
Portrayal of Challenging Childhood in Jeanette Wall's The Glass Castle

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Abstract

Literature is a body of written works. The name has traditionally been applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution. American literature refers to the body of written or literary works shaped in the history of the United States and its former colonies. Jeannette Walls was born in Phoenix, Arizona in 1960. As a child, her family moved all over the American Southwest. They had very little money and routinely experienced hunger and homelessness. Jeannette's mother, Rose Mary Walls, was a passionate painter and ambivalent about cooking meals and cleaning the house. Her father, Rex Walls, suffered from severe alcoholism. For the most part, her parents took a laissez faire approach to parenting, which meant that Jeannette and her siblings Lori, Brian, and Maureen were often left to protect and feed themselves. When Jeannette was a teenager, the family moved to Rex's Appalachian hometown of Welch, West Virginia. There Jeannette started working at the school newspaper, the Maroon Wave, in the seventh grade because it was the only club that didn't require money to join. This paper aims to present an extended definition on the meaning of the term American Literature, and it will discuss the background and how it has come about, the writing style of American authors and what makes the American text different and unique from other national literatures.

Key words: Compassion, Hardship, poverty, instability, dysfunction

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls portrays the Walls family's struggle with poverty, instability, and dysfunction. Through adversity, the characters find strength, resilience, and a unique way of viewing the world. Jeannette, the protagonist, learns to adapt and find strength in her unconventional upbringing. The instability of her family life, marked by her parents' unconventional choices and the lack of a stable home, becomes a source of resilience for her. She develops a sense of independence and resourcefulness, learning to navigate challenges with a determined spirit.

Rex Walls, Jeannette's father, embodies a complex portrayal of strength through his charismatic and creative nature. Despite his struggles with alcoholism and financial instability, Rex instills in his children a sense of wonder, curiosity, and an unconventional worldview. His dreams of building a "glass castle" represent a hope for something better, even in the face of harsh realities. The Walls family's nomadic lifestyle and encounters with poverty contribute to their ability to endure hardships. They learn to appreciate the value of non-materialistic things and develop a sense of self-reliance. Each setback becomes an opportunity for personal growth, as they find strength in their shared experiences. Jeannette's earliest memory is fire. While making hotdogs for herself at the age of three, her dress catches fire. Her mother throws a wool blanket around her to smother the flames and then runs to the neighbor's house to ask for a ride to the hospital. The hospital staff clearly thinks Jeannette is a victim of child abuse, however Jeannette says otherwise. She tells the nurses that cooking hot dogs is easy, but the nurses ask her questions about whether or not her parents hit her, etc. She tells the nurse making hot dogs is easy; and this is the first glimpse we get of her mother's philosophy on childrearing. She wants her children to be self-sufficient. Jeannette's burns are serious, so she needs a skin graft. Skin from her thigh is taken to cover her ribs, chest, and stomach. Fire is a motif in the novel. It is able to nourish, but it also destroys.

Jeannette's mother and father are intelligent people; dad could fix anything and mom thrived in the desert, in part, because of her knowledge. Rose Mary is also a certified teacher.

Jeannette compares her family to a cactus saying that they ate irregularly and "gorged" themselves when they did. By using this metaphor, Walls shows us that her family is tough

and a bit rough around the edges, and also resilient like a cactus. Rose Mary believes that suffering makes children stronger; more resilient.

As Jeannette glimpses New York City's skyline, she worries what people will think of her. She meets Lori's friend Evan at the bus station, and they walk to Zum Zum, a German restaurant where Lori works as a waitress. Lori seems exuberant, and Jeannette finds that New Yorkers are friendlier and more helpful than they appear. That night, Jeannette moves into the women's hostel with Lori. (115)

At this young age, Jeannette believes her dad to perfect with the exception of drinking. She describes him as fun when drinking beer and a monster when drinking liquor, which he only does when he has money. Always in pursuit of gold, Rex begins working on an invention called "The Prospector," a design intended to sift through sand detecting and separating gold nuggets from rocks and dirt by measuring the weight. Rex tells his children that once the Prospector is finished he will build them a "Glass Castle." He describes it as a big house with glass walls and ceilings, and a glass staircase. This image suggests a desire for future stability despite the lack of it in their current lives. This dream is something the kids want him to believe in because it can take his focus away from drinking and gambling, but glass is fragile as is the dream.

Walls also grapple with the need to establish boundaries in order to protect herself and her siblings from harm. Throughout the memoir, Walls struggles with her parents' erratic behavior and their inability to provide a stable and safe environment for their children. Despite her love for them, Walls recognizes the need to distance herself from their destructive influence in order to build a better life for herself and her siblings.

The tension between compassion and boundaries is exemplified in Walls' conflicted relationship with her father, Rex. While Walls loves her father deeply, she is also wary of his unpredictable behavior and the harm it often brings to their family. Walls' attempts to help her father are met with frustration and disappointment, as she realizes that she cannot save him from his demons. Despite her best efforts, Walls ultimately comes to terms with the need to prioritize her own well-being and that of her siblings over her father's needs. In the final chapters of the memoir, Walls reflects on the impact of her upbringing on her adult life and the choices she has made along the way. Despite the hardships she endured, Walls emerges as a resilient and determined individual, unwilling to let her past dictate her future. Through her courage and perseverance, Walls is able to break free from the cycle of poverty and dysfunction that plagued her childhood, forging a new path for herself and her family.

The Glass Castle is more than just a memoir; it is a testament to the transformative power of strength, compassion, and the resilience of the human spirit. Walls' story serves as a reminder that even in the darkest of times, there is hope to be found and beauty to be cherished. Through her powerful storytelling, Walls invites readers to confront their own struggles and embrace the inherent strength that lies within us all. As Walls herself reflects, "You should never have anyone, even your worst enemies. Everyone has something good about them. You have to find the redeeming quality and love the person for that (158)". Leo Tolstoy said "All happy families are like, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". But it seems that this saying went wrong for Walls Family, it was happy and unhappy in its own way. It consists of a band of people who were imperfectly perfect. It broke all conventions and represented a unique bond of love and support beyond human conscious. In an era of nonconformity, the non conformity they presented was of unconditional love and strength of human spirit.

The Walls Family seems to be the one where dysfunction is at heights but, the Family Dynamics it presents tells a very different story. It reveals the patterns of relating, or interactions, family alignment, hierarchies, roles that marvel anyone. Jeannette Walls grew up

with parents whose ideals and stubborn non conformity were both their curse and their salvation. Jeannette and her siblings were the ones who overcame the hardships of poverty, lack of support from their parents to embrace their dreams. Seemingly the credit for their success goes to Jeannette who even handedly showed the will power to take the burden of dreams. But in its real sense, primarily it is the lessons of self-sufficiency and fearlessness taught by their parents provided them necessary strength. The marital bond between Rex and Mary was the cornerstone of the family, in spite of all their flawed images. In an era of sexual liberty, union between these two was the result of unconditional support and love.

The Glass Castle is a testament to the indomitable nature of the human spirit and the power of love to transcend even the most challenging circumstances. Through her courageous and honest portrayal of her childhood, Walls inspires

readers to find strength in adversity, compassion in hardship, and hope in the face of despair. It is a memoir that will resonate with readers long after they have turned the final page, reminding us all of the enduring power of resilience, compassion, and the human capacity for redemption. *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls is a captivating memoir that delves deep into the complexities of family, resilience, and the human spirit. Through her raw and honest storytelling, Walls paints a vivid portrait of her tumultuous childhood marked by poverty, neglect, and the struggle to establish boundaries. Despite the hardships she faces, Walls and her sibling's exhibit remarkable resilience, finding strength in the face of adversity. Their acts of compassion towards one another offer the moments of warmth and connection. However, Walls also grapples with the need to establish boundaries in order to protect herself and her siblings from harm. This tension between compassion and boundaries serves as a central theme throughout the memoir, highlighting the complexities of familial relationships and the human capacity for both love and self-preservation. Ultimately, *The Glass Castle* is a testament to the transformative power of strength, compassion, and the resilience of the human spirit in overcoming life's greatest challenges.

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