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Journey to the Frontiers of Perception: How Women Wrote About the Westward Movement during the Nineteenth Century in Relation to Land, Animals, and the Domestic Sphere

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Journey to the Frontiers of Perception

How Women Wrote About the Westward Movement during the Nineteenth Century in Relation to
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BY

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Journey to the Frontiers of Perception

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Introduction

Afterthoughts of the Westward Movement

Pioneer women wrote extensively about land, animals, and the domestic sphere as central issues affecting the experience of westward travel during the nineteenth century. Women, land, animals, and the domestic sphere often tend to get lost within the larger discussion about westward travel. Oftentimes, perceptions and studies of the west tend to leave out highly important, though seemingly irrelevant, material because of the vastness of the discussion. Greta Gaard theorizes why women have often been left from the larger discussion, stating:

The way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind. (5)

My purpose is to give attention to literature and issues often considered afterthoughts to the pioneer discussion. Much of pioneer women's writing are not deemed canonical literature, but are considered historical texts used to piece together a larger puzzle. My intention is to show that the western experience was empowering to women because they wrote. Women contributed a new voice to the canvas of the western picture, and related a new experience as well. As a part of this experience, women also gave a voice to land, animals, and the domestic sphere. Because pioneer women found connections to land, animals, and the domestic sphere, they were propelled to record their experiences as

valuable and unique. The act of writing allowed each to step outside of patriarchal boundaries and mentalities because of their connections to each other.

Because many women recorded the journey westward using various genres to relate their experiences, the important criteria for the literature in this study is that it is written by women who experienced westward travel during the nineteenth century. These criteria resulted in women predominantly being from white, middle, and upper class families because minority and lower class women were less literate or not in a position to record their journeys. “Westward” carries a multitude of connotative meanings, but in this study, it merely implies the journey from “civilized” land to “unsettled” land by white Europeans and Americans. “Civilized” and “settled” also present problematic connotations. To the pioneers, the land was unsettled because the land was not occupied by Western culture. Yet, Native American cultures were widespread and thriving in western areas. Because travels and settlement were quite varied, the exact geography is important only to individual analysis and not to the study as a whole.

The primary texts examined in this study include Susan Magoffin’s journal, Down the Sante Fe Trail and into Mexico, Mollie Sanford’s journal, Mollie, Sarah Royce’s non-fictional account, Frontier Lady, Hilda Faunce’s non-fictional narrative, Desert Wife, Willa Cather’s fictional O Pioneers!, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s fictional Little House on the Prairie and By the Shores of Silver Lake and also includes letters taken from various women.

Writings by women provide evidence that women were not only a large part of the settling of the western portion of America during the nineteenth century, but were also consciously aware of the cultural and environmental changes taking place as a result of their involvement. We now have a large selection of women's writing available to determine their involvement, which reveals that "they did their own share of shaping, leaving a female signature on land and lives" (Butler 1). Experiences during the westward journey affected travelers in many ways, forcing them to find new ways of living and surviving due to the uncertainty of the land. Through women's writing, we can see that pioneer women were permanently changed by their experiences. Pioneer women wrote about the westward experience as a defining point in their lives. The experience challenged women to reexamine their identities, and the identities of land, animals, and the domestic sphere.

My discussion relies on the critical theories of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is based on the connection between women and the natural world due to past oppression. As a result of oppressive behavior, the same language often links women and the natural sphere as well. Karen Warren claims that,

"An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant cultures..." (Merchant 185).

Women, land, animals, and the domestic sphere are linked by the principles of ecofeminist logic in this study because they are usually overlooked as having great significance to historical events as individual actors. Janis Birkeland explains that “attributes associated with masculinity are of higher value in patriarchal cultures and women have historically been seen as closer to the earth or nature (perhaps due to childbirth and menstruation)” (18) and as a result, “a complex morality based on dominance and exploitation has developed in conjunction with the devaluing of nature and feminine values” (19). Linking women to land, animals, and the domestic sphere is problematic beyond acknowledging their otherness. While, in most cases, women during the nineteenth century lacked the same rights as men, the westward movement breaks down some of the constraints placed on the feminine sphere and the natural world. I contend that the very act of women writing about their journeys was empowering to women, land, animals, and the domestic sphere.

The ecofeminist theories allow for an analysis of women’s connections to land, animals, and the domestic sphere. According to Gretchen Legler, “Ecofeminists suggest that re-imagining what nature is and what relationships can exist between humans and the nonhuman world is part of the elimination of institutionalized oppression” (228). Each chapter will examine the connections between women and undervalued issues of westward travel. Examining these relationships from an ecofeminist perspective provides not only a new look, but also a new value determinant. These relationships were redefined as a result of pioneer women recording their experiences.

The first chapter will deal directly with the rhetoric women used to write about land. Central to this chapter is a look at the “reconception of nature not as a passive matter, as an object of study, but as an active subject. This process of ‘embodying nature’ involves writing nature out of a position as a passive mirror of culture into a position of actor or agent” (Legler 229). The relationship between women and the land is examined to determine how each changed the other and how this altered the identity of each in a changing social climate.

The second chapter looks at the role animals played in the writings of pioneer women. Pioneer women write about animals as a major force behind the westward movement. Animals play a large part in the lives of the travelers, and pioneer women provide evidence that animals were very valuable to their journey. According to Josephine Donovan, “women have undoubtedly been less guilty of active abuse and destruction of animals than men, they nevertheless have been complicit in that abuse, largely in their use of luxury items that entail animal pain and destruction and in their consumption of meat”(168). The observations women make about animals are dramatically different according to their personal situations. Ironically, pioneer women give animals a voice by writing about them, but pioneer women often participate in the domination of animals.

The last chapter will deal with the redefinition of home. The inspiration for this analysis comes from Caroline Motz; she states that “the transformation of a house, a physical structure, into a home, with its resonant emotional meanings, has been in our culture a traditional task of women” (1). The journey west forced women to reexamine

who they are in the culture, as well as, what home means. During their travels, many women called a covered wagon home for long stretches of time. Women observed how their duties as wives and mothers changed in the new version of a home. Most pioneer women were eager to be rooted in order to reestablish some stability in their upturned lives. Many of these women learned the importance of having a stable home and were less inclined to the adventurous life. Yet, other women learned the isolation and hard work that goes into maintaining a home and craved a more adventurous or less rigid life. Overall, domesticity took on new dimensions and new importance in an unsettled land where women gained respect and took great pride in homes that they took part in building.

Pioneer women changed their perceptions of land, animals, and the domestic sphere as a result of their experiences traveling westward during the nineteenth century. These issues were important to pioneer women in a different way than they may have been to women in settled locations because pioneer women faced a much more intense connection to these issues. Redefinition of land, animals, and the domestic sphere took place when women chose to write down their experiences. This is important because these issues have been seen as marginal in the larger discussion about the westward movement. Observations of pioneer women writers provide us with insight into a unique period of literature amidst great social change for women. The textual evidence suggests that most pioneer women did not write that they felt oppressed or dominated by the male sphere but rather felt an optimistic connection to land, animals, and the domestic sphere as they ventured westward. This study is not intended to show a uniquely gendered

experience, but rather to show a gender specific experience. The difference being that it is less relevant whether women reacted differently than men did, and more important that women reacted and wrote about their experiences. The westward experience allowed many women writers and readers to find a different perception of independence and respect that they gained from the freedom of unsettled land. The very act of writing places women in control, and gives their voice value. What they choose to write about takes on a new value, and thus land, animals, and the domestic sphere are also given a new value as central issues to pioneer women writers.

Chapter 1

Land and Women: A Change in Representation

“But the great fact was, the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber wastes” (15) writes Willa Cather in O Pioneers. Land was the looming element of the westward journey. The rhetoric used by women writers making the journey west during the nineteenth century presents a challenging array of nature related questions. Ultimately, the land makes the experience possible. Change in location is the crucial element that compels women to write. By examining how women wrote about the land, we can determine the value that women placed upon nature and thus evaluate women’s involvement in the settling and altering of the land. The land became the center of pioneer women’s lives as they traveled, and the relationships between women and the land often differed for each woman.

The relationship between women and the land is complex and multi-sided. Women and the land were equally altered by the experience and not all experiences were the same for land or woman. The journey westward created an awareness of nature, which resulted in a more intense relationship compared to the land they had left behind. Women were immersed in a daily relationship with the natural world that was lacking in a civilized environment. As women traveled west, the land became an important entity in their lives.

Each writer presents the same themes about the land throughout their writing, even amidst differing landscapes and differing genres. Many of the same concerns come

up in pioneer women's writing, often because they are seeing the same physical landscape. Although even when on the same path, pioneer women view the land in different ways and connect with land on their own personal level. Spirituality is a crucial discussion in all of the writing. Many of these women found spirituality as they encountered the land. While others felt that faith was tested and became stronger within their religions. Pioneer women also discussed their fantasies about the land. These fantasies ranged from simple needs and wants to blatant land exploitation. Pioneer women experienced the land in a multitude of ways, resulting in a change in their perceptions of land and life.

The physicality of the land is frequently talked about as women begin their journeys, experiencing the change in landscape. Susan Magoffin is excited about experiencing nature in a new way, stating in her journal, "now the Prairie life begins!"(2), and remarks, "we proceeded from this thick wood of oaks and scrubby underbrush, my eyes were unable to satiate their longing for a sight of the wide spreading plains" (2). The first major haul gets them to "'The Lone Elm,' 35 miles from I [Independence, Missouri]" as there is "no other tree or bush or shrub save one Elm tree, which stands on a small elevation near the little creek or branch. The grass is very fine every place, it is so tall in some places as to conceal a man's waist" (5). "The Lone Elm" is symbolic of the end of wooded areas associated with the civilized landscape; instead they are beginning to encounter the wildness and openness of the grassy plains. Sarah Royce writes in her non-fictional narrative about the land with a more serious tone because the physical landscape holds importance to Royce as a navigational tool gauging the distance of the

journey. Royce, her husband and baby girl began the journey from Iowa to California in April of 1849. She encounters the ““Lone Tree”” which “I made into an event to myself. . .I cast frequent backward looks; feeling almost as though we were forsaking a living creature to the solitude of the desert” (21-22). Like Magoffin, the tree represents the end mark of civilization before they enter the desert wilderness. But unlike Magoffin, Royce is not as eager to leave civilization behind for the wilderness.

Women often connect to the land aesthetically and appreciate the innocent beauty. Magoffin is intrigued by the changes she finds in the land, such as an entry on August twentieth after they have left “the Raton”, “Out on the open Prairie again, but with rather more variety than before. We are surrounded, in the distance, by picturesque mountains, a relief to the eye when one is accustomed to behold nothing save the plain stretched far on all sides meeting the edges of the bright blue sky and appearing more like water than land” (85). Mollie Sanford speaks of the land aesthetically stating, “Our cabin is near the banks of the creek, where a grove of tall, naked trees stretch their branches toward the sky. Perhaps when clothed in their summer foliage and the birds singing ‘mid their boughs, they may suggest more of the beautiful than now” (14). On June 19, 1860 during a journey from Nebraska City to Denver, she states in her journal, “The road is high up from the river and not much grass. Plenty of prickly pears and cactus” (128).

The beauty of the openness of the land can also be a painful reminder of the isolation that comes with openness. Hilda Faunce experienced different sides of the land relationship when she headed southwest with her husband from their home in Oregon to New Mexico. She remarks of the land early in their travels that “though they went

willingly [the horses], I could see that they were bored with Idaho, just as I was myself”(16). The land seemed to be only “rolling swells of sage heaped higher and higher to what seemed to be a final crest that would surely break and change the monotony; but when we reached that crest, there was another succession of gray waves to climb” (15). She is excited about the southwest at first arrival; “never was there such air, such sky, such roads. . .we were all so happy” (57). Yet, she changes her mind when “more than once I became panicky. . .the emptiness, the barrenness, the vastness threatened me. . .I could not face life in a country without one spear of green grass, with nothing but rocks and bare dirt, with never a human being in sight” (58). This attitude would plague her until they moved into town years later. Though not as negative, Mollie Sanford is also aware of the isolation of the land stating on May first that their first home will be “Yes! in the woods! miles and *miles* from anybody. Whatever will become of us?”(19).

Nannie Alderson feels connected to the physicality of the land in the non-fictional narrative account of her journey in 1860; “Rivers, like women, were few, and they gained in importance proportionally, while the location of every creek might be a matter of life-and-death importance to men and animals alike” (26). In this statement, she equates women as land, but not in a negative way that shows them both oppressed; but rather in a very positive way, showing how both are indispensable to the success of the land. The importance of women to the westward movement is very clear in this statement because Alderson suggests that she feels like a valuable participant in the westward movement.

Thus when she equates women to the river, she also gives value to the land as an acting and valuable agent.

Physical land descriptions in the fictional accounts are used in a more symbolic way. In O Pioneers!, Alexandra tells a story about apricot trees that shows the change in the land and the change in her. The apricot trees were foreign to the area and so was Alexandra, yet they both flourished in the new place. The necessary changes were made to the land for survival of both, yet they were both a little changed themselves by the land. The apricot trees also imply that her relationship with Carl is connected to the land as well, because Carl and Alexandra purchase and plant the seeds together, but the apricot trees flourish while he is away in the same way that Alexandra flourishes while he is away.

The land was symbolic for Wilder in a unique way because the character Laura was not eager to change the land in the ways that most of the pioneer women were anxious to do. Laura traveled west as a child, and her own childlike innocence and freeness is found in her love of the land. She connects with land as a companion who encourages her need for freedom and wildness. Pa wants to head west because “there were too many people in the Big Woods now” (1) and Laura agrees because “quite often Laura heard the ringing thud of an ax which was not Pa’s ax, or the echo of a shot that did not come from his gun” (2). In Little House on the Prairie Laura thought “that prairie looked as if no human eye had ever seen it before.” Unlike many pioneer women, Laura shows eagerness about the isolation and removal from society. The Ingalls are awed by the land that “only the tall grass covered the endless empty land and a great empty sky

arched over it”(26) as opposed to the crowded Big Woods that they had come from. To Laura, the land is beautiful because it is open and free. Laura needs the westward land to survive psychologically; constraints within civilized society preventing her from the land would be detrimental. Her growth depends upon the freedom to cross gender lines and societal constraints. Laura is the wildness and freedom of the land, and therefore, must be a part of it.

As pioneer women writers begin to develop a relationship with the land, they make it clear that travelers rely upon the land for survival. Magoffin shows the importance of the land to their destination each day because “the travellers [sic] allways [sic] stop where there is water sufficient for all their animals” (5). Later in the journey she points out the problems that arise from the land when they “have no water and the animals are panting with thirst; their drivers are seeking shelter under the wagons” (9).

Land becomes the nourishment and provider for the travelers. Paradoxically, land is also a destructive force that threatens the travelers. Land is no longer just an object of beauty or sustenance, it is a serious participant to be reconsidered. Pioneer women no longer consider land insignificant because land becomes an active member of the journey. Magoffin discovers that the land is very uncertain at times; for example, on February 5, 1847 she states that while they are camped at Dead Man’s Lake, “the grass caught fire near to our baggage wagon” and has learned on the journey “it is singular how rapidly it will spread in the dry grass” (197).

Surviving the land included encountering weather along the way. The weather determined how well they would be able to travel that day, how the crops grew, and how

many things in life would be determined. The weather represents the ultimate uncertainty of the land that was not present in more civilized settings. People no longer had the well-developed shelter that they had left behind. “We started in the rain, came in the rain, and stoped [sic] in the rain” (21) Magoffin says of one day during their journey.. Mollie Sanford speaks often of weather as well stating, “the weather is simply lovely” (24) and during unpleasant weather, “Such terrible storms as we have. They come mostly at night” (126).

Weather was problematic at times for Alderson when “ice would gorge in the Yellowstone River every spring, and for years Miles City was subject to floods. . .while I was staying in this woman’s house, one of these floods threatened” (98) yet, Alderson perceives of the rain differently after they are settled into their own home “I always loved to listen to the rain on a roof. . .it had a beautiful sound, drumming on the shingles” (121). Royce often writes about the weather such as:

On Wednesday morning June 20th I was awakened between three and four o’clock, by the sound of rain upon the wagon-top. It was quite a moderate shower, and I lay thinking in a calm mood, when a flash of lightning came, followed in a moment by a strange rushing sound, which quickly became loud as thunder. The wagon began to shake violently, then to move as if pushed sideways by a great force, then it was lifted and thrown violently over on its side. . .(20).

This situation is the very essence of the uncertainty of the weather; Royce is relaxing to the sound of rain and in a second lightning strikes the wagon.

Catherine Haun learns the importance of weather early in their trip when “there was still snow upon the ground and the roads were bad, but in our eagerness to be off we ventured forth. This was a mistake as had we delayed for a couple of weeks the weather would have been more settled” (Schlissel 168). The sun which had been the source that allowed her to be “cheered by the bright sunshine” early in the trip, later “within sight of the Platte” in a land “entirely destitute of vegetation” and “whose waters were now almost useless to us on account of the Alkali” (178), the sun seems much more harsh:

Surely Inferno can be no more horrible in formation. The pelting sun’s rays reflected from the parched ground seemed a furnace heat by day and our campfires, as well as those of the Indians cast grotesque glares and terrifying shadows by night. The demen [sic] needed only horns and cloven feet to complete the soul stirring picture. (Schlissel 179)

The sun, which she had thought of as a positive force, energizing her, became a hellish thing to her as they traveled through desert land. The weather became the center of the lives of western experience because the weather directly influenced their lives, making them unpredictable, which was both exciting and frightening. Weather impacted pioneer women in a way that was unique because of the change in land and because of the lack of adequate shelter to separate themselves from the natural world.

The weather threatens human life in the fictional accounts as well. Wilder tells of a terrible winter spent in the Dakotas in The Long Winter when “nothing seemed real but the blizzard that never stopped” (253). The possibility of death was a hard reality for the pioneers, making the weather a major obstacle to overcome. The Ingalls family

overcame the weather in this case, Pa states, “We beat old Winter at last! Here it is spring, and none of us lost or starved or frozen! Anyway, not much frozen” (313). Pa did lose his nose because of the weather, but they did all survive. Pa feels that it is humans against the natural world; the natural world did not kill them thus, the natural world did not win. Weather exemplifies the idea that nature can be both enemy and friend. Nature provides yet takes away and the pioneers must face this everyday in a very intense way.

The idea of survival changed in the second generation because the challenge is not to get out west, but to survive the west as a settler. Alexandra encountered the land as a second-generation pioneer who was determined to succeed as a farmer. As Emil works, clearing the graveyard he “was not thinking about the tired pioneers over whom his blade glittered. The old wild country, the struggle in which his sister was destined to succeed while so many men broke their hearts and died” (78). Alexandra is determined to survive; she loves the land, but only when it can provide for her. She talks about land in terms of farming jargon, “most of the land is rough and hilly. They can always scrape along down there but they can never do anything big” (64) and she feels that “we must have faith in the high land” (64). Alexandra feels a connection to the land that is very deep; “that night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it”(71). She feels a new, deeper connection to the land because she feels at this point that the land will make her money. She felt connected to the land before she made the money, and it could be argued that she made money from the land because she understood it so well.

Spirituality intensified as a result of these encounters with the land. Some women experience a new type of spirituality connected with the land, while others are drawn closer to their own religions to explain the uncertainty of the land. Sanford has a unique experience accepting her psychic abilities that seem to intensify in the west; she states, “I do not know what this wild life is going to develop in me anyway. Guess I am going to be a “meijium” [sic] or spiritualist whether I want to or not” (54). Magoffin feels the presence of spirituality from the weather when “the vivid and forked lightning quickly succeeded by the hoarse growling thunder impresses one most deeply of his own weakness and the magnanimity of his God” (39)

The urge to settle the land stems from fantasies about the land. In The Land Before Her Kolodny states that “given the choice, I would have women’s fantasies take the nation west rather than the psychosexual dramas of men intent on possessing a virgin continent. In the women’s fantasies, at least, the garden implied home and community, not privatized erotic mastery” (xiii). Pioneer women fantasized about the natural world in both positive and negative ways regarding land, as did men. The land became a fantasy to women as home and as commodity. Kolodny asserts that women had fantasies about the land, yet she mistakenly softens the impact of those fantasies. The need to settle into a home is as much of a destructive force towards the environment as the desire to “tame” the land and develop it. Pioneer women were driven to travel west because they acted on fantasies regarding the land. The fantasies ranged from wanting to experience the land to wanting to settle the land. Women that traveled westward were oftentimes more eager to change the land than we may like to believe. Many of the women were not unwilling

companions but rather enthusiastic participants. The women that were unwilling journeyers were even more eager to alter the land in order to establish a home. They yearned to make the land familiar rather than foreign. Women were anxious to change nature and redefine themselves within the change by clinging to the comfort of the homes they left behind and attempting to find the same assurance within the new land. Some women longed for their old lives, but this longing pushed them to change the new land with great drive. According to Royce, “The conveniences of civilized life, the comforts of home, can not be keenly appreciated, or even fully seen, by those who have never been, for a time, shut out from them. . . I had never before realized the worth of quiet domestic life” (103).

Catherine Haun is deeply touched by the “growsome sensation was caused by the desolation” of the “immense lonesome plain; the great fathomless ocean—how insignificant seems the human body when consigned to their cold embrace!” (Schlissel 183). The land she describes feels unapproachable and haunting; too large for any human to encounter. The cold embrace signifies that she is not attracted to this land and she feels detached from the land. Her fantasy about the land shows that she does not want to tame it or exploit it; she simply does not want to be in it because she feels that it is threatening. In this situation, the land fantasy is suffocating and repressive to her because she equates the vastness of the land as a symbol of the vastness of death.

Caroline Ingalls is anxious to have a settled home and on two occasions when they are settled, she marks the arrival of civilization with a china doll. In Little House on the Prairie “Ma set in the middle of the mantel-shelf the little china woman she had

brought from the Big Woods. The little china woman had come all the way and had not been broken”(117) and again when they settle in By the Shores of Silver Lake, Pa “stood the china shepherdess on its shelf” (283). The china doll represents Caroline’s need to have a civilized life and it represents on a larger scale the arrival of civilization to the frontier.

At the end of Little House on the Prairie, Laura has her own fantasy about the land. Her fantasy was being a part of the land, where “they were all together, safe and comfortable for the night, under the wide, starlit sky. Once more the covered wagon was home” (Wilder 335). Even the dog Jack, “curled into that round nest with a flop and a sigh of satisfaction” (334). Laura being so excited that “everything was just as it used to be before they built the house” that she could not sleep (332). Laura fantasizes about the open land and she is not content unless she feels that she is a part of the land. Her fantasy is rather positive towards nature in that she is not necessarily interested in altering the land, just being out in the open land. In the same scene, they somewhat coldly gather wood from a burned down home to start the campfire. They remark nothing about the burned down home or about the inhabitants, she simply comments, “the fire burned beautifully”(332). The fantasy includes a strength that requires the attitude of survival at any cost.

The mother in O Pioneers!, is an unwilling westerner who “had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth; but, now that she was there, she wanted to be let alone to reconstruct her old life in so far as that was possible” (Cather 31). Mrs. Bergson attempts to regain what she left behind by maintaining as

civilized a life as possible. She is anxious for her husband to succeed as a farmer in order to establish stability. Her daughter, Alexandra, is the very opposite of her mother as a very eager pioneer who becomes a very successful farmer and business- woman. These women represent the two extreme mentalities that women adopted during the westward experience, as well as the generation gap between the traveling generation and the settling generation.

Alexandra in O Pioneers has an obvious connection to the land. Alexandra not only wants to be loved and nurtured by the land, but she wants to dominate and control the land so that she can gain wealth from it. She has fantasies about the land and “for the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious” (65). Another example is the fantasy that she has repeatedly throughout her life:

She used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. (206)

This man is the land and Alexandra fantasizes that the land is nurturing and tame. The land is comforting and will provide her with abundant wealth and stability. Alexandra is a wealthy farmer that did her part to settle the land. Although there is evidence that

Alexandra loved the land and did not want to exploit it, she did want to change it.

Kolodny deemed this type of fantasy as distinctly male, whereas Alexandra is obviously connected to the land in a “psychosexual” way. Alexandra exhibits a loving relationship with a land that provides her with a unique independence.

The westward movement gave women an opportunity to write as valued participants, thus giving value to the issues that they deemed relevant to their experiences. Land is one of the major issues addressed by pioneer women writers. Women connected with the land in a newly intense way because they were forced to deal daily with the land. The liberation that the land provided to these women came at a great price; both land and women were changed—merged into something new. The journeys permanently altered how pioneer women viewed the land because the women were affected by the experience as well. The relationship to the land was one that, in retrospect, appears to be exploitative. Yet, pioneer women empowered the land because they came to view the land as an active participant in the westward experience. The personification of the land made the land more valuable because it became more human-like. The land paralleled women in many ways during the westward journey. Women subconsciously and consciously acknowledge this similarity in their writing. Experiencing each other meant experiencing something new. Middle class white women were in a new place historically and geographically in relation to the westward movement; thus was the land as a participant in this journey. Women and the land were both given a voice during this time because they experienced each other. Women wrote because of the land, and the land was written because of the women. This wonderful

parallel determines as well how women began to perceive of other minor actors during the journey. The lens of exploration, both physically and literarily, seemed to open as the land opened. The perception of land changed for each woman as the land developed into an individual also experiencing the pioneer women as they traveled westward. The act of embodying the land in the writing of pioneer women, empowers the land in a way that makes it distinctly valuable to the westward experience.

Chapter 2

Women and Animals: Value in Expression

Pioneer women connected with animals because animals were instrumental in the settlement of the west and in the lives of the westerners. The pioneers could not have altered the west as drastically or as quickly had it not been for animals. Women along the westward journey wrote extensively about animals that accompanied them on their trip and about animals that they encountered in the wilderness. Animals became an important part of the journey for different reasons, but like the land, the awareness is intensified by the journey. Animals supplied everything for the basic human needs of the pioneers: food, clothing, transportation, companionship, and protection. Women everywhere encountered animals, but what is important is that women in the west were isolated, and animals were relied upon for survival, and often became companions that replaced human contact. Women acknowledged the significant role that animals played in the journey west by changing their own perceptions about the value of animals as individual participants.

The most emotional bond between pioneer women and animals is primarily between women and domesticated dogs. Most pioneer women considered dogs a part of the family and oftentimes deemed dogs to have more worth than many of the humans they encountered on their journey. Women writers were very attached to their dogs and wrote often about them in their works. Dogs were more than just symbols for domestication and civilization. The relationship between women and dogs tend to be

more emotional during the westward movement for various reasons such as isolation from humans and protection from wild animals.

Most pioneer women considered domesticated animals to be a member of the family; especially animals that were considered pets. Faunce illustrates the deep loss that accompanied the death of her first dog, Tige:

All morning Tige played in the yard; at noon he was dead. . . . So few people know anything about the love of dogs, I was ashamed for my friends to know how terrible the loss was to me. . . . Life looked flat indeed, and I could not speak or breathe when I thought of going back to the sunshine and leaving him there in the rain. I wrapped him in a woollen skirt of mine and buried him beside a white rose bush in the yard where he and I had romped together (7).

The loss of Tige shows the great affection she feels for him; life looks bleak to her after his death. She had fond memories that reflected how important a role Tige played in their family. Susan Magoffin is keenly aware of the presence of animals in her journey. Interestingly, when she lists all the human and animals that will accompany them on the trip and she points out that “last though not least our dog Ring. . . . A gray hound he is of noble descent; he is white with light brown spots, a nice watch for our tent door” (4). Ring appears to be a very important part of her life; she speaks in more detail and with more affection than she does about “Jane, my attendant”(4). Pioneers were usually isolated from much human contact, and were especially lonesome for family and friends they had left behind; therefore, animals would help fill the emotional gaps.

We see the same type of attachment to a dog in Little House on the Prairie when they assume that their dog Jack has been killed after a dangerous creek crossing:

“Oh Ma,” Laura begged, “Jack has gone to heaven, hasn’t he? He was such a good dog, can’t he go to heaven?”. . . Pa said: “Yes, Laura, he can. God that doesn’t forget the sparrows won’t leave a good dog like Jack out in the cold.”. . . Laura felt only a little better. She was not happy. Pa did not whistle about his work as usual. . . (27).

Laura and Pa equate Jack as a member of the family. Jack is so important to her that she believes that he can go to heaven, a privilege set-aside for humans. The attachment to Jack is symbolic of their journey west; in a later book, By the Shores of Silver Creek, everyone, including Jack, is older. The Ingalls have already travel west, then back and are ready to head out west again. Laura marks the death of Jack stating, “Now she was alone; she must take care of herself. When you must do that, then you do it and you are grown up” (Wilder 14). In this situation, Laura represents the western land. As Laura matures, so does the land; therefore, Laura no longer needs Jack to protect her from the land because the land is less dangerous in its maturation as a civilized sphere. Jack’s death represents the end of the “wild” because he was the link between the human and the wild animals.

As an important part of the family, dogs became companions for pioneer women that were isolated from human contact, especially other women to confide in. During a sleepless and lonely night on June seventeenth, Magoffin writes:

I could not waken him [her husband], just to keep me company, when he was so well engaged. So I remained quiet occasionally knocking off a musquito [sic] and listening to the confused sounds without a wishing that my faithful Ring would not sleep so soundly. Just then, as if he had heard my thoughts and was anxious to prove to me that I was too hasty in his vigilance [sic], he gave one spring from his hiding place, and in a twinkling had driven them off entirely. As lonely as I was, I laughed out right.

(14)

In this instance, Magoffin feels as though her “faithful Ring” is more of a companion to keep her company than her husband. She is amused and entertained by Ring, which puts her at ease in her lonely state. Faunce claimed that “with Ken so silent and unmoved, I was dependent on Tige’s response to any interest and enthusiasm of mine” (7).

Again, the fiction of Laura Ingalls Wilder provides a look at the love of a dog. Laura and Jack may be connected deeply with the symbolism of the westward movement but they too are connected deeply to each other. Laura feels that “He understood; they had always understood each other. He had taken care of her when she was little. . . He was especially Laura’s own dog” (11). Jack served as her companion for many years and as a result, her protector.

Dogs served as the protector of the family because dogs were the link between the wild and the domesticated. Dogs were a vital part of the family as companions, while still attaining a wildness that allowed them to defend the family from unwelcome guests,

including wild animals. Magoffin has a run-in with some wolves in which, “Ring, my dear, good dog! was lying under my side of the bed, which was next to the wolves, the instant they came up, he had been listening, he flew out with a fierce bark, and drove them away” (13). Magoffin writes that “I felt *safe* [sic] with this trusty soldier near me”(18). Ring provides the protection and most importantly the reassurance of “foolish fears. . .for I knew he [her husband] would ridicule them” (18). The wildness of the land was very frightening at times, the uncertainty caused constant fear for many and Magoffin was able to calm these fears with the knowledge that Ring was near her.

Dogs are protectors of the pioneer family in the fiction, as well. They are the link between wild and domesticated. Jack in Little House on the Prairie is a bulldog that on many occasions is protector of the Ingalls family. As with Magoffin and Ring, Jack provides the Ingalls with the feeling of security; which becomes a very important mental necessity on unknown land. Jack does not have the capacity to keep them from harm on many occasions. One such occasion is when their home is surrounded by a wolf pack and Jack just “growled and showed his teeth at the quilt in the doorway” (95) but Laura believes that “the wolves might howl, but they could not get in while Pa and Jack were there”(98).

Dogs were still considered to be less important animals compared to humans on the hierarchical scale, and were still expected to provide a service to humans. Westward travel caused many times of desperation, when the value of animals comes under scrutiny. In a letter from Virginia Elizabeth B. Reed, a member of the Donner party, to the family they left behind she writes “we laid down on it and spred another over us and

then put the dogs on top it was the coldest night you most ever saw the wind blew and if it hadn't been for the dogs we would have frozen" [sic] (75). In this situation, they use the dogs to shield themselves from the cold, concerned about their own lives. Later, they were stranded in makeshift cabins, unable to cross the mountains during the winter of 1846 when they "had to kill little cash the dog & eat him we ate his head and feet & hide & every thing about him. . . we lived on little cash a week and after Mr Breen would cook his meat we would take the bones and boil them 3 or 4 days at a time" [sic] (78). Reed appears to have cared for "little cash" because using trivial terms usually refers to something we think of as "cute" and something we have an emotional connection with. It is obvious that the most basic needs of survival outweigh human life to animal life, even if one was affectionate towards the animal.

Dogs were not the only animals that provided an emotional bond during times of isolation because of the land. Mollie Sanford writes on September 15, 1857, "It seems the 'cow' is the most prominent character in this Journal. The most of my adventures are connected with her" (52). The cow named Boss provides her with milk, entertainment and companionship. Sanford has a close connection to the cow and states "I knew very well that 'Boss' would not allow such a strange man to come near her" (51). Sanford is the only person familiar enough with Boss to be allowed to milk her. This shows the companionship between Sanford and Boss. Due to this relationship, Sanford writes Boss as an important part of her experience in the west, thus giving Boss importance as an individual actor.

Animals such as cows, horses, and oxen were essential to the westward journey and settlement. These domesticated animals are used as work animals for travel and income. Faunce writes of two new horses they name Witte and Teddy; “while we tended them, we learned to love them”(6). While travelling through New Mexico in November, Faunce tells about a situation when Witte becomes ill and she tells him “we all had to have each other to live at all, and this was no time for one to go back on the others” (52). During this episode, she and Ken display great affection for the horse but they also have human demands to meet and they agree “the only thing to do and without more delay, was to get a horse to help Teddy pull the wagon. We might yet keep our appointment” (50). Whether or not they have affection for these animals is irrelevant to the fact that they are there to provide a service. The work that they do is more important than any affection for the animals.

The cow was primarily a source of food and income. Nannie Alderson writes about her life on a ranch with her husband, a cowboy; thus, cows were their main source of income. Alderson remarks about a “motherless calf” she received as a wedding present which they “called him Jack. . .we kept him till he was a big five-year-old steer. . .he brought enough to buy a much-needed carpet to cover the splintery boards of my room” (52). This passage shows that the cow, though named was useful only for monetary gain with little emotional attachment.

Magoffin, more idealistic than some of the other women, talks affectionately about the “poor oxen” that are in “fear of their oppressors [who] will compel the brutes to pull till they move it, and as a reward for their perseverance they come off with bloody

necks from the yoke's rubbing, and their heads and backs well whip-lashed" (27).

Magoffin is aware of the darker side of travel, and the pain the oxen endure; but she does not consider they would be unable to travel without the oxen.

The fictional accounts include evidence that animals were used for monetary gain and work, as well. In Little House of the Prairie, they purchase Pet and Patty to take the Ingalls to "go see the west" (Wilder 2). The horses provide the Ingalls with labor to drive them to the west and once they are settled they are used to plow the field. They also attain a cow and a calf after they have settled on the prairie from work Pa does for some cowboys and "everyone was happy because now there would be milk to drink, and perhaps even butter for the cornbread" (Wilder 171). There is very little affection for the cow and calf, they do not name them and when they leave the prairie "Pa told Mr. Scott to take the cow and calf" (Wilder 318). Domesticated animals are useful to humans, which is why they were domesticated.

Cather writes about animals as important elements to the success of farming, Alexandra's father failed due to animals:

One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs from cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. (20)

Problems arise with the domesticated animals twice from wild animals interfering. Work animals are vital to the success of the farm.

Yet, even the work animals provide entertainment and companionship. In By the Shores of Silver Lake Laura describes her first bareback horse ride; “Then everything smoothed into the smoothest rippling motion. This motion went through the pony and through Laura and kept them sailing over waves in rushing air” (54). Laura develops a great attachment to horses after this incident and loves them for the rest of her life. Laura was unable to experience the horses directly although “I always wanted to, but Pa won’t let me” (49). After this encounter, she feels a great connection to horses. Horses represented the freedom that Laura craved. When she sees the Wilder boys horses for the first time she exclaims, ““Oh, what beautiful horses!”” and “with all her heart wished for such horses” (Wilder 262). Being in the west allows Laura the freedom to experience horseback riding, something she may not have had the opportunity to experience in the east. Horses symbolize the freedom to experience new things that Laura loves about the west.

Humans fear or feel burdened by wild violent animals as opposed to domesticated animals; while both can provide financial gain, wild animals cannot be controlled as easily. The uncertainty of safety causes the wild animals to fill a different place in the minds of the travelers. Tabitha Brown relates an honest account of fear, “Pause for a moment and consider my situation—worse than alone; in a strange wilderness; without food, without fire; cold and shivering; wolves fighting and howling all around me; darkness of night forbade the stars to shine upon me; solitary—all was solitary as death (Holmes 55). Brown states very plainly that death is the ultimate fear because it is the ultimate solitary experience, which causes the great fear of the unknown. The biggest

fear comes from the violent animals most often the wolf, bear, or coyote, but others as well. The presence of wild animals is always felt and feared; they represent the uncertainty of the west and the randomness of nature. The randomness is more obvious in the wild, where death is a part of everyday life and is not a sterile civilized affair any longer.

The pioneers could not control violent wild animals and thus, the fear that they could be killed at any time by a wild beast was very overpowering. Magoffin writes that that Ring protected her from “bear, panther, wolves, &c” (78). She encounters “a wolfish kind of serenade” early in the trip (13). Faunce writes about an encounter while travelling in the desert when they meet a lion and she states, “There’s nothing so comforting as a dead lion” (34). While travelling through the woods of Oregon, Elizabeth Dixon Smith states, “these woods are infested with wild cats panthers and wolves a man told me that he had killed 7 tigers but they are a species of wolves” (Holmes 147). Wild animals can be harmful in other ways than direct killing, Virginia E. B. Reed writes, “the Bears took the provision the men had cashed and we had but very little to eat” (79). The fiction of Wilder often mentions hearing “the long, wailing howl form the dark prairie. They all knew what it was” (32). The sound of howling wolves was familiar to travellers on the prairie. The Ingalls experience a frightening event with a wolf pack that surrounds the newly built home that does not even have a door yet. Laura is less frightened and more excited about the encounter with the wolf pack. Laura does fear the wolf pack, but she welcomes the wildness of the situation. Wilder writes,

Laura was too scared to make a sound. . . She wanted to go to Pa, but she knew better than to bother him now./“Want to see them, Laura?” he asked, softly./ Laura couldn’t say anything, but she nodded, and padded across the ground to him. She had never seen such big wolves. The biggest one was taller than Laura. He was taller even than Mary. He sat in the middle, exactly opposite Laura. Everything about him was big—his pointed ears, and his pointed mouth with the tongue hanging out, and his strong shoulders and legs, and his two paws side by side, and his tail curled around the squatting haunch. His coat was shaggy gray and his eyes were glittering green. (96)

Laura connects with the wolves by appreciating their beauty and the beauty of the uncertainty of nature. While the creatures were fascinating to encounter, the wolves could them if they choose to do so. The wild was not only uncertain, it was random.

Travelers found mosquitoes burdensome and even deadly. Magoffin writes, “The mosquitoes [sic], impudent things, had learned more sense than to ‘buz before the bite’” (13-14). The mosquitoes were a constant source of pain for Magoffin. The same problem occurs for Sallie Hester while in San Jose in 1850; the entry states, “Mosquitoes nearly devoured us”(Holmes 246). These burdensome creatures nearly caused the death of the Ingalls family in Little House on the Prairie. The chapter entitled “Fever ‘N’ Ague” is devoted entirely to the illnesses resulting that “No one knew, in those days, that

fever ‘n’ ague was malaria, and that some mosquitoes give it to people when they bite them” (198).

The pioneers hunted primarily for food and hides—hunting for protection was not mentioned by any of the women nearly as often. An exception to this occurs in the fictional Little House on the Prairie when Pa “hunted that panther. And he hunted the next day and the next day. . . Pa said he would not stop till he killed that panther”(Wilder 262).

Wild animals were the main source of sustenance for pioneers, including pioneer women. Mollie Sanford claims that she “had been on the rampage for three days, exploring the woods, catching fish and helping in the garden” (33). Sanford provides food for her family by fishing often. Faunce writes that their diet consisted of “fresh meat as we killed it ourselves. Usually we had rabbit; once or twice there were doves or sage hen. Once when we shot a prairie dog to get oil for the guns, the meat looked so good I cooked some, but we had to throw it out.” (42). Hunting for food and hides in The Little House on the Prairie is also pictured as a part of everyday life that sustains the family:

Wild animals were wearing their thick winter fur, and Pa set his traps in the creek bottoms. Every day he visited them, and every day he went hunting. Now that nights were freezing cold, he shot deer for meat. He shot wolves and foxes for their fur, and his traps caught beaver and muskrat and mink” (Wilder 232-233).

The buffalo were killed for meat and hides early on and later for mere sport. The ability of humans to destroy wild animals marked the end of the wild and a beginning of civilization. With the destruction of animals like wolves and buffalo, there was no longer fear and no longer wilderness. Virginia E.B. Reed remarks that “paw goes a buffalo hunting most every day and kils 2 or 3 buffalo every day—paw shot a elk” (73). Alderson is on the verge of the buffalo disappearance stating:

I am afraid that the conservation of buffalo, or any other wild game, simply did never occurred to the westerner of those days . . . There was nothing left of those great bison herds, which had covered the continent, but carcasses. I saw them on my first drive out to the ranch, and they were lying thick all over the flat above our house, in all stages of decay. So wasteful were the hunters . . .” (16-17).

Alderson shows great awareness about the elimination of the buffalo yet when “Mr. Alderson killed the last buffalo ever seen in our part” she hurries out to “snip a sackfull [sic] of the coarse, curly hair from his mane to stuff a pillow with” (17). This contradiction illustrates the relationship between women and animals. Women did feel emotional attachment to the natural world but they were eager to alter the wild into a civilized place. Near the end of By the Shores of Silver Lake it is remarked, “‘The buffalo are gone,’ Laura thought, ‘And now we are homesteaders’” (Wilder 285).

Wild animals, though feared and hunted, were also respected and enjoyed.

Women writers have beautiful things to say about the wild beasts roaming the land.

Magoffin states:

We have seen several antelope too this morning. It is a noble animal indeed; and there is certainly nothing that moves with more majestic pride, or with more apparent disdain to inferior animals than he does. With his proud head raised aloft, nostrils expanded wide, he moves with all the lightness, ease and grace imaginable (50).

Mollie Sanford writes “The little boys have been chasing squirrels and finding all sorts of curiosities in the woods, and are wild with delight” (32). The abundance of animals is very exciting to the travelers. A scene from Little House on the Prairie shows Laura and Mary intrigued by the animals on the prairie:

Huge rabbits bounded away before them, birds fluttered up and settled again. The tiny dicki-birds were everywhere, and their tiny nests were in the tall weeds. And everywhere there were little brown-striped gophers. These little creatures looked soft as velvet. They had bright round eyes and crinkling noses and wee paws. They popped out of their holes in the ground, and stood up to look at Mary and Laura. Their hind legs folded under their haunches, their little paws folded tight to their chests, and they looked exactly like bits of dead wood sticking out of the ground. Only their bright

eyes glittered. Mary and Laura wanted to catch one to take to Ma (44).

This scene shows that Laura and Mary enjoy the animals of the prairie but they want to contain them and control them. They cannot merely observe the animals, they have to try to change them.

Women wrote animals into the western scene using detailed descriptions from the emotional connections. Animals participating in the journey are often overlooked and their relevance is often lessened because they are non-human, just as the land is overlooked as a participant in the westward movement. Animals experiencing the westward movement were changed and were a part of changing pioneer women. Consequently, the relationship between animals and women was essential to the western experience. Animals, even more so than the land, have lacked adequate discussion concerning the experience of westward travel made by women in the nineteenth century. Yet, through women's writing it is apparent that animals were vital elements involved in the westward experience, and considered individual participants to the experience.

Chapter 3 Domestic Sphere

Women writers provide evidence that the definition of the domestic sphere changed within the unsettled west. Pioneer women have been associated with bringing civilization to the unsettled west. The domestic realm has long been considered women's responsibility and this conception traveled with the pioneers to the west. H. Elaine Lindgren reminds us that

The 'cult of true womanhood' provided a powerful blueprint even for frontier women, perpetuating the idea that men and women occupied "separate spheres." The woman's world was private and domestic while the man's was public and active. True womanhood was defined by the four cardinal virtues of poetry, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness" (218).

While this notion accompanied many women to the west, many women changed their perceptions towards the validity of such standards. The westward experience allowed women to redefine the home individually and socially. Because the domestic realm has been considered women's work, it has oftentimes been considered a lesser role due to our capitalistic society. In capitalistic societies, work outside the home is often considered more valuable than domestic duties. According to Marilyn Ferris Motz,

The transformation of a house, a physical structure, into a home, with its resonant emotional meanings, has been in our culture a traditional task of women. The importance of this work has frequently been overlooked, in part because the work process is hidden from public view" (1)

During the settlement of the west, the notion that women were capable of performing only domestic duties was suspended because survival depended upon the blurring of gender defined jobs. Catherine Haun asserts,

The latter service was expected of us all—men and women alike, was very indefinite and might mean anything from building campfires and washing dishes to fighting Indian, holding back a loaded wagon on a down grade or lifting it over boulders [sic] when climbing a mountain. (167)

The freedom of the western land allowed some women to realize their many talents, both in and out of the domestic sphere. Many pioneer women did not feel that domestic work was oppressive, but instead took pride in their work and their home. The domestic sphere was more valued in the unsettled land as opposed to the civilized east because the idea of the home was different. Consequently, women should be valued as equal participants in the creation of a new life within an unsettled land because “it was essential that this [domestic] work be done” (Lindgren 223).

Pioneer women saw the domestic sphere from a variety of angles, but linking them all is the notion that because of the western experience women were changed and their definition of home changed. To begin with, I will show how the importance of the home changed as a result of the western experience. Next, I will show how some women recognized alternatives to the standard definition of home because of physical conditions and aesthetic worth. To conclude, I will show how the home came to be an indicator of civilization as the west was settled during the nineteenth century.

Central to the concerns of many women pioneers was the importance of the home. The domestic sphere is often taken for granted as a stable fixture in civilized life, maintained primarily by women. Life in civilized society revolves around the home as a retreat from the outside world. These perceptions changed as women headed west. The importance of the home intensified as women traveled west because pioneers were faced with a land void of civilized homes. Appreciation for the home, due to the work that is required to make a home, also became intensified by the western experience.

Pioneer women wrote about the home as a place that provided security and stability from the wildness of the western land. The importance of the home on a functional level rested on the notion that home was a refuge from the hardship of the wilderness. Pioneers lived in constant fear of the uncertainty of the natural world, which forced people to reexamine the significance of the home. Because of the new concept of home, many pioneer women realized that the domestic sphere was a necessary part of survival.

Many of the pioneer women discovered the importance of home through fear of the wilderness. Royce states, "At first the oppressive sense of homelessness, and an instinct of watchfulness, kept me awake. Perhaps it was not to be wondered at in one whose life had so far, been spent in city or town, surrounded by accompaniments of civilization and who was now, for the first time in her life 'camping out.'" (4-5). Mollie Sanford writes of the uncertainties of the land stating, "we were coming into wilderness sure enough! but I am prepared for *anything*" (11). Haun writes in retrospect of the journey's "hardships and dangers and the fear and dread that hung as a pall over every

hour. Although not so thrilling as were the experiences of many who suffered in reality what we feared, but escaped. . .” (185). Faunce explains that “It’s queer that, while alertness never leaves a person sleeping in the open” (33). The fear of the uncontrolled wild propelled pioneer women to appreciate the safety provided by a home.

The uninhabited land deeply affected many pioneer women. The realization of the lack of civilization was hard for some pioneer women to deal with emotionally. Sarah Royce states, “No house was in sight. . .I had for months anticipated this hour, yet, not till it came, did I realize the blank dreariness of seeing night come on without house or home to shelter us and our baby-girl” (4). Faunce writes that “the country was desolate and forsaken to the last faint cry of lonesomeness. . .I listened with an apprehension that was physical” (24). The barrenness was a constant reminder to pioneer women of the lack of home and civilization. This reminder caused some pioneer women to long for a settled home where they could feel secure.

A different way that made the home important to pioneer women was the notion that women were able to express themselves artistically through the domestic sphere. The home has traditionally been viewed as only a shelter and not as something that could be considered art. Motz claims that “Recently, many scholars have begun to question these assumptions and to attempt to view the unpaid domestic activities of women as valid and valuable in aesthetic as well as economic terms” (2). The home can be empty and still provide protection from the elements, but the alterations make the home a pleasant place. The decoration of the home and the work involved in homemaking gave women an aesthetic outlet. This caused pioneer women to strive to attain the peace that

accompanies understanding the value of a home. Therefore, as women realized the importance of maintaining a home, they began to alter their perceptions of what a home means.

The decorations and furniture of the home are artistic expressions of the pioneer women. Pioneer women took the time in their writings to describe in detail the things that were in their homes. Magoffin notes that in the tent home “every thing is complete. . . we have a table in it that is fastened to the pole, and a little stand above it that serves for a dressing bureau—it holds our glass, combs &c. Our bed is as good as many houses have; sheets, blankets, counterpanes, pillows &c. We have carpet made of sail duck”(6). Royce describes her new home in detail, “But the parlor—that was my pride (129) and boasts that “my establishment was now quite aristocratic” (132).

The Ingalls family shows the artistry associated with settling into a home on several occasions. For instance, on one occasion in Little House on the Prairie, “Ma limped, though her sprained ankle was beginning to get well. But soon she swept the earthen floor, and then Mary and Laura began to help her carry things into the house” (Wilder 72). Even when Ma is injured, she feels compelled to beautify their new home. When they arrive at their new home in By the Shores of Silver Lake, Ma states, “We can get settled here in a jiffy. Bring me the broom” (Wilder 145). To Ma, the making of the home is the beautification of the home.

Some women appreciated the art of housekeeping by learning domestic duties as a part of being pioneer women. These women were anxious to learn the skill of housemaking and celebrated its aestheticism. Alderson encounters the “west with

romantic ideas of being a helpmeet to a man in a new country, but I was sadly ill-equipped” (19) and she “knew no more of cooking than I did of Greek” (19) when she arrives; “the idea that men could cook was something new under the sun to me, but the men in Montana could and did, and most of what I learned during my first years as a housewife I learned from them” (30). Haun and her husband left Iowa in 1849 with a large party to migrate to California in search of gold to cover the debts of their business. Like Alderson, “having been reared in a slave state my culinary education had been neglected and I had yet to make my first cup of coffee” (169) yet she agreed to “do the cooking, if everybody else would help” (169) when the cook quit and headed back home. The experience she encountered with the domestic sphere gives her great pride.

Through the redefinition of the domestic sphere, pioneer women redefined their own value. Most women that made the journey westward celebrated the role of the home. Royce explains,

The conveniences of civilized life, the comforts of home, can not be keenly appreciated, or even fully seen, by those who have never been, for a time, shut out from them. Repeatedly in the days that now followed, did I find myself feeling that I had never before known the brightness of the evening lamp-light, nor the cheeriness of the morning breakfast room, with all their orderly accompaniments; that I had never before realized the worth of quiet domestic life, unworried by ever-threatening dangers. (103).

The second way that westward travel dramatically changed women's perspective of the domestic sphere was by offering alternatives to civilized life. 'Home' came to mean different things to pioneer women as they created improvised homes. The definition of home might include anything that could be used as a shelter rather than the standard term. Another alternative that pioneer women found was a rebellion from the domestic sphere. Experiencing the freedom of the west allowed pioneer women to consider a way of life that was different from the civilized world they had left behind.

Pioneer women showed excitement at having their own homes, even when those homes were not a house. As a result, pioneer women came to appreciate home in a new way. Magoffin shows excitement the first night spent "at *my own table* and in *my own house*,--I can say that few women in civilized life ever could, that the first house of his own to which my husband took me to after our marriage was a *tent*" (6). Royce shows her anxieties about not having shelter stating, "I knew we were to camp; but surely there would be a few trees or a sheltering hillside against which to place our wagon. No, only the level prairie stretched on each side of the way. Nothing indicated a place for us,--a cozy nook, in which for the night we might be guarded, at least by banks and boughs" (4). Haun writes in her journal of an account of temporary housing, "As we lived in a tent and had been on the move for nine months, traveling 2400 miles we were glad to settle down and go housekeeping in a shed that was built in a day of lumber purchased with the first fee" (185). Faunce tells of their sleeping arrangements remarking, "We made our bed on the ground as usual" (20). The fictional account of the westward journey in Little House on the Prairie relates a common alternative home for travels.

Laura is saddened when the house is build because “the wagon had been home for a long time” (Wilder 54).

While some women were attempting to make a home wherever they could, others were enjoying the lack of the civilization. Even the women that eventually opted to settle into a home were able to appreciate the freedom of the uninhabited land. Magoffin states,

Oh, this is a life I would not exchange for a good deal! There is such independence, so much free uncontaminated air, which impregnates the mind, the feelings, nay every thought, with purity. I breathe free without that oppression and uneasiness felt in the gossiping circles of a settled home. (10)

Alderson expresses the same sense of freedom from societal constraints:

Kansas then was the West. I felt that the very air there was easier to breathe. In Union you had to have your pedigree with you to be accepted anywhere, but in Atchinson it didn't matter one bit who your ancestors were or what you did for a living; if you were nice you were nice. What impressed me most was the fact that a girl could work in an office or a store, yet that wouldn't keep her from been invited to the nicest homes or marrying one of the nicest boys. This freedom to work seemed to me a wonderful thing. (8)

In the fictional work Little House on the Prairie, Laura is glad they leave their house and make the wagon home again. Laura states that “Everything was just as it used to be

before they built the house. . . They were all there together, safe and comfortable for the night, under the wide, starlit sky. Once more the covered wagon was home” (Wilder 334-335). The alternatives to domesticity encouraged pioneer women to reexamine how they perceived the notion of home.

Home and community are the ultimate indicators of civilization. The west gradually attained these features as pioneers ventured to unsettled land. Wilder glorifies the arrival of civilization to the west with the presence of the “little china woman [that] had come all the way and had not been broken”(117). The china doll represents the mother in Wilder’s fiction, who also survived the journey. Like the worn china doll, pioneer women were changed by the journey but were not broken. Women are credited with the domestication of the western land because home is associated as a feminine sphere. Women did many things in the west to leave their mark, but their own writing shows that most pioneer women were connected to the success of the home in a positive way.

With the advent of women to the west came a change in all-male homes and communities because women were seen as the force behind domesticity. For example, Sanford reports that upon their arrival to Nebraska City, “I see such lots of men, but very few ladies and children. I heard one fellow shout, “Hurrah for the girls”. . . “and Mrs. Allen, our landlady, said, ‘I’m glad to see the girls’” (12). Alderson tells of the alterations that were made for her arrival to her new husband’s ranch that was occupied by all bachelors. One major change was “a certain humble but necessary structure in the

backyard” . . . because “men living alone and very primitively weren’t apt to bother with such a nicety” (32).

Many of the pioneer women marked their success by attaining a home. The home was the ultimate goal at the end of the long journey. Pioneer women longed to achieve this goal for different reasons. Some women wanted to provide their children with a safe environment. Other women desired a home in order to attain independence. Regardless of their intentions, most pioneer women took great pride in the success of their homes.

The maternal need to protect their children encouraged many women to settle into a home. The success of the home for these women pioneers is based upon the welfare of their children. In a letter to her parents, Rachel Fischer writes, “William & I are living at his Father [sic] in a house to ourselves. . . I must now leave you to conjecture the cause of my changing my way of liveing [sic]” (104-105). Fischer implies that she and her husband have decided to settle down into a home because she is pregnant and is pleased to have a home that is their own. Royce claims that “Life can never be very lonely or dull to a mother who sees her children healthful and happy” (123).

The independence attained from the home is best exemplified through the life of the fictional Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers! Alexandra turns the family farm, inherited from her father into a successful venture. She becomes independent through her intelligence and hard work. She takes great pride in knowing that “I am still running my own house” (Cather 91). Alexandra learns that through her home she has succeeded because she feels that “there is great peace here. . . and freedom” (Cather 307).

The redefinition of the domestic sphere changed as a result of the westward movement. Pioneer women came to appreciate the value of home and their own value as being connected to the home. The pioneer experience suspended many of the standards set by civilized society. These standards were reinstated as the west became populated and civilized. Pioneer women distinguished what they valued personally for the domestic sphere instead of what society expected them to value from the domestic sphere. From this realization, women oftentimes considered themselves more of an independent participant in the home. The value of women's participation in the westward movement is often slighted because domestic duties are often slighted, yet women wrote about these experiences as valid and important. Because women are predominantly linked to the domestic sphere, the change in value of the domestic sphere also changed the value of women. Pioneer women were prompted to change their perceptions about their value and the value of home.

Conclusion

From this study, it can be determined that women took part in great social change which included the empowering of women, land, animals, and the domestic sphere as important participants in the westward experience through pioneer women's writing. Women were changed because they were able to encounter a world that was different because it lacked civilization. This encouraged women to ponder issues that were unknown to them, and consequently write them down. The act of writing, places control in the hands of the writer. Writing as an instrument of control was empowering to women, and to the topics that they discussed. Pioneer women controlled what they examined from a female perspective and created literature that would include elements that may otherwise have been omitted. Pioneer women discussed topics such as land, animals, and the domestic sphere as central elements in their lives that became intensified because of the westward journey.

My study appears to deny that women suffered oppression during the nineteenth century, which is not my intention at all. The intention of my study has been to turn a new eye towards the study of women's writing and draw positive forces from the texts. Women were without many rights during the nineteenth century but I contend that pioneer women who made the journey west were empowered by their experience. These women felt that their experiences were important enough to write about them. The act of writing is a unique way of attempting to control the experiences in life.

Ecofeminist critics disagree about the scope of women's involvement and independence during nineteenth century western settlement. Gerda Lerner claims that

“historical scholarship, up to the most recent past, has seen women as marginal to the making of civilization and as unessential to those pursuits defined as having historical significance” (Lahar 92). Yet, pioneer women’s texts provide evidence that women were very much involved in westward travel and settlement. Through their encounters with land, animals, and the domestic sphere during their journeys, women redefined these connections through observations in their writing. The historical significance of women’s literature concerning westward travel during the nineteenth century is centered upon subjects that are often left out or undermined. Pioneer women wrote about what was happening during their own experiences, thus the scope can often seem small or distorted. Yet, when these issues are brought to light, their impact on historical and social importance is heightened.

Some ecofeminists critics also disagree about the desire and willingness of women to travel westward during the nineteenth century. Lillian Schlissel argues that “however powerful the attempt to revise history, the period of the Overland Trail migration (1840-60) produces overwhelming evidence that women did not greet the idea of going West with enthusiasm, but rather that they worked out a painful negotiation with historical imperatives and personal necessity” (155). In contrast, Georgi-Findlay states that “women’s historians generally find that women emigrants shared the men’s economic concerns and optimism associated with pioneering” (69). Pioneer women differed greatly in their discussions about the west because each woman had a different experience even when encountering the same issues. Most pioneer women were optimistic about the chance to experience the west and saw westward migration as an

opportunity rather than a negative obligation. Pioneer women often had different agendas for heading west, and thus have something different to say within the same context. Many pioneer women discovered their new voice through writing down their experiences.

Great work has been done in past studies relating to ecofeminism and to women's rights. As a starting point, it was necessary to point out the oppression that women encountered. This critique of societal standards encouraged great change in our perceptions of gender and in women's rights. Women would not be where they are today if it had not been for the work of past critics. As we venture into a new frontier of ecofeminist criticism in the twenty-first century, we must acknowledge that oftentimes women celebrated being women and did not always consider themselves to be held back by the patriarchal institution. Frankly, most of the pioneer women enjoyed the experience and took pride in being good wives and mothers. The value of historical and literary worth must change as well. Women's pioneer literature has been deemed less valuable because we have overlooked the issues that women found to be important. Land, animals, and the domestic sphere may not appear to be significant to the westward movement at first glance, but this study has shown that pioneer women did place value on them .

The westward movement irreversibly altered our society in both positive and negative ways. It is impossible to ignore the impact that the settlement had on existing structures located in the west. Destruction of a great magnitude affected land, animals, and existing cultures. Many terrible mistakes were made during this time, but should we

ignore the positive aspects of such a mass migration? Women were as much altered by land, animals, and the domestic sphere; as land, animals, and the domestic sphere were altered by pioneer women. Although certain atrocities took place as a result of the westward movement, pioneer women during this time were able to take advantage of the tear in the societal fabric and become more independent by opting to write down their experiences. Through their writing, women also gave an often unheard voice to land, animals, and the domestic sphere.

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