

PSL

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Food for Thought: Food Security and Tone in *The Glass Castle*

The tone of Jeannette Walls' memoir, *The Glass Castle*, tends to drift in a rather grim direction. The Walls family is chronically homeless or poor, unable even, to afford heat in their house during the winter, with Jeannette writing "It got so cold in the house that icicles hung from the kitchen ceiling, the water in the sink turned into a solid block of ice, and the dirty dishes were stuck there as if they'd been cemented in place (176)". However, one of the most persistent problems that Jeannette and her family face is a lack of food.


The children are constantly hungry, and their parents are almost completely to blame. Jeannette's father is a raging and violent alcoholic who lacks the commitment to get better, as well as the inability to hold a steady job. Jeannette's mother is more worried about seeing the beauty in life than raising her children with full stomachs, and puts herself and her children in danger by remaining with Jeannette's father. Jeannette uses multiple scenes in the book to help illustrate her parents as a negative force in her life:

"One evening when dad was away and we had nothing to eat and we were all sitting around the living room trying not to think of food, mom kept disappearing under the blanket on the sofa bed... Brian yanked the covers back. Lying on the mattress next to mom was one of those huge family-sized hershey chocolate bars, the shiny silver wrapper torn back and pulled away. She'd already eaten half of it (173-74)."

This scene portrays Jeannette's mom as greedy and selfish, as well as helping to establish a dark and depressing tone for the book; the fact that a mother would do that to her own children seems unreasonable to most. Jeannette even makes this kind of neglect seem common with the nonchalant way that she writes "whenever mom was too busy to make dinner or we were out of food, we'd go back to the dumpster to see if any new chocolate was waiting for us (110)."

Jeanette must repeatedly perform actions and be put into situations that children should never experience. She must dig through garbage, steal from other children, hide money from her parents, and even endanger her teacher's job. However, the dark and saddening tone of the text is best represented by a scene in the middle of the text, where Jeannette literally locks herself in a bathroom stall to avoid the disdain of her classmates during school lunch. This scene, and the one that follow, also serve to highlight the negative emotions such as fear, paranoia and shame that Jeannette lives with. This next scene is preceded by Jeannette fishing a bologna sandwich out of a garbage can to give to her brother: "I began smelling the bologna. It seemed to fill the whole room. I became terrified that the other kids could smell it, too, and that they'd turn and see my overstuffed purse, and since they all knew I never ate lunch, they'd figure out that I had pinched it from the trash (173)." The rapid influx of information and new thoughts is used to accentuate the feelings of paranoia that Jeannette experiences, and conveys them perfectly to the reader.

Among Jeannette's rather bleak life, are sprinkled small bits of hope. One such scene occurs in Jeannette's elementary school days. After Jeannette's father loses yet another job she writes, "I didn't go hungry. Hot lunch at school cost a quarter, and we could usually afford that. When we couldn't and I told Mrs. Ellis, my fourth grade teacher, that I had forgotten my quarter,



she said her records indicated that someone had already payed for me (110).” While these small nuggets are a nice breath of fresh air for the reader, they do not change the underlying tones of the text. There are still numerous examples of “bad” for every example of “good;” Infact, the very next page explains how the Walls family stole money from the bank and clothes from department stores. But despite all of this, Jeannette and her family, with the exception of Mary, refuse to give up or give in.

The story of Jeannette Walls is like a week old brownie; the batter, the main substance, is stale, and leaves a bad taste in your mouth, but the sprinkles on top will always remain as a bastion of good. This is still a story of hardship and perseverance, one that provides plenty of opportunities for Jeannette to give up and turn out like her parents: homeless, unwanted, and sick. The fact that Jeannette does not succumb to the pain and tribulations are a light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. In the end, *The Glass Castle* is a dark and moody text, but one with a glimmer of hope that should not be overlooked.

