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“Have I ever let you down?” An Analysis of Rex’s Influence in *The Glass Castle*

The greatest socio-cultural influence on children is their parents and the individuals they live with. In *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls shares her unusual upbringing with readers, welcoming them into a fantasy world full of planets, cheetahs and adventure in general. As Jeannette is exposed to other sources of societal norms over time, she becomes disillusioned by the imaginative, impoverished lifestyle that she had come to love. In her early years, the most prevalent influence on Jeannette is her alcoholic father, Rex. Rex is so influential in Jeannette’s childhood that the novel follows the shift in the relationship Jeannette has with him as he slowly falls out of her favor. She is disappointed by Rex countless times and countless individuals warn her to not trust her father until she can no longer endure the strife he brings to the Walls’ family. In *The Glass Castle*, Rex’s tendency to disappoint his family shatters Jeannette’s romanticized views of the Walls’ lifestyle which allows her to escape her parents’ reality and ultimately negate the culture of poverty theory.

In order to fully understand the extent to which Rex affects Jeannette, it is worth considering the tone of her vignettes throughout the novel and how they gradually shift out of Rex’s favor. In her early memories, Jeannette characterizes Rex as a personal superhero illustrating him in an idealized manner despite the alarming decisions he makes as a father. Rex works hard to instill a particular image of himself within Jeannette, an effort that becomes

apparent early in the novel. Perhaps one of the earliest instances that defines their relationship is when Jeannette is reminiscing about her rock sales. Jeannette develops an interest in collecting various rocks that originates from her parents' extensive knowledge about geology, noting that "Mom and Dad could tell what kind of minerals and ore were in the ground from the color of the rock and soil." (Walls, 55) What makes the rock vignette more significant is the way that Rex's behaviors shape the memory. Jeannette admits that "the only person who ever bought one of [her] rocks was Dad." (Walls, 60) For young Jeannette, Rex proves to be her biggest supporter and the only individual willing to indulge her in the sale of over-priced rocks. Rex builds a facade in which he is an attentive and supportive father, an image that can only crumble as the novel unfolds. Once Jeannette realizes that Rex isn't the dad he always pretended to be, she is able to separate herself from her parents' lifestyle and ascend to a life of stability.

Another element of Jeannette's surroundings that shapes the relationship she has with her father is the way other individuals perceive Rex. She is constantly influenced by the remarks other people make about her father. Though not easy to hear, these comments are beneficial to Jeannette because they help her perceive Rex with greater accuracy, allowing her to cast aside the rose-colored glasses she had always viewed her father with. Of the many people who shape Jeannette's views on Rex, her mother is the most prominent. In a constantly fluctuating relationship, Jeannette's mother reveals her frustration with Rex at key points in the novel. For example, the Walls family is forced to leave church when Rex yells a series of disdainful comments directed at the clergy and the religion of Christianity as a whole. In light of his behavior, Jeannette's mom can only concede that Rex "is a cross that [they] must bear." (Walls, 105)

This occurrence in the text is significant because it exposes Mom's attitudes towards Rex. By designating Rex as a "cross," she blatantly expresses her frustration with her husband. Moreover, this statement indicates that Rex's behavior brings shame onto his entire family and that his family must suffer the consequences of his actions. For Jeannette, instances such as these are significant because they remind her of the embarrassment she consistently endures as a member of the Walls family. The humiliation Jeannette faces as a child gives her the motivation to break from the culture of poverty that she grew up in. In time, she comes to view her parents with disgust, appalled that she ever identified with their ideologies. When even her mother recognizes how toxic Rex is to the family, it becomes apparent to Jeannette that she must distance herself from her parents' lifestyle.

The one element that ties Jeannette to her parents' lifestyle is an underlying sense of adventure, however in most circumstances even an optimistic outlook falls short in the face of other's scorn which establishes a recurring feeling of self-consciousness for Jeannette and her siblings. Perhaps the most obvious instance of public scorn is the cheetah scene because it has a place of such prominence in Jeannette's memories. After Rex decides that the Walls were becoming too removed from nature and the wilderness, he takes them to the zoo for a less-than-traditional family outing. He jokes about staging an "animal prison break" (Walls, 107) before ultimately climbing inside the cheetah exhibit. For Jeannette, the day at the zoo is monumental because she has her hand licked by a cheetah, an exciting moment that reinforces the image her mind had constructed of Rex. However as a reader, this scene is important to note because it draws attention to Jeannette's strife as she tries to reconcile societal norms with the teachings of her parents.

Though Jeannette claims to be unaffected by the criticisms of other people visiting the zoo, the fact that she notices others at all reveals that the feelings of shame have stuck with her over the course of her life. One particular exclamation that sticks with Jeannette is uttered by a “frantic” woman who shouts that “[Rex] should be arrested.” (Walls, 109) For a young girl, an accusation of this magnitude is sure to damage the image she holds of her father even though Jeannette won’t openly admit it. The woman’s snide remark is followed by a plethora of rude comments; “people around [them] whispering about the crazy drunk man and his dirty little urchin children.” (Walls, 109) In the moment, Jeannette brushes these comments off but the fact that they have found a place in her memoir suggests that they have withstood the passage of time. The rude comments made about her parents expose Jeannette to a culture that contradicts all that she learned growing up. They motivate her to learn more about differing personal ideologies, planting a seed that grows into a tree of rebellion against that which the Walls have taught her as a child.

Jeannette’s childhood is characterized by an incessant series of disappointments and mistrust as she comes of age, however there is one particular instance that signifies a significant cleavage in the relationship she has built with Rex. Arguably the greatest disappointment Jeannette accepts is Rex’s decision to continue drinking after she asks for his sobriety as a birthday present. Jeannette expresses the faith she has in Rex’s ability to put down the bottle, assuring Lori that Rex will stop because “it’s his present to [her]” (Walls, 118) Despite the great confidence Jeannette has in her father, she is met with disappointment once again when Rex arrives at the Walls doorstep drunk after disappearing for three days. Though Rex appears in a state of intoxication consistently throughout the text, this instance signifies a shift because

Jeannette invests so much faith in him. She concedes that she “couldn’t believe Dad had gone back to the booze.” (Walls, 123). Her father’s failure to fulfill his promise leaves Jeannette hopeless and frustrated because her greatest supporter disappointed her once again.

In *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls introduces her reader to an unusual counter-culture characterized by varying degrees of neglect and abuse. Though young Jeannette gladly welcomes a lifestyle ridden with what her parents call “adventure,” in time she becomes disillusioned by it and her father’s inability to provide for the family. Rex Walls’ aptitude for disappointing provides his daughter with the motivation she needs to break from the impoverished lifestyle that she grew up in. His drinking, harsh demeanor and lack of responsibility with respect to family finances allow others to create an ugly picture of him, an image that resonates with Jeannette. Over time, Jeannette recognizes that Rex’s shortcomings send him down a destructive path giving her the motivation to aspire for more. In *The Glass Castle*, Rex’s tendency to disappoint his family shatters Jeannette’s romanticized views of the Walls’ lifestyle which allows her to escape her parents’ reality and invalidate the culture of poverty theory.

Works Cited

Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: a Memoir*. Scribner, an Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2006.