
**Overview:** In Jeannette Walls’s *The Glass Castle*, she tells the story of her atypical childhood. Walls was raised in the 1960s by two parents who were marked by their sharp intellect and unyielding nonconformist ideals. Her family developed a nomadic routine, always running away from society’s demands and breaking the normative mold. This lifestyle left the Walls plagued by financial burdens.

In a recent interview, Walls revealed that she intended her memoir to resonate with a broad readership. (Gothamist) Throughout her book, Walls uses a child-like dialect to recapture her childhood memories. In doing so, Walls was able to paint a picture for her readers without providing an explicitly subjective account of her life. Walls was able to devote time to discussing the important moments of her childhood without getting lost in too much detail. The honest and emotional manner in which Walls remembers her atypical childhood experience makes for a very readable memoir.

*The Glass Castle* is about growing up in an unconventional manner. The memoir challenges its readers to reflect upon the way they conduct their own lives. At one point in the book, Walls’ mother highlights the generational gap between the way her parents raised her and the way she raises her children. Commenting on the ridiculousness of having to lie to your children about the existence of Santa Claus, Walls’ mother reveals just how different her childhood experience was from hers. “Try not to look down on those other children. It’s not their fault that they’ve been brainwashed into believing silly myths.” (p. 39, Walls) This quote reveals the straightforward manner in which Walls’ mother addresses her daughter. Walls’ parents created a lifestyle for themselves and their children that deviated from normative society because
they did not believe in adhering to popular norms. Walls reveals how nomadic her family was by stating, we “could go pretty much anywhere and do just about anything we wanted. Mom believed that children shouldn’t be burdened with a lot of rules and restrictions.” (p. 59, Walls) Walls’ parents were always stressing the importance of intellect and self-sufficiency. However, they warned against falling prey to materialistic, uniform lifestyles.

*How this work can be applied to American Studies:* While *The Glass Castle* might not fit neatly into a specific academic genre, given its alternative subject matter and its unique stylistic approach, the teachings of the text could contribute to a wide range of academic disciplines. In Urban Sociology (SOC), Media Self and Society (HMD), or Politics/Culture in the US 1890-1945 (HIS), we have been taught to value ideas of success, conformity, and cultural awareness. Most of the noteworthy figures discussed in these courses have seemed to achieve success by following *some* form of a normative path. This memoir can be read as the antithesis of the typical “American Dream” story. Walls’ contradicts the popular image of 1950s/60s suburban conformity by offering another side to the story. The Walls family did not ignore communal values and normative social boundaries. Although as a child Walls hoped to fit into mainstream society, her parent’s unique way of thinking determinedly shut the door on this idea. Walls shares her memory of attempting to move a second hand piano into one of her family’s temporary homes. When moving the piano proved too difficult, Walls’ mother finally decided to leave it in the yard so that “the whole neighborhood could enjoy the music, too”. (Walls 53) Despite criticism of their alternative lifestyle, Walls’ family had little desire to become mainstream of members of society. Even when they were living in a cardboard shack, waking up with icicles on their bodies due to the lack of heat and eating butter for dinner, the Walls family never considered conformity.
Looking back on her life, Jeannette Walls had little to complain about. She did not resent her parents for forcing her to live a non-conformist lifestyle. Wall’s self-sufficiency, and her ability to learn from the mistakes of her parents, caused Wall to admire about how she was raised. This memoir was both engaging and enlightening. It opened my eyes to alternative ways of living life. In all, *The Glass Castle* challenged its readers question their life style choices and consider a life outside of normative boundaries.

Works Cited
