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Jeannette Walls's
The Glass Castle

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The Glass Castle

by Jeannette Walls

Written by Rachel Natbony

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The Glass Castle

Objectives

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

1. analyze the impact of social context on the memoir's characters and plot.
2. draw inferences and clarify connections about the ways in which the characters influence each other.
3. trace the character development of the memoir's protagonist and how her perception matures over time.
4. describe the overarching themes and motifs of the memoir and how they manifest themselves differently as the plot develops.
5. explore round characters and how their attitudes are revealed implicitly through dialogue and action.
6. examine word choice techniques, such as repetition and order, and their effect on the reader's interpretation.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of *The Glass Castle* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Introductory Lecture

WELCH, WEST VIRGINIA

Welch, the town in which Rex Walls grew up and Jeannette Walls later lived with her family, is the seat of McDowell County, which was, as of 2016, the poorest county in West Virginia. In *The Glass Castle*, Walls encapsulates the state of the town by stating, “Welch was shabby and worn out, but you could tell it had once been a place on its way up.”

McDowell County relied heavily—and still continues to rely—on the coal industry. Coal mining is an integral component of the economic, political, and social history of West Virginia: Of the state’s 55 counties, 43 are home to a collective total of 62 coal reserves. At the industry’s peak, McDowell County had had a population of about 100,000 residents, which is about four times the size of today’s population. It had, at the time, more inhabitants than any other county in the state.

Population increases and decreases in McDowell County are directly correlated with the demand for coal.

The first prominent use of West Virginia’s coal arose in the decades leading up to the Civil War. The coal aided saltworks (plants in which salt is made) by fueling the salt furnaces, which heated the brine pushed from salt beds underneath the rivers. This role acted as a catalyst to the rise in demand for coal to heat or fuel other things—homes, engines, etc. In 1817, a New Yorker named John Turner opened a mine in the Great Kanawha Valley in West Virginia, which created a host of new job opportunities for the locals—working in the furnaces or constructing boats or distributing product. The Norfolk and Western railroad (1838) and the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad (1869) were built specifically as coal-hauling lines, and many investors purchased parcels of land that they could then lease to coal workers. At this time, coal operations were labor intensive, so the railroads provided even more employment opportunities.

In the early 20th century, West Virginians also experienced an onset of migration. In order to escape the severe discrimination of the Deep South, thousands of African Americans fled to and around West Virginia to work in the mines. Immigrants hailing from the coal-bearing regions of Europe were also attracted to West Virginia because of the coal-related job opportunities and the possibility of prosperity.

The growth of the West Virginian coal industry began to slow in the 1950s. Many factors contributed to the slowdown, but the greatest was probably competition. By the 1950s, petroleum had exceeded coal as the preferred source of fuel in the United States. Even the coal-hauling and coal-devouring railroad industry, in an effort to abide by the Clean Air Act of 1963, abandoned coal in favor of electricity and diesel oil. Non-unionized coal producers in the western states also created steep competition. Many eastern industrialists blamed miner unions for slowing down coal production and for driving the retail cost higher and higher. Terrible accidents that cost the coal companies vast amounts of money, as well as union strikes for higher wages and improved safety conditions severely reduced the desirability of West Virginia coal. In 1890 and in 1912, West Virginia had a higher mine death rate than did any other state.

GENRE AND JEANNETTE WALLS'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

MEMOIR

The Glass Castle is a memoir, an account of one portion of a person's life, as told by that person. The distinguishing factor between a memoir and an autobiography is that an autobiography is the relating of a person's entire life, by that person, while a memoir has a narrower focus. In the case of Walls's book, the focus is related to emotions: how Jeannette felt and how she feels about her family history.

Keeping in line with a typical feature of the memoir, Walls structures *The Glass Castle* as a series of episodes—important “snapshots” of her life from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Each major part, and sometimes, each subsection within that part, relates the details of one or several interconnected memories. They might, together, paint a picture of the setting for the reader, or illustrate the toxicity of a relationship between two characters. (For example, Section 17 includes three memories, all from around the same time and all relating to how the lack of steady food affected the family.)

Although Jeannette Walls as a character is three years old at the beginning of Part II and seventeen at the beginning of IV, the reader knows from the very beginning of the book that the narrator is an adult, reflecting upon her childhood and youth.

POINT OF VIEW

The fact that much of the memoir takes place while Jeannette is a child presents the possibility that these portions may be told by an unreliable narrator. Even though the narrator is technically Jeannette Walls as an adult, she remains true to her childish, idealistic, and naïve perceptions of the incidents and situations she relates. Young Jeannette, in her naïvety, often interprets events inaccurately. She does not, for instance, acknowledge the complete lack of safety of various incidents and, for a while, demonstrates total faith in her dysfunctional parents: “Here goes the adventure!” says young Jeannette, as her father loads her and her siblings into the back of a dark U-Haul.

It is up to the reader to discern the differences between the incident and Jeannette's perception of it.

The Glass Castle

Epigraph

1. Interpret the excerpt from Dylan Thomas’s “Poem on His Birthday” that Jeannette Walls uses to preface the memoir.

“Dark is a way and light is a place”

“Heaven that never was / Nor will be ever is always true”

“[I]s always true”

2. What could the excerpt suggest about the upcoming events of the memoir?

5. In Section 4, how does dramatic irony develop the theme of losing childhood illusions?

6. How does the idea of the Glass Castle begin to emerge as a central symbol in the book? What does it come to represent? Which characteristics of the Glass Castle invite the reader to accept it as just another of Dad's fabrications?

7. Compare Mom's reaction to Mary Charlene's death to Dad's reaction. What might the differing responses indicate about each parent?

8. How does Jeannette's opinion of her parents' first meeting demonstrate her romanticized outlook?

5. At the end of Section 15, Jeannette states, "I'd never felt cleaner." To what experience is she referring? How is her claim ambiguous?

6. How might the painting reflect Mom's emotional state?

7. How does the reader infer where Mom's paychecks have gone? What details does the author provide in order to enlighten the reader?
