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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Glass Castle

by Jeannette Walls

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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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.

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.

Part II: The Desert, Sections 1-3

VOCABULARY

antiseptic – germ-killing
cheeping – chirpy
convulsions – seizures
lopsided – crooked
quacks – shams
skedaddle – [*slang*] a getaway
tentatively – hesitantly; with uncertainty
vulgar – ill-mannered

1. According to Walls, what is her “earliest memory”?

2. When the doctors and nurses ask Jeannette why she had been cooking hot dogs by herself, what answer does she provide? How do they react?

3. What inference can be drawn from the reactions of the nurses to Jeannette’s explanation of the hot dog incident?

3. In Section 17, Jeannette begins to defy her parents. Identify this instance.

4. How does Mom and Dad's argument escalate?

5. Identify the simile in the Section 17 paragraph that begins with, "Mom was swinging...."

6. What is Mom's teaching style?

7. Why does Mom hate teaching? Clarify the reasons that Jeannette provides.
