Overview: In her deeply personal and profoundly honest memoir, Mary Childers tells her story of growing up poor, white and on welfare in the Bronx. Using landmark events of the 1960s, such as the 1964 Harlem riots, Childers paints a memorable portrait of her “ragged and resilient family” of eight, struggling to persevere despite the many obstacles standing in their way (261). An alcoholic single mother, unwanted pregnancies, and degenerate boyfriends frame this heartrending tale and help emphasize the amount of perseverance it takes to work a minimum wage job.

In her inspirational memoir, Childers details her unwavering resolve to rise above her disadvantages. Self-determination ultimately enables Childers to escape a life of welfare dependence and receive her PhD. In reflecting upon her life, Childers’ concludes that both lack of opportunity and personal irresponsibility were to blame for her sustained cycle of poverty. Only when a “welfare child” denies her automatic self is she able to discover her best resolve and become a contributing, self-sufficient member of society. Thus, “Welfare Brat” sheds light on the ways in which our contemporary system of welfare makes it tremendously difficult for the underprivileged to triumph, while simultaneously arguing that ultimately, every individual is an agent in achieving his/her own success.

Throughout her memoir, Childers notes the difficulties that classicism poses for those who look to achieve the American Dream. In a society where “it takes money to make money,” those who are on the bottom of the social hierarchy constantly battle systematic inequality (163). In order to be accepted both within and beyond the Bronx, Childers is required to become a chameleon. In doing so, she is able to appear invisible in unsafe environments and
carry her head high in wealthy communities. Childers’s capacity for duplicity and her self-sufficient demeanor is key to her survival in a classicist world.

In her memoir, Childers spends a great deal of time reflecting upon the obstacles that classicism poses for underprivileged youth. For example, schools in the Bronx are not comparable to those in wealthier areas, and employers do not advertise job openings in the Bronx’s local papers. Yet, Childers spends little time discussing the advantages that she is born with, such as her natural intellect, and the color of her skin. Because she is not of a minority race, Childers’ family is able to find housing and receive decent treatment by their neighbors. Because she is intelligent, Childers is able to secure an all-expenses-paid scholarship to an undergraduate institution. The biggest flaw of this memoir is therefore its failure to address her unearned advantages, and how these advantages contributed to her success. For those who occupy the very bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy - those who lack the racial and intellectual advantages that Childers was fortunate enough to have - achieving the American Dream proves much more challenging.

*How this work can be applied to American Studies:* “Welfare Brat” is the quintessential rags to riches American memoir. It tells the story of how a disadvantaged woman was able to climb her way out of poverty and achieve financial and educational success. Additionally, issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality are dispersed throughout the text, which makes this memoir particularly valuable to an Introduction to American Studies syllabus.