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## Family Interactions in Jeannete Walls' Glass Castle

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### Abstract

Family interactions play an important role in an individual's development. These interactions however play a particularly important role for many in poverty because of the propensity of such families to move around more frequently and to face traumas together, thereby potentially relying more heavily on one another. This kind of family dynamics is clearly illustrated in Jeannette's Walls memoir, *The Glass Castle*. Because of the particular insular environment within which Jeannette grew up, the interactions and patterns possess much importance. Walls family can be characterized as a dysfunctional one which details the joys and struggles of author's early life with crazy parents and later graduating towards maturity. The Walls children learned to care for themselves and eventually found their way to prosperity. *The Glass Castle* is truly astonishing memoir permeated by the intense love of a peculiar but loyal family.

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### Introduction

Family interactions play an important role in an individual's development. These interactions however play a particularly important role for many in poverty because of the propensity of such families to move around more frequently and to face traumas together, thereby potentially relying more heavily on one another. This kind of family dynamics is clearly illustrated in Jeannette's Walls memoir, *The Glass Castle*. Because of the particular insular environment within which Jeannette grew up, the interactions and patterns possess much importance

between the trio-Rex Walls, Jeannette Walls, and Rose Mary Walls. As a Triangle, this one also has a stable side and an unstable side sharing between the father –daughter dyad and mother –daughter dyad respectively. It is this triad that serves as corner stone of the given family system.

In the book Jeannette Walls is that child, recounting her favorite childhood memories spent with her father Rex Walls as some of the best moments of her life, regardless of Rex's obvious irresponsibility and destruction wrought onto other aspects of life. Despite the many instances in which her father

### The Triangle

The smallest stable relationship that forms the base of the Walls Family is the relationship

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failed to protect his children, refused to take responsibility for them, and even stole from them, Jeannette still loved him until his dying day for two reasons: one, for his constant ability to make her feel special, and two, because he is an ever ending source of inspiration. She in her acknowledgment page pays gratitude to her father "for dreaming all those big dreams."(1).Through her account of the Christmas in which her father gave his children stars as presents, Jeannette continually portrayed Rex as an intelligent and loving father and teacher,

describing each and every piece of memory with admiration and contentment. In addition ,Rex has an ability to make her feel special ,introduced by the way in which he "took each of [the] kids out into the desert night, one by one, "describing that the stars were "one of the special traits for people like[Jeannette]" (39).The sentence "And he gave me Venus,"(40) short, conveys a lot of meaning. In the later part his lack of emotional connection with her creates a kind of sterility within her. She says "...I'd always been terrified I'd fall for a hard-drinking, hell-raising, charismatic scoundrel like you, Dad..."(268).As Jeannette is fulfilling her own dreams step by step even though the Walls children continued to stick together it is evident that in each step she missed her father. In the weeks following Dad's death, Jeannette finds herself restless and uncomfortable, always wanting to be somewhere else or, especially, on the move. And is unable to see her as belonging in any of them. She writes

I found myself wanting to be somewhere other than where I was.If I was at work, I'd wish I were at home. If I was in the apartment, I couldn't wait to get out it...It took me a while to realize that just being on the move wasn't enough; that I needed to reconsider everything.(285)

The affectionate level Rex experiences for Jeannette is the same way around. Jeannette was always being his favorite child, as for him it is only feelings of his daughter mattered him. During childhood when Rex was teaching her how to swim despite the fact that her father purposely dropped her into the water, he tries to rationalize his actions which he never did for anyone. he says, "you can't cling to the sink your whole life, "and "if you don't want to sink, you better figure out how to swim"(66).Towards the final part of her life Rex who has been following along her class syllabi by checking the books out from the library, calls Jeannette to discuss her courses. She says she's thinking of dropping out, since she's a thousand dollars short on tuition. A week later, he arrives at Lori's carrying a garbage bag with 950 dollars he won at poker. Jeannette hesitates but he insists until she accepts it. Therefore it can be said that Rex was the pedestal through which she achieved the life she dreamt off.

Rose Mary as a mother was not able to stand the responsibility of providing her family as she is expected to be the dominant nurturing force in the household. She always kept her own needs ahead of all; when she find out the children have eaten the margarine in the refrigerator, she says it is because of her children's selfishness. In relation to Jeannette, as a mother she was always absent. In one particular instant, When the Walls' grandfather and Uncle Stanley moved to an apartment after Uncle Stanley burns down the house after having fallen asleep while smoking. They were living in an apartment with no windows and walls covered in graffiti. The children used to go there once a week for a bath. One week while waiting her turn, Uncle Stanley begins touching her and himself inappropriately. Mary's reaction to this was cold and shocking. "Oh, you're probably imagining it,"... "Mom cocked her head and looked concerned. Poor Stanley he's so lonely" (184) writes the author. Instead

of providing her offspring at least the warmth of embrace she sympathized with Stanley and offered Jeannette an idealized advice—"she said that sexual assault was a crime of perception, if you don't think you are hurt you aren't."(184).A number of likely obvious instances rationalize the lack of warmth Jeannette felt for her mother, and it seems that it continued in less velocity in later part of her life as well .

Feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow opines that mothers experience their daughters as their "doubles", as an extension of their own life. Rose Mary as a mother is in search for identity in her blood, primarily in her daughters. She feels Jeannette no way similar to her which brings her in conflict with her own motherhood. When we examine the dialogues between this dyad, Mary always try to be more idealistic with Jeannette, she says, "Everyone has something good about them, "she said, "You have to find the redeeming quality and love the person for that."(144)It can be the case of her bipolar nature or her attempt to teach her

children self sufficiency that she lead a motherhood of selfishness and negligence. She lived in an imaginary world with her own ideals "Life is a drama full of tragedy and comedy, you should learn to enjoy the comic episodes a little more" (129) says Mary. As time passed this triangle also faced existential threat following in the creation of another triangle, between Lori-Jeannette-Brian.

### **Marital Bond**

It analyses the four patterns of relationship within a nuclear family namely, marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children, emotional distance. The marital bond between Rex and Mary was of a love - hate relationship. The more they fight more they came closer. Their relationship goes from love to hate in matter of seconds- (one minute they were fighting and the next they were laughing).Even though they fight and

rarely see each other ,Rose Mary refuses to leave her husband and ignores his short comings. She used to say to her kids that he is the cross that God had given them to carry, and forced them to accept him for what he is, she says "Your father is who he is, "Mom said. "It's little late in the game to try and reform him. Humor the man" (277).According to Mary the life with her husband was never boring. In the case of Rex her first meeting with Mary is his favorite story. He says, "This crazy-ass mother of yours, can't live with her, can't live without her" (262).He knows how to pacify his beloved, "yeah, but you love this old drunk" (138).This was enough to diffuse the tension between the two. Like Mary Rex also can't stand his wife's disrespect and insult .Once as always Mary quitted her job just for the sake of empowerment. This infuriated Rex and demanded Jeannette to apologize. The marital bond forms the starting of familial relationships, if it remains unstormed, the family remains. It is union between Rex and Rose that stabilized the Walls family. Mary supported her husband in all his actions sometimes unknowingly, intentionally with silence or violence. However physically far they were they were there for each other for emotional support.

"Mom never seemed upset about Mary Charlene's death. God knows what he's doing, she said. He gave me some perfect children but he also gave me one that wasn't so perfect, so He said, „Oops, I better take this one back" (15). The above quote is Mary's reaction to the death of her nine months old child Mary Charlene. For Mary it was easy to adjust but for Rex it was the greatest failure of his life. When he found her body he was crying like a "wounded animal" after that he faced trouble in holding jobs and began drinking and started having dark moods. Thus physical mental tension happen in the Rex- Mary relationship was primarily due to the demise of their daughter as Bowen calls it "the emotional distance" created by the "impairment of one child". According to Bowen, the undifferentiated energy toward the

grandparents is either resolved or absorbed in the present generation.

### **Relationship with Grandparents**

In the memoir the comfort the children shares with their grandparents is of different magnitude. Of the three, Grandma Smith was special for the children. The positive vibes the children received from this person is the reason. Grandma Smith represents the longing of Jeannette for responsible figure head she could look up to and thus, seek refuge beneath. “[Grandma Smith] and mom fought each other from the beginning .Mom felt Grandma Smith nagged and badgered setting rules and punishments for breaking those rules. It drove mom crazy, and it was the reason she never set rules for us” (91).Grandma Smith set lots of rules with punishments and was very punctual and yet as a young child she loved her seemingly more than her own mother. She had strong opinions of how to dress, talk, organize time, cook, and to manage finances. As a child no one love rules and regulations but for Walls children it was what they needed most- an order. Grandma Smith makes no secret that Jeannette is her

favorite grandchild and she loved her grandma for the structure she brought to her. She writes, “But I loved Grandma Smith”... “I even liked all her rules” (111).Unlike her daughter Rose Mary Walls Grandma Smith led civilized life- she owned two houses, with good investments. Jeannette speaks of Grandma Smith with an uplifting and positive tone. Smith was someone who was accepting and had the strength to give her shelter, protect, and care, and the impetus for gaining a better life as a better person.

### **Impairment with one child**

Rose Mary Walls can be characterized as bipolar, Narcissist and Rex an addictive. In the light of this the state of Maureen can found

another dimension. In an interview with Karen.R.Long Jeannette said “It was difficult to tell Maureen’s story; Maureen was something of casualty... Maureen cannot shake her mind of the horror of cold”. Maureen turned out to be a different from other siblings. She wasn’t around, or old enough when the parents actually had some good in them. She didn’t get all the intellectual encouragement the parents used to give the other three .The parents were too burnt out by the time Maureen was older to instill a love of learning and exploring in her. She remained indoctrinated. Like her mother a self serving “excitement addict” she completely enthralled herself with her absurdity. She was the most beautiful, attractive among the Walls. However she was not able to find the same kind of bond with her siblings as they have. Maureen never manages to finish college and wandered from job to job and boyfriend to boyfriend. She sought order and home outside her family. Ultimately she ended up stabbing her own mother in fit of anger and was jailed and later sent to asylum. The responsibility for this mishap can be pointed towards the so called parents of her. It is obvious that the parents suffers psychological imbalance, therefore primary blame must be passed to her genes which was later exemplified by nature and nurture she went through. The case of Maureen thus becomes a part of multigenerational transmission process.

“I had been counting on mom and Dad to get us out, but now I knew I had to do it my own” (221).These words of Lori proves how emotionally far she was from her family, particularly with her parents.Eventhough we find various instances of this phenomena in the book, the magnitude of this feeling needs attention. Within the text we can see that Lori grew up as a forced outcast. Her parents never allowed Lori, or any of their children for that matter, to live as a normal children conformed to society. It was Lori who suffered the most due to the non conformist parenting style rather than Jeannette and Brian. Children rely, learn, and thrive off of one another, but Lori



wasn't accepted into any group of kids, mounting her devastation. This devastation and emotional pain of exile grows bigger and bigger inside Lori as the years go by. All her teenage and youth, society never accepted Lori. She was always left behind, bullied or looked down upon although she was brilliant and artistic. Lori was fearful of success because that would bring her attention. Now if Lori succeeded and shined, then she would attract attention to herself and have less of a chance to get into society, once you reach the top, all you can do is fall down. In New York City during the initial days Rex, Rose and Maureen moved into Lori's apartment. Meanwhile, Mary had cluttered Lori's apartment with her paintings and does not adhere to the deadlines by Lori to straighten the place up. Without any sting of guilt Lori asked them to leave. She justified, "I had a room now, and I had a life, too, and there is no room in either one for Mom and Dad" (252) and substantiates the depth of emotional distance.

### **Sibling Bond**

Bowen wrote "no single piece of data is more important than knowing the sibling position of people in the present or past generation" (Bowen, 87). The siblings of Walls family

always had each other as a stable force in their lives. Most of the time, Jeannette, Lori, Brian were left to take care of their parents, their baby sister Maureen and also each other. Through these many hardships, they were able to stick together and form a solid relationship with one another, shaping their futures.

In the triangle, Brian and Jeannette enjoyed a special code. They began their partnership when they were living in Blythe. Before Jeannette gets jumped by the Mexican girls "Brian [jumps] out from behind a clump of sagebrush, waving yucca branch" (45). From there they began to fight against all the peer attacks and bullying together. The camaraderie we see between Brian and Jeannette is unlike

any other relationship in the Walls household. Lori, smart and mature has her own share in the triangle. Lori's quick thinking was that saved her and her siblings from Billy Deel's BB gun. As Erma was violating Brian, Lori makes a point of letting her know that this is not okay. "Then they flew at each other, tussling and flailing and pulling hair" (147) says the author. Lori stood for her younger brother even though it causes Grandmother Erma to hate her more. Jeannette was never selfish, she worried for her siblings, and often put them before herself. When times were tough in the Walls household, Jeannette considered "stuffing food into her purse to take home for Brian" (173). Jeannette offered her chance of going to New York to Lori taking Lori's wishes into consideration. The care these three have for Maureen is worth mentioning. It is the unconventional nature of Maureen that distances her from her sisters and brother. Jeannette and her siblings depended on each other for survival. Maureen was a sort of "black sheep" in the family. It is the relationship between the siblings that saved Walls family from collapse.

It is the emotional system that governs the behavior of an individual on a societal level. Apart from Maureen, no other members of the family find socialization. They seek society only to fulfill their selfish needs. Society influenced them, but they never let society to overpower them. Rex and Mary perceived society like this—"Mom and Dad liked to make a big point about never surrendering to fear or to prejudices or to the narrow-minded conformist sticks-the-mud who tried to tell everyone what was proper" (102). It is obvious that the Walls family lead a life of non conformity and unconventionality towards societal norms. But there are some instances where societal notions overpowered the emotions of these people.

In a political science class at Barnard Professor Fuchs— one Jeannette's favorite professor — asked if Conservatives or Liberals were right about the cause of homelessness. Jeannette responded that it's neither a result of misguided social programs nor of cuts in those

same programs, but that sometimes people refuse to make compromises and choices that would allow them to make ends meet. Professor Fuchs became furious, asking what she knows about struggles of the poor. This devastating episode for Jeannette could have been more easily resolved had she dared to explain how her own family history led to her thoughts. But, it seems that she is still unsure who she is and where she belongs. This mental dilemma was the case with all the four Walls children. They were embarrassed to mouth out their roots and saw it as a hindrance for their success. Their consciences were knitted with the stability they saw in human lives rather than the glitz and glamour of New York Life. Apart from making their own a life secret the Walls children never made a deviation in their lives, always living towards themselves. "You West Virginia girls are one tough breed" said Jeannette's colleague. On the other hand the parents always lived outside society never submitting them towards social norms and values. Their values remained unchanged, it was its dynamics.