

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Glass Castle

by Jeannette Walls

written by Rachel Natbony

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The Glass Castle

Note to the Teacher

Jeannette Walls was born in Phoenix, Arizona on April 21, 1960, to Rex and Rose Mary Walls. Along with her three siblings, Lori, Brian, and Maureen, Walls grew up subject to a nomadic, dysfunctional lifestyle. When she completed eleventh grade, she followed her sister Lori to New York City, attended and graduated from Barnard College, and achieved great success as a journalist. She was hired as a reporter for *The Phoenix* straight out of an internship for the magazine, wrote for *New York Magazine* for several years, and became a regular contributor to *MSNBC.com*.

Her childhood and adolescence, as Walls conveyed in her bestselling memoir *The Glass Castle*, was in “the boundary between turbulence and order.” On the one hand, her parents immersed her in knowledge and skill, discussing art and science, inspiring her imagination, and providing her with intangible, yet invaluable, gifts; her mother was an artist and a writer, and her father, a resourceful inventor. On the other hand, the two adults tended to Walls and her siblings carelessly, neglecting necessities like steady food and stable shelter. *The Glass Castle* is Walls’s tribute to her chaotic, vivacious family history and how it has forever shaped her.

It is important to note that *The Glass Castle* contains incidents of violence, sexual assault, and racism. The maturity of the class should be considered in teaching this memoir.

All references come from the Scribner edition of *The Glass Castle*, copyright 2005.

Terms and Definitions

Allusion – a reference to a person, place, poem, book, event, etc., which is not part of the story, that the author expects the reader will recognize; **Example:** In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom speaks of “Chamberlain’s umbrella,” a reference to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.

Analogy – a comparison between things, people, places, etc., that are similar in order to point out the dissimilarities; **Example:** a tree being compared to a branching river

Characterization – the methods, incidents, speech, etc., an author uses to reveal the people in the book; characterization is depicted by what the person says, what others say, and by his or her actions.

Comic relief – the intrusion of humor interrupting or immediately following a scene of great excitement; **Example:** The drunken Porter answers the door immediately after the killing of King Duncan in *Macbeth*.

Conflict – the struggle that moves the action forward in a work of literature; there are three types of conflict, and most books include all three: *man versus man* (**Example:** a typical Western, in which the sheriff confronts the outlaw); *man versus nature* (**Example:** a story about someone surviving in a small boat on the ocean); *man versus himself* (**Example:** a character in a story fighting his or her own drug abuse). Some authorities consider *man versus society* a fourth category of conflict (**Example:** a character in a book fighting against the Nazis).

Dynamic Characters – people in the book that evolve, change, or surprise the reader; **Example:** Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker*

Flat or Static character – a one-dimensional character who lacks diversity and complexity; a character who is either all good or all bad and does not change; because the character behaves in just one way, he or she is easy to comprehend. **Example:** Sherlock Holmes seems to be calm, deliberative, and in complete charge, regardless of the situation.

Foreshadowing – the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come; foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense. **Example:** Two small and seemingly inconsequential car accidents predict and hint at the upcoming, important wreck in *The Great Gatsby*.

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace how Jeannette's attitude toward her parents changes as the memoir progresses.
2. discuss and debate the culture of poverty as it relates to the Walls family.
3. identify and explain the importance of the following symbols/motifs:
 - the Glass Castle
 - the Prospector
 - the Joshua Tree
 - Jeannette's rock collection
 - fire and burning
 - the geode
4. recognize young Jeannette as an unreliable narrator and clarify how her naïvety contributes to the theme of possessing childhood illusions that eventually fade.
5. characterize Jeannette's mother and father, explaining how they impede, as well as cultivate their children's success.
6. analyze the structure of *The Glass Castle*, speculating as to why Walls decided to format her memoir the way she did.
7. evaluate the cycle of parenting and how the fashion in which one is raised influences his or her own parenting style later on.
8. point out the recurrence and significance of comic relief in the memoir, especially during or after incidents of danger.
9. identify and elucidate instances of juxtaposition, particularly in relation to Jeannette's mother and father.
10. locate many of the allusions included in the memoir and explain their roles.
11. explore the theme of living in "the boundary between turbulence and order."
12. compare the coping mechanisms of all four siblings—Jeannette, Lori, Brian, and Maureen—and how their adaptations to the familial dysfunction foreshadow their futures.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Jeannette Walls structures her memoir by first describing an encounter she has as an adult, watching her mother scavenge through the trash. Explain why you think Walls decided to introduce the memoir this way.
2. Describe how Mom's disapproval of materialism clashes with Jeannette's desire to achieve a stable life.
3. Dad addresses Jeannette as "Mountain Goat." Explain the significance of this nickname.
4. What is the role of comic relief in *The Glass Castle*? Cite specific examples from the text to support your answer.
5. Walls precedes her story with the following lines from "Poem on His Birthday," by Dylan Thomas:

*Dark is a way and light is a place,
Heaven that never was
Nor will be ever always true*

Analyze the excerpt and how it embodies an idea or theme from *The Glass Castle*.

6. In Part I, Section 7, Jeannette explains, "I wondered if the fire had been out to get me. I wondered if all fire was related. . . . I didn't have the answers to those questions, but what I did know was that I lived in a world that at any moment could erupt into fire." Clarify the idea Walls intends to convey in this quotation.
7. On Christmas Eve in Part II, Dad lets each child choose a star as a gift. How does this act reflect the Walls parents' parenting style?
8. Explain how nonconformity plays a significant role in the fate of the Walls family.
9. Throughout the novel, Mom and Dad use various maxims. Identify at least three maxims from the memoir and clarify their significance or relevance to Jeannette's story.
10. Both Mom and Dad are clearly round characters with various faults and redeeming qualities; however, are they static or dynamic? Does either of them change by the end of the novel? Support your assertion with details from the text.

The Glass Castle

Part I: A Woman on the Street

VOCABULARY

blustery – gusty
electrolysis – hair removal
gimmicky – artificial; lacking substance
invariably – always
parched – dry
retrospective – a display
ruddy – flushed

1. Walls chooses to open her memoir with a memory from adulthood instead of one from her childhood. What precedent does this choice set for the rest of the book?

2. Describe how Mom looks when Jeannette spots her on the street.

3. Why does Jeannette drive away in the taxi without acknowledging her mother?

Part II: The Desert, Sections 9-10

VOCABULARY

blasphemy – the act of speaking offensively about sacred things
dago – [*slang*] a derogatory term for an Italian or someone of Italian ancestry
deceived – tricked
descendants – ancestors
diminutive – a shortened form
flurry – a burst
namesake – a person who has the same name as another person
sagebrush – a shrubby, scented plant
shearing – cutting
sonar – a method of locating objects through sound waves
staggered – stumbled
warmonger – a leader who promotes warfare and aggression

1. Find the irony in the second paragraph of Section 9, and explain why the idea is ironic.

2. How does Dad feel about stars? How does this outlook represent his values?

3. What do the Walls children receive from Dad for Christmas?

4. What is unique about Jeannette's choice of star?

Part II: The Desert, Sections 26-27

VOCABULARY

coasted – drifted
haunts – places frequented
ingrate – an ungrateful person
lemon – [*slang*] a flop; something that is not satisfactory
recesses – alcoves
recuperating – recovering
restraints – mechanisms intended to hold a person in place

1. What does Jeannette ask Dad to do as a birthday gift for her?

2. How does Dad honor Jeannette’s birthday request?

3. Mom says, “Only he knows how to fight his own demons.” What is the significance of her comment to Jeannette’s relationship with Dad?

4. Describe Jeannette and Brian’s “most audacious, tactical victory” against Ernie Goad and his friends.

5. What types of conflict are most prevalent in Section 9?

6. Section 10 alludes to an important shift in Jeannette’s relationship with Dad. Describe that shift.

Part III: Welch, Sections 25-27

VOCABULARY

abolished – eliminated
accorded – given
aerodynamics – the study of moving air
deference – respect or regard
dynasty – an empire
enraptured – captivated, mesmerized
hawking – vending
highfalutin – snobbish
irate – furious
lockjaw – a disease in which jaws stay firmly in one position
trifled – toyed
unspooled – unrolled
validity – authority, weight
vinegar – bitterness

1. How does Jeannette's work on *The Maroon Wave* affect her experience at school?

2. Who is Chuck Yeager? How is this man important to Dad?

3. Walls describes the audience's reaction to Chuck Yeager's speech, stating that "the applause about shattered the glass in the windows." What literary device does Walls incorporate here?

4. In Section 26, what do you learn about Lori's life in New York City?
