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# *The Glass Castle*

A Memoir

by

**Jeanette Walls**

2005



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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## THE GLASS CASTLE BY JEANNETTE WALLS

### KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

#### SETTING

The Places: Nevada (numerous little towns including Blythe and Battle Mountain plus Las Vegas); San Francisco, California; Phoenix, Arizona; Welch, West Virginia; and.....

#### LIST OF CHARACTERS

##### Major Characters

**Jeannette Walls** - She is the narrator and main character of the story. She tells the events of her life living with neglectful and yet loving parents.

**Rex Walls** - He is Jeannette's alcoholic father who manipulates and uses his wife and his children for his own needs and yet never stops loving them and hoping they love him.

**Rose Mary Walls** - She is the selfish mother of the family who brings her own baggage with her and passes it on to her children. She also loves her family but only after her own needs are met.

**Lori Walls** - She is the oldest child of the family, but isn't the one who dominates. She is smart and loving, but without Jeannette, hasn't the courage to escape the life she hates.

**Brian Walls** - He is the boy of the Walls siblings and learns very young how to protect his sisters. He grows up to be a protector as well when he becomes a police officer.

**Maureen Walls** - She is the most fragile of the children and spends all her life looking for someone to take care of her.

##### Minor Characters

**Erma, Ted, and Stanley Walls** - These characters are Rex Walls' mother, father and brother. They are racists and have bad attitudes about nearly everything. Stanley tries to rape.....

#### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The protagonist is Jeannette Walls who tells her readers all about.....

**Antagonists** - There are numerous antagonists in the story who impact on Jeannette in minor ways, but the greatest antagonists are her parents. They love their children, but.....

**Climax** - The climax occurs when Maureen becomes mentally incompetent and the.....

**Outcome** - Maureen leaves for California, Dad dies, and the remaining family members see little of each until five years after Dad's death. They meet at .....

#### SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

A successful journalist, Jeannette Walls, relates the horrific childhood she experienced being raised by alcoholic, manipulative, and selfish parents. Her parents are extremely dysfunctional and yet very vibrant people who force their children to learn how to take care of themselves by.....

## THEMES

The first and most important theme is: **forgiveness**. Jeannette spends her whole life forgiving her parents over and over for the choices they made that adversely impacted their children. In the face of no food in their stomachs, leaking roofs over their heads, no heat, and ratty clothes plus stealing their money and sometimes their souls, Rex and Rose Mary didn't deserve forgiveness. However, Jeannette and her brother and sisters always find a way to welcome their parents back into their hearts.

Another theme tells us **that sometimes the most mature and responsible people in.....**

## MOOD

The mood is usually very troubling as we see Jeannette and her siblings struggle to survive. However, it.....

## JEANNETTE WALLS - BIOGRAPHY

Jeannette Walls was born in Phoenix, Arizona. Her parents moved the family around the southwest before settling for a time in Welch, West Virginia. It was in West Virginia, as she entered her teens, that she was often mistreated. At age 17 she moved to New York City. With the help of part-time jobs, she eventually entered Columbia University's Barnard College, where she graduated with honors.

She had come to love journalism while working on her high school newspaper so.....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

**NOTE: The Sections listed in this summary are not included in the actual text. We are listing them to make the summary easier to follow.**

### PART I – A WOMAN ON THE STREET

#### SECTION ONE

##### Summary

The memoir opens with Jeannette, the author and main character, sitting in a taxi, wondering if she has overdressed for the evening, when she looks out the window and sees her mother rooting through a dumpster. She recognizes all her familiar gestures even as she is at times hidden by people scurrying home in the blustery March weather. It has been months since Jeannette has seen her mother, but she's more overcome with panic that the woman will see her. She slides down in the seat and then orders the taxi to take her home again. She listens to Vivaldi, hoping the music will settle her down. She sits down in her favorite room and looks around at the possessions that make the room such a comfort to her – a comfort except when she thinks about her mom and dad huddled on a sidewalk grate somewhere.

Jeannette calls a friend of her mother's and leaves a message for her mother to call, their usual way of making contact. When her mother calls, they make plans for lunch at the older woman's favorite Chinese restaurant. When Mom arrives, Jeannette sees that she has tried to clean herself up even though there is deep-set grime on her neck and temples. She also immediately fills her purse with all the plastic packets of soy sauce and mustard and empties the bowl of dried noodles in there as well.

The first thing Mom begins to talk about is Picasso. She had seen a retrospective of his work and thinks he is highly overrated. However, Jeannette is more concerned with what she can do for her parents and tells her mother so. She wants to help her mother change her life, but Rose Mary Walls tells her daughter that it's her values that are all confused. She feels she's fine and that Jeannette is "way too easily embarrassed. Your father and I are who we are. Accept it." (pg. 8)

##### Notes

This chapter is Jeannette's way of immediately differentiating her life from her parent's lives and how their

eccentric, odd ways are so different from her normal life. However, she gives the reader the feeling that maybe they are not so eccentric that they cannot be loved. She is setting us up for the life she led being raised by Rose Mary and Rex Walls.

## **PART TWO – THE DESERT**

### **SECTION ONE (Pages 9-14)**

#### **Summary**

Jeannette's earliest memory concerns the time she set herself on fire cooking hotdogs. She is three years old and boiling hotdogs on the stove while her mother works on one of her paintings in the other room. Her dress catches on fire, but she is unable to scream until the fire singes her hair and her eyelashes. When her mother hears her cries, she grabs an army surplus blanket and wraps Jeannette in it to put out the flames. Her dad has gone off in the car, so Mom grabs Jeannette's younger brother and hurries to the trailer next door to ask the woman there to take them to the hospital.

After they arrive, a nurse tells Jeannette that she's going to be okay, to which Jeannette responds that she knows that, but if she's not, that's okay, too, a statement making her wise beyond her years. Then, she looks down and sees her little brother's grimy hand grabbing ice cubes from her pitcher and crunching away!

The doctors and nurses begin asking Jeannette all kinds of questions about how she got burned and where her parents were when it happened. They also ask her how she got all the bruises and cuts she has on her body and if her parents had ever hurt her. She replies very honestly that the cuts and bruises came from playing outside and the burns from cooking hotdogs. She explains how she does the cooking and that she's allowed to do that, because her mom thinks she's mature for her age. It's obvious that the authorities are concerned with the care being provided by her parents.

Jeannette loves her stay in the hospital, because she isn't used to the quiet and order and she loves it. She has her own room and a television, and she gets delicious meals three times a day. It's also the place where she gets her first piece of chewing gum. "I would have been happy staying in that hospital forever." (pg. 12) When her parents come to visit, Jeannette shows them the chewing gum. Her mother disapproves and calls it a low-class habit. Dad sits down on her bed and tells her the story about how her older sister, Lori, was stung by a poisonous scorpion. They took her to a Navajo witch doctor, who opened the wound and put a brown paste on it. Lori was soon okay, and now Dad wishes they had taken Jeannette to a witch doctor instead of the quacks at the hospital.

The next time they visit, little brother Brian's head is wrapped in a dirty white bandage with dried bloodstains. He had fallen off the couch and cracked his head open on the floor. There was blood everywhere, but one kid in the hospital at a time was enough, so they never took him to the doctor. Mom also tells Jeannette they entered her name in a raffle at a fair and she won a helicopter ride. Jeannette is thrilled until she realizes the family had already taken her ride. This is followed by an argument between Dad and the doctor. Dad believes Jeannette should be wearing bandages while the doctor tries to explain that the burned skin needs to breathe. Dad pulls back his fist to hit the doctor when a guard in a uniform appears and tells the Walls family they'll have to leave.

A few days later, after Jeannette has been in the hospital for six weeks, Dad decides to break her out of there, obviously leaving without paying the bill. He picks Jeannette up and holds her against his chest. She takes in the familiar smells on him of Vitalis, whiskey, and cigarette smoke. He runs out the emergency exit with her as nurses cry out for them to stop. Mom is waiting in their car, the Blue Goose, with Lori and Brian, and Dad places Jeannette in the front seat with Mom saying, "You don't have to worry anymore, baby. You're safe now."

## Notes

There are numerous examples in this section about how Rose Mary and Rex raise their children and how lucky the kids are that one of them didn't die from neglect. There is also a great deal of foreshadowing of Dad's bad temper and alcoholism, because of the familiar smells on his shirt and how he nearly punches the doctor about bandaging Jeannette's burns. Rex Walls gives the impression that he has no patience with anyone who doesn't view the world the way he does. Such an attitude can be dangerous.

## SECTION TWO (Pages 15-16)

### Summary

A few days after Jeannette returns home, she is hungry enough to fix herself some hotdogs while once again her mother is painting. Mom is impressed that Jeannette gets "right back into the saddle." She tells her that she shouldn't live in fear of something as basic as fire. Jeannette tells the reader that she doesn't fear fire. Instead, she becomes fascinated with it. Her Dad shows her how to pass her hand through a candle flame without getting burned. She does it over and over and then begins running to watch while the neighbors burn their trash. Dad tells the astonished neighbor who thinks Jeannette would want to run from fire after what happened to her, "Why the hell would she? She already fought fire once and won." (page 15)

Once she even takes her favorite toy, a plastic Tinkerbelle figurine, and holds its face to a flame. Before she can pull it away, the face begins to melt. She puts bandages on it, but she wishes she could perform a skin graft like she received. Of course, she knows that would mean cutting Tinkerbelle into pieces.

## Notes

This short section emphasizes the eccentric way the Walls parents raise their children. They want to teach Jeannette not to be afraid of fire, but they do it in such a way that they set her on a path of possible pyromania! Jeannette's fascination with fire is unusual, to say the least.

The story of Tinkerbelle's melting face is a perfect parallel to Jeannette herself. She has faced real fire and has lost parts of her skin. That doesn't even begin to describe the parts of her emotional self she may have lost.

## SECTION THREE (Pages 17-18)

### Summary

A few months later, Dad comes home in the middle of the night and makes everyone get up and pack. They are moving. They aren't allowed to take any more than they need to survive so as to hurry them onto the road. However, Mom holds them up by digging and digging in the back yard, looking for the jar of cash she buried there. She had forgotten where she had buried it. Jeannette is disappointed to have forgotten Tinkerbelle, but Dad won't go back. She also tries to keep Quixote, their cat, quiet so Dad won't become angry, but cats hate to travel, and eventually, Dad grabs it by the scruff of the neck and throws it out the window. Jeannette bursts into tears while Mom tells her that she shouldn't be so sentimental. Her explanation is that the.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Jeannette Walls** - Jeannette Walls' greatest attribute is her ability to forgive. Throughout this book, the reader can see how many times Jeannette would have been justified in hating her parents and abandoning them forever. However, she always finds a way to rise above those feelings and forgive them. She presents the events of her life with no self pity, but just as a way of coming to terms with the incidents that.....

**Rex Walls** - Rex is a very complex character. He undoubtedly spent most of his childhood being molested by his own mother and living with people who passed on their dysfunctional lifestyle to.....

**Rose Mary Walls** - Of all the family members, she is the one most easy to dislike. She is a free spirit who had a contentious relationship with her “control freak” of a mother. As a result, she never wants to be held within the normal boundaries of a wife and mother. She is frequently dominated by an.....

**Lori Walls** - Even though she is the oldest child, Lori usually defers to Jeannette’s assertive and perhaps more intelligent personality. She tends to be somewhat shy and for years doesn’t even realize that not everyone has blurry vision. Only when she gets her first pair of glasses does she.....

**Brian Walls** - As the only boy among the siblings, Brian’s first and lasting trait is his power and strength. He becomes the one who sides with Jeannette in all the fights they must.....

**Maureen Walls** - She is the most fragile of the four children, and by the end of the story, there is no resolution to the problem of her instability. From the beginning of her life, Maureen was passed around for others to care for her. She ran outside as a toddler without a diaper. As she began to grow older, she played with no friends and had to make up her own in a little fantasy world that would foreshadow her .....

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

The plot of this memoir is divided into five parts, most of which represent a place where the Walls family lived. The towns and cities are all part of this eternal journey they take together and out of which come the events that mold their characters. Nevada is a desert which is very representative of the arid, dry childhood Jeannette, Brian, Lori and Maureen experience. Welch is covered with a fine layer of coal dust and is.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

**Forgiveness** is the most important theme. Throughout the unfolding of the memoir, each character must come to grips with the concept of forgiving each other. Mom and Dad neglected their children in so many ways and should be punished, but their children also need to understand that forgiveness is for themselves as well for their parents. As long as they harbor bitterness in their hearts for how they were raised, they will never find the contentment they deserve. Lori and Jeannette are the two who come to

## **AUTHOR’S STYLE**

Jeannette Walls writes a reader-friendly story that relates the unbelievable circumstances under which she and her brother and sisters were raised. The language is representative of.....

## **RISING ACTION**

The rising action begins with Jeannette seeing her mother searching through a dumpster and then begins a series of flashbacks to being raised by the homeless woman she....

## **FALLING ACTION**

The falling action involves Maureen’s escape to California after serving a year in prison and Dad’s death from a heart attack. Then the family barely sees each other for the next.....

## **POINT OF VIEW**

The point of view is first person, told from Jeannette’s viewpoint. She is the narrator and .....

## OTHER ELEMENTS

### FORESHADOWING

There are several literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is **foreshadowing** which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

1. Jeannette sits down in her favorite room and looks around at the possessions that make the room such a comfort to her – a comfort except when she thinks about her mom and dad huddled on a sidewalk grate somewhere. This foreshadows the story of her life with neglectful parents.....
- .....13. Dad and Jeannette sit at the bar, and Dad orders two beers even though Jeannette has asked for a Sprite. This foreshadows that he is giving a signal to some guy there that Jeannette is old enough and available.

### IRONY

Another important element is irony – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

1. It is ironic that the first thing Jeannette’s Mom begins to talk about is Picasso. She is homeless and finds food in dumpsters.....
- .....28. “But despite all the hell raising and destruction and chaos Dad created in their lives, Jeannette cannot imagine what her life will be like . . . without him. As awful as he can be, she has always known he loves her in a way no one else ever has.”

### QUOTATIONS - IMPORTANT QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points of the story (Scribner, New York, 2005):

1. “I was sitting in a taxi wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster.” (page 3; This is the striking opening line that immediately differentiates between the author’s world and that of her parents.)
2. “In my mind, Dad was perfect, although he did have what Mom called a bit of a drinking situation.” (pg. 23; Here Jeannette begins her description of the relationship with her father.) .....
- .....23. After Maureen’s arraignment, the entire family becomes enraged with each other, “giving vent to all the years of hurt and anger, unloading his or hurt accumulated grievances and blaming the others for allowing the most fragile one of us to break into pieces.” (pg. 276; This occurs after Maureen’s trial.)

### SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / METAPHORS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel include **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as:

1. Once she even takes her favorite toy, a plastic Tinkerbelle figurine, and holds its face to a flame. Before she can pull it away, the face begins to melt. She puts bandages on it, but she wishes she could perform a skin graft like she received. Of course, she knows that.....

Another element that is very dominant in this novel is that of a **motif** or a recurring thematic element used in the development of a literary or artistic work. There are three motifs in this novel. The first is that of **faith or as Dad always says, “Have I ever let you down?”**

1. Whenever Dad feels that his children lose faith in him, he asks them, “Have.....

The second motif is that of **order and turbulence**. Some examples include:

1. After Jeannette and Brian have blown up the garage, Dad tells them.....

## **IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY**

**Title:** *The Glass Castle*

**Author:** Jeannette Walls

**Date Published:** 2005

**Meaning of the Title:** It refers to the dream that.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ**

1. Jeannette is badly burned at the age of three, because
  - a.) her mother had gone for groceries.
  - b.) she was playing with matches.
  - c.) she was cooking hotdogs.
2. Jeannette and her family move a lot, because
  - a.) they are always running from bill collectors.
  - b.) they never like the homes they live in.
  - c.) they're accident-prone and mess up their homes.....

## **ANSWER KEY**

1.) c 2.) a 3.) b 4.) a 5.) b 6.) c 7.) b 8.) a 9.) a 10.) c 11.) b 12.) a 13.) a 14.) c 15.) a

## **ESSAY TOPICS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

1. Discuss how fire is such a prominent motif in the lives of the Walls family. Why is it important?
2. Mom has known all along that the land she owns is worth at least a million dollars, but she.....

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