

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for These Happy Golden Years

by
Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, These Happy Golden Years

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Interest Level: MG

Fifteen-year-old Laura begins teaching and is courted by her future husband, Almanzo.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Emotions, Love; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Series, Little House

Main Characters

Almanzo Wilder the quiet man who courts Laura by taking her for rides in his buggy and sleigh

Cap Garland Almanzo's friend who helps him with his wild horses

Caroline Ingalls (Ma) Laura's wise and gentle mother

Carrie Ingalls Laura's younger sister who attends school with her

Charles and Martha Harrison the brother and sister who attend Laura's first school

Charles Ingalls (Pa) Laura's father, who loves music and encourages Laura to be brave and thoughtful

Clarence Brewster the boy in Laura's first class who initially defies Laura's authority as teacher

Florence Wilkins Laura's friend who fails the teacher's examination

Grace Ingalls Laura's youngest sister

Ida Brown Laura's friend from school who goes for a buggy ride with Laura and Almanzo

Laura Ingalls the central character of the book; she is a spirited young woman who earns money to send her sister Mary to college and later marries Almanzo

Mary Ingalls Laura's blind sister, who attends a special college

Mary Power one of Laura's closest school friends

Mr. Lewis Brewster the man who boards Laura while she is teaching at her first school

Mr. McKee Mrs. McKee's husband, who has to stay in town to earn money while his family lives on his homesteading claim

Mr. Owen Laura's teacher, who regrets not allowing Laura to graduate because he wanted the class to graduate together

Mrs. Lib Brewster the emotionally disturbed wife of Mr. Brewster, who hates having a boarder and longs to go back East

Mrs. McKee the dressmaker who hires Laura to sew; she asks Laura to stay with her while Mr. McKee stays in town to work

Nellie Oleson a classmate whom Laura dislikes

Ruby and Tommy Brewster Clarence Brewster's younger brother and sister, who also attend Laura's first school

Uncle Tom Laura's uncle who comes to visit and relate his adventures crossing the prairies

Vocabulary

cutter a small lightweight sleigh

impertinent impolite; rude

pantry a room or closet used for storing food

satchel a small bag for carrying things

sobered became serious

Synopsis

When Laura Ingalls wants to earn money to keep her blind sister Mary in college, she leaves home to accept her first teaching job, which will last eight weeks. She boards with the Brewster family twelve miles from home. Unfortunately, Mrs. Brewster hates having a boarder and is very unfriendly to Laura. Laura's problems worsen when some of her students misbehave. By the end of first week, Laura longs to go home. She is surprised, however, when Almanzo Wilder comes for her in his sleigh to take her home to her family for the weekend. After Laura spends a pleasant weekend home, Almanzo takes her back to the Brewsters.

By the second week the class seems out of control,

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for These Happy Golden Years by Laura Ingalls Wilder

and Mrs. Brewster is unbearable. Laura is very relieved when Almanzo picks her up again on Friday. At home Pa advises her not to confront Clarence, her most troublesome student. Ma adds that Laura should ignore the boy when he misbehaves.

After Laura takes Ma and Pa's advice, her class becomes more manageable. Laura worries, meanwhile, that Almanzo plans to court her. Finally she tells him that she is not interested in him romantically, and she assumes he will no longer be willing to take her home on weekends. The following week, Laura awakens to see Mrs. Brewster brandishing a knife in an attempt to force Mr. Brewster to take her back East. Laura dreads having to spend the weekend with the Brewsters. Although she secretly hopes that Almanzo will come to get her in spite of her rudeness toward him, she realizes that the extremely cold weather would prohibit him from coming even if he wanted to. She is surprised when Almanzo arrives despite the cold and her previous behavior.

Laura's final week of teaching goes well, and Almanzo drives her home from the Brewsters for the last time. The next day Laura feels lonely as she sees couples driving on Main Street in sleighs. She is delighted when Almanzo arrives to take her on a sleigh ride Sunday afternoon. Laura returns to her own school as a student and gets a job sewing on Saturdays for Mrs. McKee, a local dressmaker, to continue to earn money for Mary's special schooling.

In April, Uncle Tom comes to visit. He recounts his adventures crossing the prairies. When Almanzo comes for Laura, he jealously asks about Tom and is reassured to find that Tom is Laura's uncle. Soon after Tom leaves, Mrs. McKee asks if Laura will live with her on the McKee homesteading claim since Mr. McKee has to stay in town to work. Laura agrees, but she worries that she will miss Mary's summer visit. By the end of May, however, Mrs. McKee has adjusted to living alone, so Laura is able to go home.

During Mary's visit she surprises the family with what

she has accomplished in college, and Laura accepts another sewing job. The family decides to celebrate the Fourth of July at home rather than watch the fireworks in town. At the end of August, Mary returns to school.

In early winter Laura watches Almanzo break in a pair of wild colts. Before the colts are completely broken, Almanzo uses them to take Laura on frequent sleigh rides. He admires Laura's bravery in riding behind the spirited horses, since even most men in the town are not willing to take that risk.

At Christmas, Almanzo continues to lavish attention on Laura by giving her a beautiful hairbrush set. In spring Laura takes another teaching job and agrees to use the money to buy an organ as a surprise for Mary. Mary decides to visit a friend instead of coming home for the summer, however. Laura also takes a sewing job to earn a new dress for herself. The first Sunday she wears it, Almanzo comes to get her in his buggy. When he tries to put his arm around her, though, Laura forces him to pull away by startling the colts with the whip.

Another Sunday Almanzo brings Nellie Oleson along on their buggy ride. Laura is furious; she dislikes Nellie, who flirts with Almanzo as they ride. The following Sunday, Nellie is in the buggy again, so Laura startles the colts to scare her. Later, Laura tells Almanzo that he must choose between her and Nellie. On the following Sunday, Laura is relieved when Almanzo comes without Nellie. Almanzo and Laura's Sunday drive becomes a weekly occurrence.

On the Fourth of July, Almanzo arrives to get Laura with a new team of wild horses, Barnum and Skip. Laura attempts to get in the buggy three times before the horses finally bolt. As the summer progresses, though, the horses become tamer, and by the end of August, Barnum pulls Almanzo's buggy by himself. The horse seems gentler when Laura holds the reins.

In the fall Almanzo and Laura attend singing school. Laura and Almanzo leave class early so that

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for These Happy Golden Years by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Barnum is not frightened by the crowd. Laura gets into the buggy while Almanzo unties Barnum. The high-spirited horse runs off with Laura, and Laura has to run Barnum in circles before she is able to stop the buggy.

The next Sunday, Barnum is misbehaving again, so Laura offers to take the reins. Laura amazes Almanzo by slowing Barnum to a walk. Gradually Barnum's behavior improves. On the last night of singing school, he trots smoothly while Laura sings. When she is done singing, she asks Almanzo what he is thinking. He responds by asking whether she would like an engagement ring. Laura implies that she might accept one from him.

The next Sunday, Laura and Almanzo become engaged. They plan to marry after Almanzo builds their house the next summer. A few days later Almanzo has to leave suddenly to spend the winter with his family in Minnesota. Laura is lonely without him, but he writes often. On Christmas Eve the family, unable to go to church because of a storm, hears someone knocking on the door. It is Almanzo who has returned early from Minnesota.

In March Laura takes the teachers' examinations again. A few days later Laura learns that she passed the tests but her friend Florence did not. Florence offers Laura the teaching position that she can no longer take, and Laura accepts. With her first month's salary, Laura and Ma travel to town with Pa to buy fabric to make dresses and sheets. When they return to the wagon, they spot a blanketed lump in the wagon box. At home Pa reveals a sewing machine.

Later Laura wants to help her parents by giving them some of her teaching money. She worries that the sewing machine was expensive, so she insists that her parents use the money for Mary. Soon Mary comes home for the summer. She is surprised to find the organ that has been waiting for her for over a year. In June, Laura somewhat reluctantly finishes teaching her last class.

The summer passes. A few days after Mary returns

to school, Ma and Laura are working on a dress when Almanzo arrives. He wants to get married as soon as the house is built. His sister and mother want a big wedding that he cannot afford, so he hopes to be married before they arrive. Laura agrees, but Ma objects because Laura's white wedding dress will not be ready in time. She also wants Laura to have at least a small wedding but finally realizes that Laura and Almanzo's plans are best.

The following Wednesday Laura's things are loaded onto Almanzo's wagon, and Pa gives Laura a cow as a wedding gift. The next day Laura and Almanzo are married by Reverend Brown. They enjoy a wedding supper with the Ingalls family and then leave for their new house and their life together.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What does Laura do to keep her classroom under control?

Laura accepts that she will not be able to control her classroom through force. Instead, she uses psychology to outsmart Clarence. She stops giving him attention when he misbehaves. She also challenges him intellectually by implying that he is not capable of doing the same work as the other students. In addition, Laura stops playing with her students so she can maintain her authority. When Martha and Charles are late on a snowy day, she reprimands them even though she is sympathetic. By using these methods, Laura makes her students want to cooperate instead of engaging in power struggles.

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Literary Analysis

What events in this story show that bravery is important?

The difficult life of the pioneers required bravery in order to survive and prosper. Those who could not face hardships and summon the courage to persist usually gave up and went back East. Laura shows the determination and bravery needed to endure. For example, Laura returns to the Brewsters even after Mrs. Brewster threatened Mr. Brewster with a knife. Later, Laura is willing to get into Almanzo's buggy, which is pulled by a pair of wild colts. Laura even refuses to panic when Barnum runs away with her in the buggy after the singing lessons. Finally, Laura remains calm and strong when she takes a difficult teacher's examination.

Inferential Comprehension

What characteristics do Laura and Almanzo share that make them a good match?

Laura and Almanzo love horses and are good at handling them. Both of them feel it is important to be brave. Each is accustomed to the difficult life on the prairie, and both know how to save money. They share a love of music and are content being quiet for long periods of time.

Constructing Meaning

How does Laura persuade Ma to accept the money she earned from her last term of teaching?

First, she says that she does not need the money since she already has enough to pay for the dresses she needs. Then she points out that the money could be used to pay for Mary's visit or Mary's clothes. She concedes that Ma and Pa could manage on their own but states that she would like to help out one last time. This would make her feel better about going away, about not helping anymore, and about having so many new clothes.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details Mary describes some things she learned at the college for the blind. Have the

students read an excerpt from Helen Keller's autobiography to learn in more detail the types of things people learned in a college for the blind during this era. Ask them to write a brief report.

Recognizing Plot The relationship between Laura and Almanzo develops slowly throughout this book. Have the students create a plot line showing the significant moments in the story of their romance.

Understanding Dialogue Laura, Almanzo, Pa, and many others in this story often do not directly say what they mean. For instance, when Laura is telling her parents that she loves Almanzo and not just his horses, she says that she could not have one without the other. Locate two or three pieces of subtle dialogue and have the students interpret what the speaker means.

Responding to Literature Laura has a very difficult time staying at the Brewster house. Have the students think about what they would have done if they had been in her position. Have them take into consideration Laura's reasons for staying. Then have the students discuss their ideas in class.