Showalter concurs: "This enterprise should not be confined to women; I invite [male critics] to share it with us" ("Towards" 142).

Though Fowler contests K. K. Ruthven's description of only extreme sides of feminist criticism, she would agree with him that men can engage in feminist discourse. According to Ruthven,

> It is no more necessary to be a woman in order to analyse feminist criticism as criticism than it is to be a Marxist in order to comprehend the strategies of Marxist criticism. In any case, whether or not men are eligible to take part in feminist literary studies at any level is an argument created and sustained solely within the domain of feminist discourse. It is not a problem which antecedes the invention of feminist criticism, but on the contrary is a function of it, and cannot possibly be regarded therefore as a prediscursive or extradiscursive mandate for the production of feminist criticism. This is as good a reason as any why men should not be put off by the intimidatory rhetoric of radical feminism, but confront the challenge of the new knowledge it proclaims by becoming involved not only in the production but also in the assessment of feminist criticism. (272)

Setting aside his statements on radical feminism, I found myself encouraged not only by Ruthven's comments, but also by women scholars like Fowler and Showalter who, in the words of Ruthven, discredit "essentialistic theories of human behaviour which designate certain characteristics as male-specific and others as female-specific" (264), thereby discrediting the notion that feminist scholars writing about women's issues must be female. I believe that William Handley has succinctly summarized the theoretical and scholarly direction for which I aim when he says, "I share in the revisionist spirit of feminist

scholars who have moved the focus away from masculine genres to literature by women, yet I have chosen to focus on both genders in relation to each other—to see women and men in texts by women and men" (3). In this same vein, I supply, through each main chapter, footnotes that comment on men who have written about literary women in positions or mindsets similar to the discussed female protagonist of each chapter. In so doing, I show that authors of both genders have written about women in similar positions. It is with the help of these scholars and through the submission of these footnotes that I find my legitimacy when participating in feminist discourse.

1. Constructing a Felicitous Space: Theories of Space and Gender and Historical Backgrounds

Paula E. Geyh notes, "Space is not inert, a mere site or setting for the action of our lives and narratives, nor do subjectivities simply 'inhabit' spaces that exist independently of them" (103). Rather,

> Subjectivity and space are mutually constructing: while subjects constitute themselves through the creation of spaces, these same spaces also elicit and structure subjectivities. To understand postmodern subjectivities and space, we must explore the complex ways in which they construct one another. (104)

In other words, the space an individual occupies indicates and even helps to determine the kind of person that individual is. In her essay, Geyh focuses "on the ways in which feminine subjectivity both constitutes itself and is constituted either through or in opposition to the space of the 'house' or the 'home' [. . .]" (104).

It follows, then, that if space allocation is differentiated by gender, space and gender have a significant influence on each other—an influence that can vary with time and culture. Doreen Massey comments on this influence in *Space, Place, and Gender*, when she notices

> the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations. Some of this connection works through the actual construction of, on the one hand, real-world geographies and, on the other, the cultural specificity of definitions of gender. Geography matters to the construction of gender, and the fact of geographical variation in gender relations, for instance, is a significant element in the production and reproduction of both imaginative geographies and uneven development. (2)

Though Massey's project focuses on geography, gender, and space in the modern day work place, I think her concepts about geography can apply to the nineteenth century, where indeed geography affected gender, evidenced by women on the American frontier.

Indeed, in the past, women have been stereotypically assigned to the house, to the inside space. During Geyh's discussion, she pays careful attention to the windows of the house, which, she believes, indicate "the boundaries of the house," so that "the very structure of the house, which relies on those boundaries, is simultaneously engendered and endangered. The window's double nature is apparent in the way that, closed or open, it might either divide or connect the inside and the outside" (110-11). In American literature, the sharpest division between inside and outside spaces for women occurs on the frontier, especially on the prairie frontier.[1]

How do people respond to the land of the outside spaces? Or, better yet, how does the land respond to people? D. H. Lawrence believes that even to the frontiersman and immigrant in America, "the very landscape, in its very beauty, seems a bit devilish and grinning, opposed to us" (50). In the first place, then, open space on the American

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[1] Renée Hirschon has made some interesting assertions about open and closed spaces in the context of discussing the role of woman in Greek society: "Among the conceptual categories of the society is a set of perceptions surrounding two opposed states: that of the 'open' and that of the 'closed'" ("Open" 76). Essentially, she says that "'opening' is an auspicious state; it is propitious and desired. 'Closing' is associated with misfortune, it is unfavorable and, in its ideal sense, should be avoided" (76). She goes on to discuss the various ways in which "closed" and "open" states occur in women's lives: "For the woman this auspicious state can only be achieved through conjunction with her husband [. . .]. His role as a medium of opening for the woman is not only a physical one, but exists too in the context of sociable exchange beyond the family" (78). Also, "The woman's use of space is defined and restricted in terms of the domestic imperative" (81). Hirschon also has another interesting article focusing on inside and outside space:

> In the wider context of social life the fundamental dichotomy of the 'house' and the 'road,' the inner and outer realms, is the point of orientation for interaction between women in the neighbourhood. This spatial and symbolic division is mediated, however, by two items—the kitchen, which is the diacritical marker of each conjugal household and the exclusive area of each married woman, and the movable chair. ("Essential" 72-73)

landscape—including the frontier—can be intimidating to at least some men. Second, if the landscape is naturally adverse to men, how much more harsh might the landscape be to women? Glenda Riley writes about this issue of women's adaptability to the frontier: "The prairie frontier, then, was not a particularly hospitable one for women. Given the nineteenth-century role expectations that, on the whole, women's lives would be domestically oriented, women were often disappointed with the setting and the resources that were offered to them by the prairie" (46). Both historians and novelists acknowledge that women experienced a rough time on the American frontier in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Few scholars agree, however, on the reasons for women's struggles on the frontier or on the ways in which women's relationships to frontier space changed over time. My purpose in this study is to focus on O. E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, and Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* to show how the female characters in these novels react to space and how space prevents or provides tranquility and growth for these frontier women. In so doing, I will show how these texts, each of which can be interpreted through a feminist lens, reveal feminine spatiality and gender struggles in the context of American culture and literary theory.

My desire to look at feminine spatiality stems from two major works. Gaston Bachelard's seminal work, *Poetics of Space,* served as the first spark for me. Although the bulk of Bachelard's book focuses on philosophical and phenomenological aspects of poetry and poetic images, the ninth section deals with poetic images central to this study—with images of closed and open spaces, specifically with a discussion of the space of the house. Fortunately, Bachelard's analysis of these images and of the significant concept that he calls "felicitous space" has also inspired other scholars. Diana Fuss' intriguing book, *The Sense of an Interior*, looks at the interior rooms of four great writers. She notes, "My own view on the relation between literature and architecture is one part Martin Heidegger, one part Gaston Bachelard.

[. . .] Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* asserts that a building is a special kind of poetry" (4). The title of Judith Fryer's book, *Felicitous Space,* comes directly from the following introductory statement by Bachelard:

> In the present volume, my field of examination has the advantage of being well circumscribed. Indeed, the images I want to examine are the quite simple images of felicitous space. In this orientation, these investigations would deserve to be called topophilia. They seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love. (xxxv)

Based on Bachelard's and Fryer's uses of the term, then, felicitous spaces are defined for the purposes of this study as "spaces of comfort, spaces people are familiar with, spaces without internal hostility."

One of the most captivating concepts that Bachelard discusses is how "the dialectics of large and small [offer a kind of] poetics of space" (xxxviii). By proposing various dialectics—between large and small, within and without, closed and open—Bachelard has provided a paradigm for scholars, including Fryer and the present researcher, to use in viewing literary texts. Fryer's *Felicitous Space* focuses specifically on works by Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. Her overriding critical question is "what *is* the relationship, in America, of space to the female imagination?" (49). One of her own answers is that the woman "has been denied, in our culture, the dialectical movement between private spaces and open spaces" (50). Though Fryer devotes considerable space to *My Ántonia*, her discussion focuses more on Jim's imagination than on the dialectic itself, which is the concept that I explore in my study of selected novels by Rölvaag, Wilder, and Cather. Nevertheless, Fryer's critical study serves as a model of how Bachelard's concepts can be applied to literature from a feminist perspective.

Concepts of Space and Gender on the American Frontier

Shirley Ardener says, "*space reflects social organisation*, but of course, once space has been bounded and shaped it is no longer merely a neutral background: it exerts its own influence" (12). As Ardener rightly notes, space turns into a social construct, and that social construct becomes the crux of my study because of the traditional power structure that has extended from the urban to the rural frontier of the United States, a power structure that awards open spaces to men. Space as a social construct serves as a relevant theme in my study, and I will often refer to feminist scholars like Diana Fuss who address this issue. She says that her book, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*, "can be described as an investigation of the place of essence in contemporary critical discourse, but perhaps we should be interrogating not only the place of essentialism but the essentialism of place" (29). In other words, whereas scholars have well documented the phenomenon of how certain people have been stereotypically assigned different qualities, the identity politics involved with certain spaces is still a rather new topic to explore. In *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*, Deborah L. Madsen spends a chapter on eco-feminism and its application to Willa Cather. In this chapter, she summarizes a few eco-feminist principles from scholars such as Ynestra King, who argues that the "relationship between men and women is the paradigm for oppressive hierarchical relationships: that which is dominant is gendered as masculine, that which is subordinate is feminised" (122). It follows from this paradigm, in conjunction with the works by scholars like Fuss, that spatial assignment can be and has been predicated by gender. Madsen points out that one of the ways to counterbalance this hierarchy is to dissolve the either-or binary.

When the geography of the frontier limits the amount of intimate, feminine space because of the rural setting and remoteness of neighbors, the social configuration invites disaster for pioneer women.

As Glenda Riley remarks, "frontierswomen's responsibilities, life styles, and sensibilities were shaped more by gender considerations than by region" (2). Drawing on Ardener's and Riley's assertions as well as the observations of Geyh previously discussed, I assign open space primarily to the masculine gender and closed space to the feminine. In general, closed space refers to women in the home, while open space concerns men working outside the home, be that in the fields, around the house, or on open ranges or places farther away.

Just as "[f]eminist scholarship rejects the idea of a literature produced in a social and historical vacuum" (Fowler 54), so too must a true feminist analysis of space in *Giants in the Earth*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *My Ántonia* consider the historical and social context. In other words, the woman's perspective includes actions and events surrounding her, in this case, the historical westward movement. The role of the pioneer woman essentially required her to remain in closed spaces. As Susan H. Armitage explains, "The pioneer woman's major role was that of domestic provider and sustainer. She was responsible for feeding and clothing her children and her husband" (9). Women fulfilled this space as provider and sustainer by spending the majority of their time inside the home. Dean L. May provides an interesting historical account about pioneer families scattered around the western frontier. His focus on women in frontier communities in the 1860s promotes the idea that space has the power to give or delimit power for women. For the pioneer women in Sublimity, Oregon, "virtually everything produced on the farm involved the woman in an important role at some point in the process." This gave the women

> considerable influence *within* the home—for this folk the social world of most meaning to most persons of both sexes. Yet, when they moved beyond the family and close neighbor/kin group, their influence quickly diminished. More than a third of those over eighteen in Sublimity in 1860 could not read or write (35 of 94; the corresponding figure for men

> was 15 of 151, or 10 percent). Such women no doubt felt disadvantaged in situations requiring them to deal with those outside their neighbor/kin group. (May 135)

According to Glenda Riley, nineteenth-century pioneer women focused on their homes and families, while the men concentrated on making a living for those families (42). These traditional sex roles initially resulted in women working in inside spaces and men laboring outside.

During the nineteenth century, however, stereotypical spatial assignments for women migrating to the American West began a long but significant process of transformation. Julie Roy Jeffrey notes that "It was not until the [eighteen] seventies that pioneers pushed eagerly out onto the prairies of Minnesota, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas" (27), and oftentimes wives and mothers would accompany the men. In the environment of wagons, sod houses, and claim shanties inside and outside spaces often became difficult to distinguish. Similarly, as Jeffrey argues, this same issue of gender role delineation was not always clear cut. And even though, as Jeffrey claims, this was the time for women to take advantage of new opportunities available to them, the majority did not capitalize on this. Their inability to do so stemmed from their uneasiness at embracing a whole new mindset, "even when forced into new ways of behaving. Possibly the polarization of sex roles which cast women into the role of the dependent, if superior, sex made it psychologically difficult to create sexual alternatives even when the environment seemed favorable" (Jeffrey 26). In other words, these women were leaving "civilization" and all the stereotypical gender roles that society entails, yet even on the prairie, where they had to learn to live in the masculine open spaces, they often found it difficult to assume a different kind of role in the family. Essentially, most pioneer women found themselves still clinging to their feminine roles.

Overview of the Study

Finally, I want to provide an overview of the three female characters who will serve as the main subjects of my study: Beret in *Giants in the Earth*, Laura in *Little House on the Prairie*, and the eponymous character in *My Ántonia*. In this section I will make relevant, but brief, connections between historical frontier experiences and the spaces experienced by each fictional character. In organizing my chapters, I begin by discussing Beret, move to Laura, and conclude with Ántonia because I believe this order best illustrates the gradual progression of women's spatial liberation on the frontier. I feel I ought to mention that this study is by no means comprehensive or representative of all cultures.[2] As Handley says, "My hope is that my readings will provide a way of thinking through such issues in other texts as well as the comparative functions of nostalgic retrospection; that it will offer a way of contrasting relations between the personal and the public" (8). For this study, the personal and public, inside and outside, and subject and object all dynamically interact and influence each other, and I want this study to serve as a catalyst for future research not only in Anglo-American cultures, but other diverse ones as well.[3]

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[2] One example of a corroborating reaction to space from another culture can be found in the novel, *The Endless Steppe*, by Esther Hautzig. While teaching this book in a graduate summer seminar on multicultural adolescent literature, I was fascinated to see how Esther responded to her family's displacement from Poland to Siberia during the Jewish displacement of WW II. Her reaction to open spaces for the majority of the book corresponds to the phases of response by Laura Ingalls in *Little House on the Prairie*. Esther remarks that "Siberia was the end of the world, a point of no return" (42) and then interprets the land as a living, menacing entity: "Outside, the steppe was vast and silent—not even a bird was overhead that morning—and it became Popravka's accomplice in reducing us to insects" (52). Comments about her family's frontier spirit and Esther's gradual love for outside spaces can be found in the passages on pages 81, 94, 112, 113, 228, 236, and 239, respectively. Clearly, this topic of felicitous space is ripe for research, spanning multiple genres.

[3] One could look at diversity through race as well as genre. For example, Joyce Carol Thomas' picture book of poetry, *I Have Heard of a Land*, recounts a single, African-American mother's endeavor to establish her household on the open Oklahoma prairie during the time of the 1889 and 1893 Land Runs. The female protagonist is the obvious family leader who works outside as well as inside, as is illuminated by

In developing my analysis, I build on the criticism of other scholars. For example, Sylvia Grider discusses how Beret Hansa "cannot adjust to the emptiness and hostility of this new environment" (113); Carolyn Heilbrun's study of daughters' relationships to their parents finds that many daughters without brothers—a position held by Laura Ingalls—try to fill a son's role in the family, emulating the father rather than the mother (50); and a feminist perspective shows Ántonia Shimerda as finding "the challenge of maintaining domestic order against the disordered life of the frontier" (Fryer 247). In my study, I also incorporate the work of other feminist scholars like Nina Baym, who notices the gender-divided perspective of the landscape in which "[male] heroes of American myth turn to nature as sweetheart and nurture, anticipating the satisfaction of all desires through her and including among these the desires for mastery and power" (75), whereas a woman "is more likely to write of it [nature/landscape] as more active, to stress its destruction or violation" (75-76).[4]

Chapter 2 focuses on Beret, who succumbs to the vast open spaces and never finds a felicitous space. Many historians have documented the unhappiness and isolation felt by pioneer women like Beret. These women suffered infelicity for various reasons, including homesickness and the inability to cope with the startling environment. Jeffrey's comments about the westward influences upon women lends itself to my discussion of Beret's infelicity here, because she calls attention to

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the text when it says that in this new land, a woman can "plant her crop and / walk all day and never come to the end of it" (5).

[4] It is important to note here two seminal works about frontier land coming from slightly different theoretical fields. First, Baym is probably referring to Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, which "traces the impact of the West, the vacant continent beyond the frontier, on the consciousness of Americans and follows the principal consequences of this impact in literature and social thought down to [Frederick Jackson] Turner's formulation of it" (4). Also, from a feminist point of view, Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* serves as a related source for Baym's discussion about landscape and gender. Kolodny argues, "From accounts of the earliest explorers onward, then, a uniquely American pastoral vocabulary began to show itself [. . .]. At its core lay a yearning to know and to respond to the landscape as feminine [. . .]" (8).

the issue of "contradictions" surrounding life in the house: "Women, unsullied by material interests, were supposed to find fulfillment at home. Yet, their ability to do so depended in some measure upon their husband's economic success" (32). Outside of "civilization," these women had to live without luxuries they were used to having. According to Henry Nash Smith, "the only value recognized by the theory of civilization is the refinement which is believed to increase steadily as one moves from primitive simplicity and coarseness toward the complexity and polish of urban life" (267). For the purpose of this discussion, "civilization" will refer to the elements inherent in urban life, whereas "uncivilized" suggests areas not yet structured for urban living. In the travel out West, women "coped with their sense of desolation by reproducing aspects of the world they left behind. Thus, women arranged their wagons, writing in their journals of the little conveniences they had fixed" (Jeffrey 38).

One of Beret's main ailments on the Dakota Territory is her melancholy, a melancholy that she feels no one else understands and that she cannot express to her family. She is deeply homesick for Norway, but as the caregiver, Beret knows she cannot encourage the family by sharing her depression. Jeffrey's discussion of how women coped with stress while traveling on the frontier adds to our understanding of Beret's predicament. According to Jeffrey, "The ways in which women handled their frustrations most often testifies [sic] to their attempts to live up to norms of female behavior, at least in front of their men" (48). Interestingly enough, "A fuller picture of the lives of Norwegian women on the prairies can be established than of any other group of ethnic women because of the relative abundance of Norwegian women's documents that are available" (Riley 31-32). Riley notes that journal entries written by Norwegian women living on the prairie express varied emotions. Because many of these women, like Beret, felt great helplessness and futility in the face of "uncivilized" open spaces, they may have developed defense mechanisms to the crude environment, pouring all of their energies into what they knew best—the do-

mestic, inside sphere. These "transplanted" women "tried to recreate [their former "civilized" lives] on the prairie. [They] tried to reestablish what they thought of as civilization, not only in child rearing but also in every other aspect of their lives" (Riley 54). As chapter 2 shows, much of Beret's psychological trauma stems from her belief that their homestead is beyond the protective boundaries of the civilized world.

Readers familiar with Wilder's *Little House* series will find little trouble comparing Ma Ingalls to the previously mentioned Norwegian women who vie for a semblance of civilization on the open prairie. Ma, like Beret, considers herself in charge of maintaining cleanliness and an appearance of order around the house, and she assigns Laura and Mary some household chores as part of this maintenance. Like Beret, Laura Ingalls experiences some inconvenience and danger in traveling to the open frontier. However, Laura ultimately finds herself in a more positive position toward her new environment. Chapter 3 focuses on Laura Ingalls and how she negotiates her inner conflict between finding pleasure not only in interacting with Ma in the feminine space of the home, but also deriving equal personal fulfillment while working with Pa in the more masculine open areas. As a little girl on the prairie, Laura Ingalls crosses the "border spaces," as Susan Naramore Maher says (139), desiring the masculine open spaces and leaving the closed spaces to her ultra-feminine sister, Mary.

To reinforce the notion of gendered space in *Little House on the Prairie*, I include some observations about the lives of pioneering women, such as May's account of women in Sublimity:

> The tax lists of 1862 and 1871 record only two land parcels in women's names (in both instances widows), in spite of the Donation Land Act, which made it possible for wives to claim the same amount of land as their husbands and an 1866 Oregon law permitting women to own personal and real property in their own name. As noted, there are virtually no

> surviving accounts of formal women's activities outside the home until the 1880s. Apparently Sublimity's good wives rarely ventured beyond the kin/neighbor group that defined their social world. (135-36)

This report suggests the kind of behavior little girls like Laura saw in their frontier mothers. Even though women were allowed to "own" land in the outside space of the prairie, few early female pioneers took advantage of it. However, while migrant women in the American West might have been tentative in claiming outside space, their children—women of the next generation—found the transition much easier, as Laura's experience shows. Through a series of examples from Wilder's text—the construction of the house, the observation of the wolves through the window, and the digging of the well—this chapter will demonstrate how Laura navigates the gender border, arguing ultimately that, with Pa's encouragement, she favors the open, masculine spaces. Thus, Laura establishes herself as a literary example of a pioneer girl who embraces what women of Ma and Beret's generation cannot: the border between masculine and feminine space. However, even though Laura feels comfortable in masculine spaces, she does not permanently reside there, not completely in *Little House on the Prairie*, and even less so in subsequent books of the series, where she fully embraces her feminine space along with her physical maturity.

Chapter 4 shows how Ántonia Shimerda goes beyond Laura's border space to become a progressive, independent woman—successfully revolving between the two poles of an engendered-hybrid space. While Laura is comfortable in the border spaces, she cannot traverse completely into the male sphere for several reasons. Probably the most notable factor is her age, which prevents her from making her own decisions. On the other hand, Ántonia—also a pioneer girl from the younger generation—physically matures through the course of the novel and gradually integrates into masculine space. In his study, May recognizes women's gradual progression into the public, male sphere

in communities like Alpine, Utah, where women "worked outside of the household in various community endeavors that took them early into public, male space" and where "women became in some senses more free. Many chores related to family production were no longer required. Their new role as consumers propelled them with greater frequency into male space and into new types of work, permitting in time a new sphere of independence" (May 143). After her father's death, Ántonia supports the family by working alongside her brother out in the fields, laboring in the open masculine spaces and gradually acquiring masculine physical attributes. With these masculine qualities come not only denigrating comments from traditional society, but also her independence. She is free to work where she wants to, whether that be out in the fields as a hired hand or in a home as a domestic laborer. As a possible explanation for such independence, Julie Roy Jeffrey submits that "emigration forced women to modify normal behavioral patterns" (25). As an emigrant from the Old World, Ántonia serves as an example of a literary woman faced with not only geographical differences on the frontier but also cultural differences in a new land. As such, she faces criticism from society whether she establishes herself in masculine or feminine spheres. This chapter, then, argues that Ántonia serves as an example of a pioneer woman who exists in both masculine and feminine spheres at certain times throughout the novel. Jeffrey goes on to say that "the frontier, which for most women began as soon as they left home and friends, challenged conventional sex roles and accepted modes of behavior" (25), a statement that definitely describes Ántonia's situation and gives larger meaning to the socio-historical context of my discussion of these three literary females.

Chapter 5 synthesizes my argument about the pioneer woman's evolving and dynamic reaction to felicitous space and the open spaces of the western frontier. By discussing the literary characters in the order of my chapters, I reiterate the sociological progression of the pioneer woman, a woman who moves from completely loathing to totally

embracing vast spaces. Carol Fairbanks and Sara Brooks Sundberg's comment illustrates the spectrum of the literary pioneer women: "Women's reactions to the prairie landscape were as mixed as their attitudes toward emigration" (43). Though the stereotypical (and more than likely predominant) feelings of many women about traveling and living in the open masculine spaces of the western frontier might have been negative, other women increasingly found positive aspects about the prairie. I admire the frankness of Rosi Braidotti's prose when she says, "I deliberately try to mix the theoretical with the poetic or lyrical mode. These shifts in my voice are a way of resisting the pull toward cut-and-dried, formal, ugly, academic language" (37). Although I know I fail to inject my research with shifts of poetry, I strive to keep my prose from impeding my message.