

PSL Student

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Glass Castle Literary Analysis

When one thinks of chronic homelessness, the image of a scraggly man or woman with a cardboard sign comes to mind, but then they do not think anything else of it. When one thinks of chronic homelessness, they almost never envision an entire family suffering the consequences of living a hungry-nomadic life; that is why the story of Jeannette Walls and “The Glass Castle” struck deep within readers everywhere. Not only does the novel address the issues of homelessness and poverty, Jeannette gives us a first hand look at how that type of life affected her childhood and how she was raised. Jeanette’s informal upbringing allowed her to become very independent, resourceful, and strong willed.

It is shown very early on in Walls memoir that she is very independent and resourceful; she has already begun cooking food for herself when she is not even tall enough to see over the stove. After an unfortunate cooking accident involving a stove and a very flammable -- yet fashionable -- tutu landed Jeannette in the hospital with severe burns, the nurses obviously started asking her questions as to how the accident had happened. When Jeannette explains that she had been cooking hotdogs for herself, the nurses were reasonably horrified at the thought of a toddler handling boiling water and fire. Jeannette goes on to explain: “‘Mom says I’m mature for my age,’ I told them, ‘and she lets me cook for myself a lot’” [Walls 11]. This is the first example we see of how Jeanette had to become independent at such a young age, thanks to her neglective parentage. She even states that her mother says that “people worried too much about their children. Suffering when you’re young is good for you...It immunized your body and soul,

and that was why she ignored us kids when we cried” [Walls 28]. This is a very backwards way of explaining why one would ignore the cries of their child; but it is the way that Jeannette has been raised and is a strong factor that shapes her into who she grows up to be. Had her parents been at her every beck and call, she definitely would not have nearly as self-sufficient as she turned out to be and if she definitely would have been a very different person as an adult.

As she continued to grow with her parents neglect, she began to become more and more resourceful, especially when she was with her brother, Brian. For example, after they had been beat up by kids at their new school, instead of continuing the fight, they recognized their surroundings and proceeded to get their meal for that night. In her memoir, Wall states that her and Brian “climbed through a hole in the chain-link fence he had discovered that morning and ran into the iceberg-lettuce farm next to the apartment building. I followed him through the rows of big green leaves, and we eventually settled down to feast, burying our faces in the huge wet heads of lettuce and eating until our stomachs ached” [Walls 46]. Since their parents are unable to feed them, Jeanette and Brian are forced to take their hunger into their own hands. This becomes an issue later on in the novel when Lori and Jeannette get in trouble for eating a stick of butter, which happened to be the only food in the house; this causes the mom to become distressed because she obviously hates that she is unable to supply for her children. One of the rules of the family was that they “were always supposed to pretend [their] life was one long and incredibly fun adventure” [Walls 69]; the adventure in this context referring to going out and trying to find enough food to feed a family for a few days at least. Jeannette's parents always try to shed a light on their living situation, but it is at this point of the novel that both the reader and Jeannette begin to see just how problematic it can be to live this way. One could also consider

this a growth point for Jeannette, it is the first time she really stands up for herself to her mom, making it known that she has a problem, stating “It was the only thing in the house...[she] was *hungry*” [Walls 69].

Through everything Jeannette had went through as a child, from her parents neglection, to having to basically take care of herself since she was three, it is safe to say that her experiences as a child helped form who she grew up to be. Despite having to overcome these obstacles, Jeannette managed to grow into an independant, resourceful, and caring woman.