Four Perspectives on Teaching Jeannette Walls's Memoir, *The Glass Castle*

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Introduction

In 2004, my home institution, Winthrop University, a comprehensive state university with approximately 6,500 students, instituted a Common Book Program that required students to read and discuss a nonfiction text in freshman composition. Later, the Common Book migrated to a course dedicated to strategies for succeeding in college, and it is currently housed in a second-semester freshman seminar called "The Human Experience: Who Am I?". The university frequently seeks to inspire freshmen and transfer students by selecting texts that depict young persons' success in academic life despite great obstacles. Here are some examples of this sort of narrative. Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* follows Cedric Jennings from the housing projects in Washington, DC, to Brown University and beyond. Bill Strickland's *Make the Impossible Possible: One Man's Crusade to Inspire Others to Dream Bigger and Achieve the Extraordinary* describes the author's rise from academic aimlessness to become a pedagogical innovator, airline pilot, and guest lecturer at the Harvard Business School. William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer, in *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope*, describe William's efforts to build an electricity-generating windmill despite poverty and famine in rural Malawi. As a result of

William's TED Talk in Tanzania, he was able to study at the African Bible College and Dartmouth College, where he received a bachelor's degree in 2014. The university's 2017–2018 Common Book, Joshua Davis's *Spare Parts: Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream*, tells how four Phoenix, Arizona, high school students (three undocumented, one documented) cobbled together an underwater remote vehicle from spare parts and beat the team from MIT to win first place in the university division of a NASA-sponsored robotics competition. *Spare Parts* is a timely choice because of its emphasis on illegal immigration and on figures like Joe Arpaio, whom President Trump pardoned in 2017 for a conviction on racial profiling. Behind the selection of these books, of course, is the university's hope that freshman readers will say to themselves, *If the persons in the Common Book can succeed in school despite odds far greater my own, surely I can too; maybe I can even adopt some of their strategies*.[1]

The Human Experience course features readings that deal with the "self" in a variety of contexts: education, autonomy, community, diversity, alienation, nature, and the sacred. All of these subheadings in our textbook, *The Human Experience: Who Am I?*, have connections with a particularly fine Common Book, Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle*. The memoir includes not only the author's educational autobiography but also struggles for autonomy on a personal and familial basis; disharmony with communities and relatives; encounters with adversaries, including a number of bullies; struggles with alienation of various kinds; the beauty of nature, especially in the desert; and frequent references to religious belief and practice. The strong overlap between the anthology and the Walls memoir is no doubt one reason why it was chosen

to serve as the Common Book two years in a row. In addition, *The Glass Castle* lends itself particularly well to the kind of analysis and teaching that occur in an English classroom. In order to teach the text effectively, one must think in rubrics that come naturally to instructors in our field. My approach to the book, for example, emphasizes literary analogy, psychology, formalism, and composition. These four areas, though they do not cover the full extent of the book's rich content, will serve as focal points below because they encompass much that is memorable and important in Walls'sstory. (Other possible perspectives include, but are not limited to, economics, nutrition, social work, and sociology.)

Andrea Irvin's "Minds *and* Hearts: Using Jeannette Walls's Memoir, *The Glass Castle*, to Teach Emotional Intelligence" is currently the only noteworthy publication on teaching the memoir in the MLA Bibliography. The present essay is closer to a lesson plan than Irvin's article because it adumbrates four perspectives that directly inform pedagogical practice. My hope is that what follows will not only invite instructors to adopt *The Glass Castle* in a course like freshman composition but also provide a resource as they make decisions on their own approaches to teaching the memoir. My suggested unit comprises three class sessions and a paper assignment; the material is organized below by day, though it could be presented in any order. The first section compares *The Glass Castle* and Dylan Thomas's "Poem on His Birthday," from which Walls takes the book's epigraph. The full poem is a suitable paired text because it has much common ground with *The Glass Castle*, including setting, alcoholism, gratitude, and spirituality. Discussing the latter, of course, does not require that one teach at a religious school, imply that one should promulgate a Christian perspective, or necessitate a

particular audience. The section simply demonstrates that analyzing the two works side by side is a suitable heuristic, that it is sensible to start with the epigraph, and that spirituality (in whatever sense) is an important dimension of the human experience. Section two analyzes *The Glass Castle* from the standpoint of depth psychology and literary genre. Here depth psychology refers to the workings of the unconscious mind on motive and behavior; the shadow, defined by Carl Jung as what we hide about ourselves from society, is particularly relevant to Walls's dysfunctional family. Section three describes a classroom activity on the themes and images in *The Glass Castle*. The final section proposes ten paper topics that are suitable for freshmen writers, and the conclusion features an end-of-unit in-class writing exercise that relates to the memoir's advice for school and life. Altogether, the four perspectives—literary analogy, psychology, formalism, and composition—provide enough material for up to three 75-minute class sessions on *The Glass Castle* and paper topics suitable for an out-of-class assignment. Each section below begins with an italicized abstract to help orient the reader, followed by analysis that serves as a resource for instructors.

First, a brief summary of *The Glass Castle* is in order for readers who are unfamiliar with it. The memoir is a triptych inside a frame that deals with Walls's mother. The book opens with Jeannette's embarrassment at seeing her homeless, dumpster-diving mother on the street in New York City, then doubles back to childhood. Her first memory—of being badly burned—opens section one, "The Desert." In this location, the Walls family—Rex, an Air Force veteran, and Rose Mary, a teacher and artist, along with their children Lori, Jeannette, Brian, and Maureen—*skedaddles* from various towns when Rex loses his job or when legal trouble threatens. Along the

way, Jeannette enjoys the desert's natural beauty, witnesses her parents' fights and foibles, confronts a bully named Billy Deal, and begins to untangle the mysteries of sexuality. Allowed to take only one object on each move, Jeannette chooses a geode, an image of inner beauty and possibility that resonates throughout the book. "The Desert" also includes some of Rex's more outrageous actions like repeatedly pushing Jeannette into deep water until she learns to swim and taking the children to a zoo where they pet a cheetah. The second section, entitled "Welch," finds the family relocated in Rex's hometown, Welch, West Virginia, dealing with abusive relatives (grandmother Erma, uncle Stanley); local bullies, including Dinitia Hewitt, an African American who eventually becomes Jeannette's friend; lack of proper nutrition and housing; and various effects of Rex's alcoholism and Rose Mary's bipolar disorder.[2] Highlights such as Jeannette's interview of Chuck Yeager for the school newspaper and Rex's acquisition of a gold Cadillac by gambling are juxtaposed with lows like suffering from malnutrition, enduring winters in an uninsulated house, and being pimped out by her father as part of his plan to hustle an unsuspecting pool player. Despite all the impediments, Lori and Jeannette develop into *caryatids*—female pillars, strong young women. "New York City," section three, is the setting of the children's escape—first Lori, then Jeannette, and finally the younger siblings. But before long, the parents arrive in the city, eventually ending up homeless until they find an abandoned apartment building used by squatters. Lori and Jeannette study and work in their respective specialties, art and journalism (Jeannette attends Barnard College), while Brian eventually becomes a police officer, and Maureen gets sent for a while to a mental institution for stabbing Rose Mary (Maureen later moves to California and drops out of the story). Meanwhile, Rex

shares Jeannette's college experience by reading the public library's copies of her course textbooks. After college, she ironically gravitates to the opposite of her childhood background, living an upscale life with her first husband, Eric, the antithesis of Rex, while reporting on celebrities for a publication. Rex dies in New York City, so he is not present for the closing frame, "Thanksgiving," when Jeannette and her second husband, John, host the family for a holiday dinner. Today Rose Mary lives with them.

Perspective One: Literary Comparison

Day One: I began my unit on *The Glass Castle* by giving students a copy of Dylan Thomas's "Poem on His Birthday" and asking them to describe the setting and to underline language that relates to religion/spirituality, predation in the natural world, and the poet's situation. After sharing their findings and advancing an interpretation of the poem, students were invited to draw comparisons between the poem and the memoir. The discussion that followed yielded insights involving the Welch house, Rex's alcoholism, faith in the afterlife, religious practice, nature, thanksgiving, and the meaning and relevance of the stanza from which the author takes her epigraph. Why, I asked my students, does Jeannette choose an epigraph from a poem that is religious (though in problematic ways) for her secular book? Although she is silent on her own faith (if any), her many religious references—especially Rex's comments on the afterlife—invite readers to think about their own belief system, a relevant component of a course called The Human Experience in which the sacred is the subject of multiple anthology

pieces. The exercise, of course, invites personal reflection, but such inquiry does not presuppose authentic religious belief or, for that matter, spirituality of any sort. This section simply describes objective academic content. In that spirit, the following material provides the instructor with background information on "Poem on His Birthday" in relation to *The Glass Castle*.

We begin, then, with Dylan Thomas (October 27, 1914–November 9, 1953).[3] The poet began "Poem on His Birthday," his fourth and final birthday poem, in 1949, the year he turned 35, life's biblical midpoint (*Harper Study Bible*, Ps. 90.9–10), and completed it in the autumn of 1952, the year before his death at age 39. The poem is set in October at his home in Laugharne, Wales, on the cliffs overlooking the Taf Estuary. "Poem" continues Thomas's lifelong fascination with death and conveys the feeling that his end is drawing near. Seeing not only fecundity in the natural world but also the deaths of other creatures, he recognizes that their passing, like his own, is inevitable. Nevertheless, he seems to praise the Creator. Thomas himself summarizes the poem as follows:

> [He] celebrates, and spurns, his thirty-fifth birthday. . . . Birds and fishes move under and around him on their dying ways, & he, a craftsman in words, toils toward his own wounds which are waiting in ambush for him. . . . Now exactly half of his three score and ten years is gone . . . he looks back at his times: his loves, his hates, all he has seen, and sees the logical progress of death in every thing he has seen & done. His death lurks for him, and for all, in the next lunatic war, and still singing, still praising the radiant earth, still loving, through remotely, the animal creation also gladly pursuing their inevitable &

> grievous ends, he goes towards his. Why should he praise God, and the beauty of the world as he moves to horrible death? He does not like the deep zero dark and the nearer he gets to it, *the louder he sings, the higher the salmon leaps, the shriller the birds carol*.[4] (qtd. in Ferris 263; emphasis in original; Ferris's ellipses)

The first parallel between "Poem on His Birthday" and *The Glass Castle* is a common element in the two works' settings. Thomas mentions a "house on stilts" as "his slant, racking house" where the poet works on his poems, "the hewn coils of his trade" (stanzas 1 and 3). As Robert K. Burdette observes, "It is a 'slant' house because it is built upon the incline or slope of a cliff; and the house is 'racking' because it too is in the process of falling down or wrecking" (79). The house is on "stilts" because one side is propped up by columns.[5] One will immediately see the parallel to the Walls family's house at 93 Little Hobart Street in Welch, West Virginia, for it too is slant and racking and partly supported by pillars, as Walls describes:

> The house was a dinky thing perched high up off the road on a hillside so steep that only the back of the house rested on the ground. The front, including a drooping porch, jutted precariously into the air, supported by tall, spindly cinder-block pillars. It had been painted white a long time ago, but the paint, where it hadn't peeled off altogether, had turned a dismal gray. (150)

Photos of Thomas's studio and of the house in Welch can be found via Google; instructors may want to include suitable images, for example, in a PowerPoint presentation.[6] The studio, a former boat house, is a mere shed the size of what is today called a "tiny house," and like the Walls family's house in Welch, it appears to lack insulation. One curious detail is that the best photo of

the Welch house shows it fronted by a cinder-block foundation rather than by pillars and porch. The pillars, by the way, contrast with Lori's image of the "'caryatid'" (a classical pillar shaped like a woman) on page 208, which relates to the notion of "[b]eing a strong woman" on page 214. Ironically, the house where Lori and Jeannette grew into caryatids was supported by pillars of a more precarious sort. Beyond the similar structures, a significant parallel arises from the reference to "the hewn coils of his trade" (stanza 3), which William York Tindall identifies as "art's intricacies and all its troubles," with "hewn" implying "headstone cutting" (285); perhaps "hewn" also emphasizes the poet's meticulous and drawn-out approach to revision. The Welch house is the locus of analogous creative activity: Rose Mary's many writings and paintings; the children's homework; Lori's art projects; and probably some of the stories that Jeannette wrote for her high school paper, *The Maroon Wave*, not to mention the assignments she did for other students. To a significant extent, Walls, the now-famous memoirist, writes about writing, just as Thomas, the professional poet, writes about his craft.

Whereas the details of the writing studio are not in question, one of the poem's key themes, religious faith, receives different interpretations in the criticism. The opening "Note" in *The Collected Poems* concludes with a theological observation: "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't" (xiii). Nevertheless, there exists a range of opinions about Thomas's spirituality in "Poem on His Birthday." The poet himself called it a poem "in praise of God's world by a man who doesn't believe in God," though his joy is greater than his sense of doom (qtd. in Korg 118). For Tindall, "Thomas' dark way seems a faithless, hopeful approach to

a light that never was nor will be," yet the critic concedes that the poet harbors a secular but not theological faith (287–88). William T. Moynihan glosses the word "bless" in stanza 2 as an "affirmation of the goodness and beauty of nature and life which is central to this poem" (131). He also observes that Thomas considers Heaven to be closed to him, that he "rejected the traditional Christianity of his childhood, but [that] he learned to see nature as holy, faith in life as essential, and love as the best immortality" (215–16).

The contrasting view is more in the spirit of Thomas's positive affirmation of God in the "Note." As John Ackerman states, the basic point is that Thomas had "a more philosophic acceptance of Christian faith and teaching," that is, faith in God without adherence to "Church-going orthodoxy and practice" (158). Oliver Evans agrees that "Faithlessly" (stanza 8) "means lacking *particular* faith—that is, faith in a particular dogma" (137; emphasis in the original). Likewise, Moynihan concedes that Thomas's rejection of "the hypocrisy he saw in various forms of Christianity does not *necessarily* mean that he also rejected God or the possibility of metaphoric truth in Christian 'myth'" (225; emphasis in the original). Rushworth M. Kidder observes more directly that, as the poem progresses, "the fear of the immanence of death yields to the conviction of the immanence of God and His power over life" (198). As these critics would agree, surely all the religious language in "Poem on His Birthday," which students enjoy tracking in a New Critical manner, implies that the poet does have faith in something beyond the natural world. Two details offer particularly strong support for this position. First, in line one, "the mustardseed sun" recalls the mustard seed as a symbol of faith in the Gospels and puns on the "son" of God.[7] In fact, "Poem on His Birthday" specifically refers to the Holy Trinity: "great

/ And fabulous, dear God" (stanza 6); "blessed, unborn God and His Ghost" (stanza 7); and "Him / Who is the light of old" (stanzas 8–9). Second, the reference to "angelus knells" in stanza 5 recalls how "The angelus—to be prayed at sunrise, noon, and sunset—parallels the movement of the sun" (Burdette 81) and perhaps also the trajectory of the poet's life, as well as the poem's movement from "mustardseed sun" to darkness in stanzas 6 and 8. More significantly, the Angelus is a prayer commemorating the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she is pregnant with Jesus, whose incarnation, incidentally, parallels the poet's own birthday. But as other references to funeral bells in stanzas 2 and 10 remind us, the phrase "angelus knells" is "a synthesis of birth and death" (Tindall 286). In short, with allusions to Jesus and to biblical statements about faith, "Poem on His Birthday" does seem to support the interpretation that Thomas had a faith that transcended appreciation of natural beauty.

Although Walls never states her own theological position, *The Glass Castle* does include many references to religion and faith with respect to her parents who enact the tension between "Church-going orthodoxy and practice" (Rose Mary) and the religious doubt that yields near life's end to an acknowledgement of possibilities beyond nature (Rex).[8] Religious observance and a Catholic upbringing were Rose Mary's conditions for having children, but on rare occasions when Rex accompanied the family to church he challenged and ridiculed the priest's message, causing the family's expulsion from the service (104–05). In one of the book's funniest vignettes, Rex, who writes letters to dictionary publishers to challenge definitions (56), ironically conflates the virgin birth and the Immaculate Conception (114); the latter, of course, means that Mary was conceived without sin, not that Jesus was conceived without sex. Various things

probably give rise to Rex's atheism: at a minimum, hatred of authority, alcoholic rage, and scientific materialism. Walls writes, "Dad was an expert in math and physics and electricity. He read books on calculus and logarithmic algebra and loved what he called the poetry and symmetry of math. He told us about the magic qualities every number has and how numbers unlock the secrets of the universe" (23). For Rex, as William Carlos Williams states in "A Sort of a Song," there are "No ideas / but in things" (lines 9–10), and he buys into the illusion that Spirit must not exist if science cannot measure it. As Rex lies in the hospital suffering from tuberculosis, however, his interest in physics opens him to an alternative possibility. This is one of the places where Walls mentions "the transition between order and turbulence" (261; other references to the phrase appear on 61 and 288), which corresponds perhaps to the line between the estuary and dry land in Thomas's poem. Although still skeptical about there being "'a bearded old geezer named Yahweh up in the clouds,'" Rex now admits that "'if the physics—the quantum physics—suggests that God exists, I'm more than willing to entertain the notion'" (261). Rex, like Thomas, does not countenance religion; however, unlike Thomas, he does not affirm God's existence but merely signals an openness to consider that possibility. In summary, Rose Mary's hollow religious observance, Rex's skeptical materialism, the book's many religious details, Thomas's attitude toward faith versus doctrine, and the poem's strand of religious language provide many alternative points of view that enable a lively discussion with students.

A close reading of stanzas 1 and 2 in "Poem on His Birthday" suggests another specific parallel to Rex's situation. The poet "celebrates and spurns" his thirty-fifth birthday while

watching the birds outside his writing shed and thinking of himself as part of nature's mutable realm: "This sandgrain day" recalls sand in an hourglass; "Herons spire and spear" and "steeple stemmed, bless"; flounders, gulls, and curlews "Work at their ways to death"; and "the rhymer in the long tongued room" rings his birthday bell. The herons, whose beaks are long and narrow like steeples, also "walk in their shroud" (stanza 3), a further reminder of the poet's mortality. The key detail is the word "bless," which may suggest that the herons grace the scene or bestow some kind of good upon the observing poet. But if "bless" recalls the French *blesser*, to hurt, then the word is part of a strand of predatorial images. Like the seals in stanza 4 that dive down to kill but are themselves killed, the poet "Toils towards the ambush of his wounds" (stanza 2). For Ackerman, "The 'ambush of his wounds' towards which 'the rhymer . . . toils' refers to the act of redemption that the poet, in his art, performs. He redeems, it is implied, both himself and the world by his dedication" (157). Perhaps a better reading is that Thomas continues to work on his poems as his body, corroded by alcoholism, declines toward its inevitable death. Life's hard knocks and the poet's own bad habits will eventually take his life. Indeed, he lapsed into a coma and died in New York City after imbibing too much whiskey and being administered a large dose of morphine sulphate by a physician (Ferris 305–06). If "wounds" refers to Thomas's alcoholism, the line "Toils towards the ambush of his wounds" is eerily prescient (cf. "scar" in stanza 5). Of course, the ambush laid by one's wounds is directly relevant to *The Glass Castle*. After the brief vignette in which Jeannette, while riding in a taxi, sees her mother scavenging for food, the book begins with a literal wound that scars her for life. In her first memory, her dress catches on fire as she cooks hotdogs, and she is rushed to the hospital and treated for severe

burns. Unlike her burns and literal scars, however, Rex's wounds are inner, slower, and self-inflicted—decades of heavy smoking and what Rose Mary euphemistically calls "a little bit of a drinking situation" (23). Unlike Thomas, though, he is unable to keep any job and never *toils* for very long toward anything.

What evidence is there that the "wounds" mentioned in "Poem on His Birthday" actually refer to the poet's alcoholism? A clue comes via "moonshine domes" in stanza 10. A man is "Tangling through this spun slime / To his nimbus bell cool kingdom come / And the lost, moonshine domes." According to Burdette, "Stripped of its husks, the soul comes to 'old and air shaped Heaven where souls grow wild' (on 'moonshine'?) and where 'he might wander bare' [stanza 7]" (87). Although the moonshine in the poem means light reflected off the moon, Thomas's mention in the "Author's Prologue" of "the moonshine / Drinking Noah of the bay" justifies the alternative meaning (xviii). Thomas Dilworth sees various poems in the background of the "moonshine domes": the "moonlit dome" in "Byzantium" (line 5), the "sunny pleasure-dome" in "Kubla Khan" (line 36), and the "dome of many-coloured glass" in "Adonais" (stanza 52, line 3). For Dilworth, the dome image in Thomas's poem can represent a state that has been lost (Yeats, Coleridge) or the dead (Shelley) (5). In addition to these helpful glosses, one remembers that Coleridge claimed to have written "Kubla Khan" after a nighttime vision sparked by "an anodyne" or sleep aid, namely opium (Coleridge 546), a corollary to Thomas's alcoholism as well as the parents' addictions in *The Glass Castle*. As Rose Mary puts it, "'I'm a sugar addict, just like your father is an alcoholic'" (174). Given the nexus of "The ambush of his wounds," "He sings towards anguish" (stanza 3), "The voyage to ruin I must run" (stanza 9), the

possible allusion to the drugged poet of "Kubla Khan," and her parents' addictions, it is little wonder that Walls begins *The Glass Castle* with an epigraph from a poet who drank himself to death.

Nevertheless, Thomas realizes in stanza 10 that he has various blessings (boons, not wounds): "Four elements and five / Senses, and man a spirit in love." In addition to the elements, the senses, and love, the poet's aesthetic appreciation of nature is heightened by shortness of time. These blessings, along with faith in God, are with him as he "sail[s] out to die" in the last line. The poem thus offers a theological counterpart to Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," which is written from a nonreligious point of view but ends with the far-superior line: "Downward to darkness, on extended wings" (stanza 8). In any case, joy in the natural world links Thomas's poem and Walls's memoir. He includes cormorants, herons, flounders, gulls, curlews, hawks, dolphins, seals, geese, eagles, whales, horses, and larks. She mentions the following "critters" (101): dog, cat, snake, lizard, tortoise, coyote, buzzard, scorpion, horny toad, mosquitoes, roaches, Gila monster, tortoise, rattlesnake, scorpion, rat, tadpole, frog, fly, dragonfly, termites, mountain lion, cheetah, and iguana. In addition, she writes lyrically about the beauty of the natural world.[9]

"Poem on His Birthday" conveys a sense of thanksgiving that is even more explicit in *The Glass Castle*, which ends with a coda entitled "Thanksgiving." As the book concludes, Jeannette and her second husband, John, host Rose Mary, Lori, and Brian. Her home is not made of glass or emerald or diamond, but it is what she needs. That sturdy farmhouse with a vegetable garden outside corrects the pipe dream of the Glass Castle, along with the disrepair of the Welch

house and its backyard garbage dump. A book that begins with Jeannette's embarrassment at seeing her mother in "A Woman on the Street" ends with reunion, reconciliation, familial love, humor, compassion, and a sense that all has been for the best. Whereas Thomas's gifts are emotional, natural, sensuous, and spiritual, Jeannette's great achievement is the serenity that comes from having overcome major obstacles. If she is right to say in her interview at Point Loma Nazarine University that she received "incredible gifts" from her parents ("An Evening"), perhaps Rose Mary is right after all when she says that "'what doesn't kill you will make you stronger'" (179). If so, perhaps their lives are like the Joshua tree: "'It's the Joshua tree's struggle that gives it its beauty,'" says Rose Mary (38). As the memoir closes, Jeannette and her siblings give thanks for having risen above the ambush of their wounds, though the reunion is incomplete because Maureen, the youngest sibling who has eschewed the family and moved to California, is not among them.

The Glass Castle's three-line epigraph (in italics) comes from stanza 6 and suggests that mortal life may culminate in some kind of heavenly destination:

> And freely he goes lost
> In the unknown, famous light of great
> And fabulous, dear God.
> *Dark is a way and light is a place,*
> *Heaven that never was*
> *Nor will be ever is always true,*
> And, in that brambled void,

Plenty as blackberries in the woods

The dead grow for His joy.

Tindall, however, emphasizes theological ambiguity in his summary of the stanza:

> "Dark is a way" to the light of God and heaven. As in the earlier poems, both God and heaven remain uncertain. A "fabulous" god [sic], both wonderful and mythical, sits in a heaven "that never was / Nor will be ever." Yet God and heaven are "always true"; for myth is truer than fact. Although a "void," heaven is, paradoxically, a crowded blackberry patch, where the dead "grow" for God's joy. "Grow" means thrive and heap up. Once again Thomas' long struggle through the dark towards the light seems over; but as he comes to light, what comes to light is light's ambiguity. In the "unknown, famous light" he is lost indeed. "Famous," "great," and "fabulous" are words from Yeats, not T. S. Eliot. (286)

For Tindall, Thomas describes God and Heaven in terms of human myth rather than as a divine or transcendental truth. Still, the poet's attitude toward myth is wholly more positive than Rex's comment about children's being "'brainwashed into believing silly myths'" like Santa Claus (39), the idea that Mary conceived without sex, or the tall tales that he spins about his own adventures and demonic creatures.

Kidder suggests a slightly more positive reading of the key stanza and associated details elsewhere in the poem:

> . . . toiling in darkness because of faith, the poet envisions his present darkness, or lack of understanding, as a temporal journey, and his goal of illumination (or God) as

> something spatial and beyond time. Denying the evidence of his merely worldly beliefs by means of the positivity of his religious faith, he offers another seeming paradox: "Heaven that never was / Nor will be ever is always true." Looking to that future, he dreams of that heaven where he might "wander bare / With the spirits of the horseshoe bay" in the company of "blessed, unborn God and His Ghost, / And every soul His priest"; but, jolted from his vision, he remembers that "dark is a long way." And, alone on his dark earth he turns to prayer [in the last three and a half stanzas]. (200–01)[10]

Kidder's explication portrays the stanza's progression from earthly darkness to heavenly light as being more straightforward and less mythical than Tindall suggests. The following paraphrase of stanza 6 by poet Francis G. Fike, with my emphases in brackets, eliminates the ambiguity by rendering the lines affirmatively:

> With free will he wanders confusedly
> Into the mysterious but renowned light
> Of great, myth-rich, precious God.
> Darkness is one path forward and light is a destination;
> Heaven that never existed [on Earth]
> Nor ever will exist [here] is nevertheless true
> And, in the natural world's thorny emptiness,
> Plentiful as blackberries in the woods
> The living dead mature to give God joy.

Read in this way, stanza 6 straightforwardly presents mortal life as a journey on a dark and thorny path where our souls mature in ways that please God as we prepare for our return to the great light of the afterlife.

According to "Poem on His Birthday," a soul's upward movement in the earthly realm bears some relationship to John Keats's "pleasure thermometer" (Letter to John Taylor).[11] For Keats, different "gradations of happiness" are possible; for example, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" moves from nature (the setting, its plants and creatures in stanzas 1–4) to art ("garland," "bracelet," "A fairy's song" in stanzas 5–6) and then to love ("I love thee true," "kisses four" in stanzas 7–8). Likewise, Thomas's poem opens with the natural scene and its denizens, mentions his "coils" (poems/art), and later emphasizes that "man [is] a spirit in love" (stanzas 3 and 10). But whereas Keats's hierarchy stops with human love, stanza 6's "fabulous, dear God" and positive portrayal of heaven suggest divine love and a possible higher dimension. In summary, the stanza from which Walls takes her epigraph suggests wayfaring: though we journey through life on a dark and thorny path, well-lit heaven may be our final destination. Meanwhile, the image of humans as blackberries is highly positive: while on Earth we grow/mature into something ripe and desirable, thus pleasing God. In other words, stanza 6 seems to offer a higher degree of religious certainty and hopefulness than the poem's critics have previously assumed.

"Poem on His Birthday" is about how every year on one's birthday one is a year closer to death. We live in a realm of toil and struggle, but heaven may well be our ultimate destination. That message makes it an appropriate poem to use as an epigraph for a book that celebrates Jeannette's late father. Although she is silent on her own religious point of view, the epigraph, if

considered in the full context of the poem in which it appears, may imply the hope that he is in heaven and that she will one day see him there. More broadly, if *The Glass Castle* is a book about finding blessings (benefits) in a world full of blessings (hurts, wounds), the trials that Jeannette endures are purposeful: that too is the epigraph's implication.

Perspective Two: Depth Psychology

Day Two: From a discussion of connections between "Poem on His Birthday" and *The Glass Castle* that include a vertical dimension, my unit moves to what the memoir suggests about the psyche on the horizontal plane. Here is a suggested approach. Instructors write the following terms (some of which are from Jungian depth psychology) at random on a handout or put them on the board: imagination, the imaginal realm; the shadow, shadow projection, and shadow work; inflation and pride; alcoholism; sexual abuse; the Glass Castle and gold; individuation and wholeness; intervention; the boundary between turbulence and order; the garbage pit; suspense; comedy and tragedy; innocence, experience, and organized innocence. After helping students define the terms, instructors have students write for ten minutes about connections among as many of the terms as possible. Then, using the details described in the following section, the class explores the role of the unconscious in the family's experience.

Walls's memoir dramatizes the psyche in ways that depth psychology can fruitfully address, and "Poem on His Birthday" suggests some preliminary entry points. "To be 'in the mustardseed sun' is to be in the light of the Logos" (Burdette 95), but "the sea that hides his

secret selves / Deep in its black, base bones" in stanza 10 refers to the "subconscious" (Dilworth 6). *The Glass Castle* presents a similar distinction between consciousness/rationality and the unconscious. Rex, for example, loves math and science ("Dad preferred science and math books" [57]), and Jeannette's own story begins with the dawn of personal consciousness: catching on fire is her first memory, and the episode reminds us that Prometheus's gift to mankind represents consciousness. On the other hand, Rose Mary paints "a picture of a woman drowning in a stormy lake," probably a self-portrait of the losing battle she fights with addiction and unconscious forces (195). The drowning woman clearly contrasts with Lori's caryatid reference: "'Pillars shaped like women,' Lori said. 'The ones holding up those Greek temples with their heads'" (208).[12]

Closely akin to the unconscious is the imaginal realm that is accessed naturally at a young age. The memoir depicts the "imagination" as a neutral medium that can be used for good or ill (36, 103). Jeannette engages with the imaginal realm via demon hunting; she believes that fire has a personality of its own (*participation mystique*, attributing a human psychological characteristic to something inanimate); and Maureen has imaginary friends but also fears bogeymen and has nightmares that prefigure her psychological problems as an adult (81, 111, 103, 156). It is tragic that Maureen seems to be the scapegoat for the parents' many addictions and dysfunctions. One almost suspects that Lori, Jeannette, and Brian escape the darkness because Maureen does not, much as Aeneas and his fellow Trojans are allowed safe passage to what would become Italy because Palinurus falls overboard: "one single life shall be offered to save many" (Virgil, book 5, line 815). Although never stated, the point is lightly implied by the

children's adult situations: a successful artist (Lori), a famous writer (Jeannette), a police officer turned English teacher (Brian), and a mental patient whose present-day situation is not revealed (Maureen).

For Irvin, "demons" are "obstacles" (59), but demons also represent the shadow or the things that we hide in public and repress into the unconscious. According to Daryl Sharp, the shadow is the "[h]idden or unconscious aspects of oneself, both good and bad, which the ego has either repressed or never recognized" (123). The memoir begins *in medias res* with an example of Jeannette's own shadow, her shame because of her parents' homelessness in New York City. Ironically, while the young journalist lives on Park Avenue and reveals the shadows of the rich and famous ("even the people who seemed to have it all had their secrets" [270]), she believes that she must lie about her own background to keep her job. Yet the past is inescapable and remains with us always. What is carried within the psyche, for good or ill, relates to various images that the memoir presents. On the positive side is the geode that Jeannette carries from one home to the next and eventually gives to Maureen; its beautiful crystal interior suggests "inner spirit" or "inner beauty" (104, 245).[13] But positives are sometimes hard to find: the cash jar is buried somewhere, and Rose Mary has difficulty finding it (17). A contrasting image, the Phoenix house is internally unsound because termites have eaten holes in the floor (much as alcohol must be eating holes in Rex's liver). His solution to the holes in the floor (patching them with the flattened metal from beer cans), is as effective as putting a bandage on a tumor or hunting inner demons in the outer world, which the Walls children do in the desert as if

conscious action in the physical world will address the only demons in the tale—those that lie within the unconscious (78, 240).

The great driver of the Walls family's shadow appears to be Rex's childhood sexual abuse by his mother Erma. Like Billy Deal, who has a misshapen head and is described as "'the devil with a crew cut'" (82), Erma is physically ugly: "She was enormous, with pasty skin and about three chins. Bobby pins held back her lank gray hair, and a cigarette dangled from her mouth" (130). Contrary to the concept of *kalokagathia*, "[a] Platonic teaching consisting of the harmonious combination of bodily, moral and spiritual virtues" ("*Kalokagathia*"), that is, the idea that what is morally good is also physically beautiful, Walls presents the morally bankrupt as physically ugly. She states that the siblings became the true demon hunters when they pounded on Erma ("Author Jeannette Walls" 147), but this interpretation is bad psychology. Pummeling their grandmother is merely another example of projection, and they may also pummel the sad old woman as compensation for the futility of trying to reform their parents. As for Rex, apparently to get away from his mother, he left Welch at the earliest opportunity to join the United States Air Force and in later years, instead of dealing with the shadow of sexual abuse, dulled his emotional pain with alcohol. But drinking also allows his rage to manifest, as it does when he almost kills Rose Mary (71) or calls her a "'stinking bitch'" (122). When he drinks, Rex turns into "an angry-eyed stranger" who projects his shadow onto others (23). In the movie adaptation of *The Glass Castle*, Woody Harrelson as Rex sums up the psychological challenge that propels the action: "I spent my whole life huntin' for those demons in the wild, and the entire time they were hidin' inside my own belly. Sad state to spend your life in, bein'

afraid of your own self" (Cretton 1:53). Shadow projection is both psychological and literal when Jeannette shoots at Billy Deal with a real projectile (88). Fortunately for her, she misses, but the scene anticipates Dinitia Hewitt's murder of her mother's boyfriend (200). The vengeance that lurks in Rex and Jeannette is fully active in Dinitia; whereas they project the shadow, she is possessed by it and, we assume, is placed in a physical prison that restricts her body because she could not manage her own pysche.

Walls emphasizes the forces that prevent Rex and Rose Mary from integrating the shadow and addressing their addictions. He is too proud to admit his problem for most of his life, and when he does dry out because Jeannette asks him to, he is not sober for long. His pride leads in turn to inflation, a "state of mind characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, often compensated by feelings of inferiority" (Sharp 72).[14] According to Walls, "Dad always fought harder, flew faster, and gambled smarter than everyone else in his stories. Along the way, he rescued women and children and even men who weren't as strong and clever" (24). He thinks of binge drinking as "slaying dragons" (229), has "ridiculous dreams," creates "stupid plans," and makes "empty promises" (70). Because he fancies himself to be so great, he sets his sights on striking it rich. Sometimes his grand schemes, among them the Glass Castle, prevent even the ability to hold down a simple job to put food on the table. In that sense, he embodies the Terrible Father archetype, just as Erma, Rose Mary, and perhaps Grandma Smith (Rose Mary's mother) exemplify the Terrible Mother. The larger context is the trouble caused by the country's dysfunctional father figure, President Nixon. It is significant that Jeannette "watched the Watergate hearings on a little black-and-white TV" at Becker's Jewel Box when not dealing with

customers (215). Therefore, the disorder in the Walls family's microcosm mirrors the disorder in the macrocosm of national politics.

The opposite of shadow projection is individuation, which means making the material from the personal and collective unconscious available to conscious awareness. According to Sharp, it is a "process of psychological differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality"; wholeness is its goal (67). The Gospel of Thomas emphasizes the importance of individuation or bringing forth: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you" (verse 70).[15] The problem with Rex and Rose Mary, however, is that their codependent relationship prevents an honest reckoning. They make excuses for each other like this one: "'Don't worry, God understands,' Mom said. 'He knows that your father is a cross we must bear'" (105). Not only is the assertion bad psychology; it also makes avoiding an intervention a matter of religious responsibility. Because enabling Rex and Rose Mary in maintaining their addictions masquerades as "'respect[ing] your parents,'" no genuine change is possible (219). Intervention is clearly needed, as Rex himself ironically acknowledges in his statement about supernatural creatures: "That was the thing to remember about all monsters, Dad said: They love to frighten people, but the minute you stare them down, they turn tail and run" (37). This too is bad psychology. There is great value in confronting the past and coming to terms with what and who we really are: we must acknowledge (bring to light) the shadows that lurk within. If repressed, they fester. If recognized openly, they release their hold on the psyche and may even contribute their energy in positive ways.

There is potential for such confrontation early in the story after Jeannette shoots at Billy Deal. A police officer orders the family to show up in court the next day, but Rex decides to skedaddle instead. Had they kept the court date, difficult truths would have been acknowledged, and years of dysfunction, poverty, and neglect might have been avoided. Another possible reckoning is avoided in Welch when a man from child welfare stops by the house while Rex and Rose Mary are away; Jeannette spouts inflationary lies about her parents, and the man never returns. The climax of the story comes in New York City: after Maureen stabs Rose Mary, the whole family shows up for Maureen's court appearance. At last the family members openly confront each other, but even then there is projection and failure to take responsibility instead of true individuation: "I just stood there looking from one distorted face to another, listening to this babble of enraged squabbling as the members of the Walls family gave vent to all their years of hurt and anger, each unloading his or her own accumulated grievances and blaming the others for allowing the most fragile one of us to break into pieces" (276). At this point in the memoir, the family has masked problems for so long that all they can do is blame each other.

Rex's dream of building the Glass Castle represents things as they might ideally be in the Walls family if inner work were properly done by all its members. As an emblem of individuation, it is an outer and physical sign of an inner and psychological renewal—the wholeness that is individuation's goal. In other words, if Rex had proper mental health, it would get built. Because he remains in a state of inflationary inebriation, it does not. Its only physical manifestation is the hole dug in the yard at the Welch house for the foundation, which fills up with garbage, a fitting emblem of Rex's polluted, dysfunctional psyche. To the extent that the

Glass Castle remains a set of blueprints, it is merely a pipe dream as well as a sign of stunted development and lost potential. As a representation of his inflation, it is akin to his plans for another unobtainable dream, building The Prospector (23): were he to strike it rich with this machine, the family would live in the Glass Castle. He can *dream*, but he cannot *do* because he is paralyzed by alcoholism and pride. Even tasks like insulating the Welch house and putting a decent roof on it are beyond his capability. The imagined Glass Castle is as ironic an image of wholeness as the ouroboros in Maureen's religious experience: "Once she insisted that the devil had taken the form of a hoop snake with its tail in its mouth, and had rolled after her down the mountain, hissing that it would claim her soul" (207). The devil (shadow) chases after her as though demanding to be acknowledged; however, Maureen, like her parents, flees the wholeness that the circle represents. It is they who "turn tail and run," not the shadow.

Although the Glass Castle never gets built, *The Glass Castle* gets written. Its publication is Walls's act of bringing to light the shadows from her upbringing and early adult life. As she puts it, "Part of the secret of story-telling is shining your light in the dark corners" ("Author Jeannette Walls"). Writing the memoir is inner work, and the book is an image of wholeness that the Glass Castle, had it ever been built, would also represent. She states, "It was the most therapeutic thing I've ever done in my life," and she emphasizes the saving paradox of shadow work: "things we don't like about ourselves [are] where our greatest strengths lie" ("Author Jeannette Walls"). In other words, the shadow, once acknowledged, becomes a brother rather than an antagonistic Other, and writing is her medium for individuation. As a writer, she brings order to the chaos of memory by negotiating "the boundary between turbulence and order."

According to Rex, the term is from physics: "'It's a place where no rules apply, or at least they haven't figured 'em out yet,' he said" (61). Later, as he nears his death, he mentions "the transition between order and turbulence . . . [and how] turbulence was not in fact random but followed a sequential spectrum of varying frequencies. If every action in the universe that we thought was random actually conformed to a rational pattern, Dad said, that implied the existence of a divine creator, and he was beginning to rethink his atheistic creed" (261). For him, science and faith move closer together, but for Jeannette the statement implies that there was purpose ("rational pattern") in her chaotic upbringing. In the memoir's final sentence—"A wind picked up, rattling the windows, and the candle flames suddenly shifted, dancing along the border between turbulence and order" (288)—turbulence represents the unconscious, and order reflects the integration of unconscious content into conscious awareness. The meeting of turbulence and order, or the unconscious and consciousness, is the sweet spot where individuation—psychological growth—is possible.[16] Thus, the ending implies that the family's future will be characterized by a greater sense of wholeness, not by physical neglect and psychological dysfunction.

The structure of *The Glass Castle* reflects the movement toward individuation. The book is a frame tale because it begins and ends with Jeannette's adult encounters with Rose Mary. It begins with "A Woman on the Street" (shame regarding her mother) and ends with "Thanksgiving" (reunion and psychological well-being). The story in between those bookends has three parts. In the *Poetics* Aristotle says that a tragedy has three parts—beginning, middle, and ending. But since *The Glass Castle* is not tragic, beginning (desert), middle (Welch), and

ending (NYC) constitute a rising action, at least for Lori, Jeannette, and Brian. In addition, the book's three segments correspond to William Blake's stages of innocence, experience, and organized innocence. In the first stage, one is unaware that life's ills should make one miserable. Perhaps the best example in *The Glass Castle* is that the section about getting burned does not mention that Jeannette felt any pain. Similarly, she grows up in a state of neglect but generally buys into her mother's ruse that life is an adventure. In Welch, however, experience catches up with her: there she is not only subject to life's ills but also miserable because of them. Life, she realizes, is not as it should ideally be. In New York City, however, though well aware that the world and the people in it are flawed, she does not let family problems get to her and rises above her former poverty via focus and hard work. Statements about happiness further illustrate Blake's three states. "I was happy in Battle Mountain," she writes, but this is largely because she does not know any better (81). Next, "[t]hat summer morning I'd spent swimming with Dinitia at the public pool was the happiest time I'd had in Welch" (199). Here she is quite aware that life is hard because Dinitia and other girls have assaulted her on multiple occasions, and the statement implies, by omission, that there were plenty of unhappy times. Finally, "I'd never been happier in my life," she says regarding her first job at *The Phoenix* in New York City (248).[17] Having risen from the ashes of her life in Welch, she is fully aware of her parents' problems but does not let them get to her. The three stages, then, might be described as love, distress, and forgiveness of her parents. Interviewer Dean Nelson quotes Oscar Wilde as stating, "'Children begin by loving their parents [the desert]; as they grow older they judge them [Welch]; sometimes they forgive them [NYC].'" "Perhaps forgive" is Walls's response to Nelson's inquiry about forgiveness. She

does not see herself as a victim, thinks that her parents gave her great gifts, and has compassion for her mother, whom she considers "a damaged woman" ("An Evening"). Thus, the third stage is probably not forgiveness as such but more likely a wholeness that she achieves, which allows her to live and let live without recrimination.

Upward progress toward individuation can also be understood with respect to notions of comedy. As Rose Mary tells Jeannette, "'Life is a drama full of tragedy and comedy. . . . You should learn to enjoy the comic episodes a little more'" (129). In the desert, the parents' misbehavior seems *funny* to the reader; the tone is jaunty and good humored. In Welch, however, the potential for tragedy emerges. Now hard knocks sully the children's well-being, and psychological chaos may win the game. Suspense arises: *Will the children escape the gravity field of parental dysfunction?* If *The Glass Castle* were a tragedy, the story would end in Welch, with problems overcoming the characters. Instead, the story shifts to New York City where the three eldest children overcome their problems. There, a higher sense of comedy is achieved (characters overcome problems) so that harmony, integration, and forgiveness are possible. Ultimately, the comic resolution hinges on an honest acknowledgement of problems: owning them rather than succumbing to them.[18]

Perspective Three: Literary Formalism

Day Three: After a discussion of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of *The Glass Castle*, instruction turns to the book's formal elements. Walls's memoir is full of interesting themes

and images that can lead to a helpful discussion. Each of the following paragraphs offers references and questions that could be used to create a handout for small- and large-group discussion in class. The section is actually adapted from my own handout for an in-class activity. I first had students work in groups on one or two of the following items; then they shared their discoveries with the class.

Pride

What types of pride did you notice in *The Glass Castle*, and what is the role of pride in the family's dysfunction? Jeannette says to her professor: "'But if some of them [the homeless] were willing to work hard and make compromises, they might not have ideal lives, but they could make ends meet'" (257). Might pride be one reason that Rex and Rose Mary are unwilling to work? Is pride what drives Rex to focus on seeking great wealth? "He [Rex] was focused on striking it rich" (171), rather than holding down a humble job. The closest he ever comes to riches, of course, is winning Elvis, the gold Cadillac, in a poker game. Is pride at work here? For pride, see also pages 12, *15*, 41, *46*, 55, *73*, 118, 121, 129, *134*, 138, 159, 171, 224–27, 237, 239, 252, 254, *258*, *267*, 269. The italicized pages specifically use the words "pride" and "proud."

Hatred of the Police and Resistance to Authority

For Rex and Rose Mary, "every politician was a crook, every cop was a thug, and every criminal had been framed" (205). Here are some specifics: the gestapo, the car chase (34, 48); mention of how a police officer would be "'hauling your asses off to jail'" (50); a cop's visit to

the house in Battle Mountain after the shooting incident (88–89); the shooting of a mountain lion by police in Phoenix (106); the security guard at the Phoenix zoo (109); reference to rangers at the Grand Canyon (118); being awakened by cops in NYC (255); resistance to the housing agency, "battling authority" (267); and picking a fight with security guards at court (275). What do you make of Rex's deep-seated hatred of authority? Does it come perhaps from his relationship with his mother?

Generational Change

The memoir makes many references to the ways in which children are different from their parents. Why does this generational change occur? Do Oedipal hatred and the violation of free will play a role? How does Jeannette get out of that cycle? Here are some specifics. Rex and Rose Mary have to get away from their mothers; Rose Mary becomes very unlike her mother (27). "Mom [unlike her mother, Grandma Smith] believed that children shouldn't be burdened with a lot of rules and restrictions" (59). "She thought rules and discipline held people back and felt that the best way to let children fulfill their potential was by providing freedom" (73). This point encapsulates Rose Mary's educational philosophy. But Grandma Smith had forced her to get a teaching degree when she'd really wanted to be an artist (73–74). Grandma Smith set rules for Rose Mary, who never set any rules for her own children (91). Yet, contrary to Rose Mary's opposition to "chemical warfare," Jeannette suggests roach spray (100) and, in her first marriage, "wound up with a man [Eric] who was exactly the opposite [of her father]" (268). Brian becomes a police officer (262ff., 274) and renovates houses in NYC, which Rex never did in Phoenix or

Welch (286). Rex and Rose Mary are homeless; Jeannette lives on Park Avenue. How do you account for these shifts between generations?

Key Images

The Glass Castle is rich with images. What is the significance of the following details? The geode (60, 90 124, 152, 183, 239). Knives: Dinitia fatally stabs her mother's boyfriend (200), Rex uses a knife to cut the piggy bank (228), he gives "his favorite jackknife" to Jeannette (240), and Maureen stabs Rose Mary (275). The planet Venus (40, 247, 281). Fool's gold/iron pyrite (59). A snake biting its tail (207). Elvis, the Gold Cadillac (224). Caryatid (208). Drowning woman (195). A piggy bank named Oz (224).

Fire

There are frequent references in *The Glass Castle* to fire. Jeannette is injured by it (9ff.) but becomes fascinated with it (15). She lights toilet paper on fire and drowns it in the toilet, but when their motel burns she wonders if the fire had been out to get her for flushing the burning paper (33–34). Rex lights the Christmas tree on fire (115). Erma fears that the children will burn her house down (147). Kerosene is a dangerous fire-starter (178). Uncle Stanley burns down his parents' house (183). Rex sets a room in a boarding house on fire (253). Other references to fire appear on pages 61, 82, 162–63, 165, and 191. What is the significance of all the references to fire?

The Glass Castle

In her interview, Jeannette states that the Glass Castle is "one of my father's drunken promises or hope for the future" but that "it is whatever you choose to make of it" ("An Evening"). In other words, it is a symbol. The Glass Castle is mentioned on pages 25, 83, 152, 155, 157, 238, and 279. Similar images include Lori's reference to New York City "as a sort of Emerald City" (223), Rose Mary's pawned "big diamond wedding ring" (28), the diamond ring the children find (186), the rings Jeannette sells at the jewelry store (214), and the geode that sparkles like a diamond (239). Remember, though, that when Jeannette gets her own home, it is a sturdy farmhouse with a vegetable garden outside. It is not made of glass or emerald or diamond. What does the Glass Castle represent to her and to you? Why do you think Walls included a strand of related images, and what do you make of the contrast to her own home?

Perspective Four: Composition (Paper Topics)

Homework: In the spirit of lifting heavy weights in order to build strong muscles, my students write classical arguments that connect to their reading assignments. Papers must state a thesis, give textual background, describe a focused topic from students' own lives, argue for the thesis statement's main idea by bringing the two background sections into dialogue, poke holes in the argument, reply to the objections, and place the focused topic in a slightly more general but not universal context. The following topics are designed with the classical

argument in mind; some of them invite comparison to the anthology pieces in *The Human Experience: Who Am I?* and to other texts. A brief conclusion follows this section.

Values

In her interview at Point Loma Nazarine University, Jeannette (mis?)quotes Oscar Wilde as stating, "A necessity is a luxury once sampled" ("An Evening"). Another version of the statement is "A luxury once tasted becomes a necessity." The statement and others have been attributed to various people, so it is not certain who originally said it, but her point is that we think that we cannot survive without things to which we have grown accustomed. Similarly, Rose Mary holds that "the surest way to feel rich was to invest in quality nonessentials" (197). Did reading *The Glass Castle* help you see your understanding of necessities in a different light? Is anything that you always considered a necessity really a luxury? Here is a great opportunity to make a connection to Brian Swimme's view of consumerism as a dominant cosmology: does viewing luxuries as necessities contribute to purchasing consumer goods as an antidote to dissatisfaction? For consumerism, see Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, rev. ed., Orbis Books, 1996. For mention of "values," see *The Glass Castle* 5 and 269.

Science vs. Religion

Jeannette makes statements about science and religion on pages 104–05 and 261. Where does the author stand vis-à-vis science and religion? Can a person simultaneously embrace religious faith and reason/science? Of course, science and religion start from very different

assumptions, which are mutually exclusive, or *are* they? Using connections to *The Glass Castle* and a narrowly focused experience of your own, explain where you stand on a spectrum ranging from science's emphasis on materials to religion's emphasis on faith in things not seen. (For additional references to religion, see note 8.)

City Life vs. Wilderness

Rex Walls, despite all his problems, loved nature. "'These cities will kill you,' he said" (34). Later, Jeannette writes a paragraph that begins, "Dad missed the wilderness," in which she develops her father's biophilia. "He felt it was good for your soul to have buzzards and coyotes and snakes around" (106). Later, of course, working in "untamed country" in upstate New York seems to do him some good versus the temptations afoot in New York City (262). Even Rose Mary expresses a sense of environmentalism (185). On the other hand, one might argue that a couple of days in the desert would be more likely to kill you than life in the city. Using an example from your own experience, engage with views on nature/wilderness vs. the city/civilization expressed in the memoir in order to inquire into your own environmental ethic. Will cities really kill you? If so, in what sense? You may want to make a connection to David W. Orr on biophilia and biophobia and/or Richard Louv on "nature deficit disorder." For Orr see "Love It or Lose It: The Coming Biophilia Revolution" in *Earth in Mind,* Island Press, 2004. For Louv see *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, rev. ed., Algonquin Books, 2008.

Harm vs. Benefit

To a large extent, *The Glass Castle* is a book about growing up while "living in a state of neglect" (193). Yet Jeannette suggests that a hardship that one considers a curse may become a blessing in later life. As her mother says, "'What doesn't kill you will make you stronger'" (179). Believe it or not, Jeannette even states in her interview at Point Loma Nazarine University that her parents, who raised her in a state of deprivation, gave her "incredible gifts." In the same interview, she mentions, as an example, how her father pimped her out in a bar. She calls it "the worst experience of my life . . . but also the best experience of my life" ("An Evening"). What is the worst experience in *your* life? Is there something in your own life that seemed like a curse at the time but is in retrospect a blessing? How might a Wallsian approach shed a positive light on your darkest moment?

Victim vs. Perpetrator

When Jeanette is sexually assaulted by her uncle Stanley, her mother tells her "that sexual assault was a crime of perception" and that her uncle was "'so lonely'" (184). Think about a time when someone harmed you in some way. Then think compassionately about why s/he might have done that. For example, maybe you were bullied, as Jeannette was by Dinitia Hewitt. Does Jeannette's awareness of the ills in Dinitia's life (or in her uncle Stanley's) correspond to a similar realization about your own antagonist? Does such a realization alter your attitude toward your victimization?

Diligence vs. Pride

Pride, which Catholics consider a "deadly sin," is a major theme in *The Glass Castle*. For pride, see pages 12, *15*, 41, *46*, 55, *73*, 118, 121, 129, *134*, 138, 159, 171, 224–27, 237, 239, 252, 254, *258*, *267*, 269. The italicized pages specifically use the words "pride" and "proud." What types of pride are manifested in the memoir, and what is the role of pride in maintaining the family's dysfunction? For example, Jeannette seems to imply pride when she says to her college professor, "'But if some of them [the homeless] were willing to work hard and make compromises, they might not have ideal lives, but they could make ends meet'" (257). What do you think about pride in the memoir? Also consider how your own pride may (or may not) have been a problem for you in a specific situation, perhaps one that is analogous to part of Jeannette's story.

Parental Contradictions

It is obvious that Jeannette's parents are riddled with contradictions. Rose Mary says, "'God helps those who help themselves'" (113), which she and Rex, as parents, do not. Rex, a mythomane, is guilty of psychological inflation and tells tall tales about himself like hand-to-hand combat with a demon (37), but the Walls children are not allowed to believe in Santa Claus (39). He writes to the dictionary people (56) but elsewhere gets the definition of "Immaculate Conception" wrong (114). Most jarringly, Jeannette's mother and father demand respect that they neither earn nor deserve, and they punish her for insubordination (220–21). Using such contradictions and other imperfections, consider your attitude toward contradictions you perceive

in your own parents, other authority figures, or anyone who preaches one thing but practices another. How does Jeannette deal with inconsistency in others? How might you do the same?

Generational Change

One of the important themes of *The Glass Castle* is that one generation reacts to the previous generation by developing opposite characteristics. This principle is evident, for example, in Rose Mary's relationship to her mother, Grandma Smith, and the Walls children's reaction to their parents. Unlike their parents, who have various addictions, Lori and Jeannette become strong, focused, determined, responsible, hard-working, successful career women. At one point, Jeannette even works for a publication called *The Phoenix*, as though she has risen from the ashes of her dysfunctional upbringing. Unlike Rex, who hates cops and repairs holes in the floor of the Phoenix house with beer cans, Brian becomes a New York City police officer and renovates old houses. (He also differs from his mother by later choosing a career in teaching.) But why this sort of generational change takes place is mysterious. How and why are you different from your parents? Is the situation with your parents similar to or different from the Walls children's with Rex and Rose Mary, and why is that? What light can you shed on the mystery of generational differences?

Luck and Fate

One of the memoir's most important statements is Jeannette's explanation of why people may be homeless. She says to her college professor, "'I think that maybe sometimes people get

the lives they want'" (256). In other words, homeless people like Rex and Rose Mary, whether they realize it or not, live as they wish. The memoir, though, offers alternative interpretations of life's outcomes. Focus ("so focused it was scary" on 208), determination, and hard work are juxtaposed with luck (55, 256) and fate (113). Here is yet another possibility: Rex and Rose Mary are driven by the unconscious forces that manifest as addictions of various sorts (alcohol and sugar are the most notable). For example, the likelihood of childhood sexual abuse by his mother may explain a great deal about Rex, and Rose Mary's condition reflects bipolar disorder and her dysfunctional relationship with her authoritarian mother. What seems to you the most likely explanation of the parents' behavior—one of those mentioned here or something else? Why do you think that they choose to live as they do? Has the memoir changed your view of those who are deprived, disadvantaged, or mentally ill? Has it changed the way you view your own success or failure in a specific case that is analogous to one of Jeannette's vignettes? In general, are we at the mercy of an indifferent fate, or are we free to pursue wholeness despite the forces that have shaped us?

Causes of Brokenness

The Glass Castle identifies two causes of psychological harm: encountering something bad and receiving a handout. On the one hand, Jeannette implies that Rex is the way he is because his mother Erma may have sexually abused him as a boy (148). Jeannette writes, "Erma had seemed to have some sort of an evil hold over Dad, and I thought he'd be relieved to be free of it" (180). On the other hand, Rose Mary is critical of governmental assistance. "Welfare, she

said, would cause irreparable psychological damage to us kids. . . . 'Once you go on welfare, it changes you. Even if you get off welfare, you never escape the stigma that you were a charity case. You're scarred for life'" (188). Ironically, the implication is that neglecting her children's well-being would *not* scar them for life, though Jeannette, of course, was *literally* scarred for life by fire when she was three years old because of parental neglect. Ask yourself the following questions. How does Rex react when Erma dies? What happens when he no longer has his mother to blame for his problems? Is Rose Mary right to preach a self-reliance that she does not practice? How does her understanding of self-reliance relate to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance"? Does receiving public aid destroy your ambition or harm you in some other way? Or, on the contrary, might graciously receiving assistance actually engender gratitude, humility, and upward mobility? Finally, do Jeannette's reflections on brokenness spark any insights into your own upbringing or current situation?

Conclusion

Final in-class writing exercise: A unit on *The Glass Castle* might conclude by having students write in class on day three about the following question: What insights about the human experience has the book sparked? In other words, what does Walls want us to take away from a reading of her memoir to use in our own lives? How, in particular, does the book offer a prescription for academic success and personal happiness?

The Glass Castle is an uncommon Common Book in the sense that it is unusually rich with material relating to the lives of students at any type of institution. As the unit wraps up, it may be fruitful to have students reflect on the lessons that they have learned from Jeannette's experiences. How, for example, did the three eldest Walls children manage to succeed in spite of their desperate upbringing? Whereas Rex's motion is downward and tragic (problems overcome him), the Walls children's motion is upward and comic (they overcome problems). Lori, Jeannette, and Brian do escape their parents' gravity (their pull as well as the seriousness of their issues) in order to launch careers that lead to better lives. Lori and Jeannette have successful careers as artist and writer, respectively. Brian joins the NYPD and restores old houses in his spare time. How the three manage to rise above their upbringing is pretty clear and should provide inspiration to the college students who read *The Glass Castle*. Rose Mary says: "'Jeannette, you're so focused it's scary'" (195; cf. 208). Like two of her siblings, she is also hard working. Native intelligence, focus, and hard work, versus Rex's indigence and unachievable dreams of striking it rich (despite his undeniable brilliance and knowledge of widely ranging subjects), are the book's prescription for academic and professional success. Similarly, shadow work is the key to psychological well-being. The kind of life Jeannette achieves by the end of the book is something that comes in increments—her jobs, her education at Barnard College, her work, and her relationships all contribute. Perhaps her most appropriate advice for students is this statement from her interview: "And I believe, if you get those two things, if you get a sense of self-esteem and a love of education, that you can make it through just about anything" ("An Evening").

Regarding marriage, *The Glass Castle* provides another parable. Jeannette's first husband is Eric, "a detached, almost fanatically organized guy" who "was decent and responsible, never gambled or lost his temper, and always paid his bills on time." Jeannette knows that he "would never try to steal my paycheck or throw me out the window . . . I'd wound up with a man who was exactly the opposite" of her father, and they live together not in a drafty shack but in a luxury apartment on Park Avenue (267–68). Eventually Jeannette realizes that Eric is not right for her. In the "Thanksgiving" section she notes that John, her second husband, is a lot like her: "he had moved around a lot while growing up, but his mother had been raised in an Appalachian village in Tennessee, about a hundred miles southwest of Welch, so you could say our families hailed from the same neck of the woods." She loves him "for all sorts of reasons" (286). Living with her second husband in their farmhouse illustrates the fruits of her individuation: marrying someone a lot like herself signals self-acceptance versus burying the shadow beneath an upscale lifestyle with Eric. Thus, her prescription for academic and relational success may very well be a gift of wisdom that reaches into many readers' lives.

Notes

[1] The university's other Common Books depart from the educational rubric just sketched. Russell Baker's *Growing Up* is his memoir of family life during the Depression, which Winthrop University appropriately chose during the great recession that began in 2008. Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* traces the life of Christopher McCandless through many misadventures to his untimely death in the Alaskan wilderness. Malcolm Gladwell discusses how ideas and consumer goods catch on in *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Sarah Erdman narrates her Peace Corps service in the Ivory Coast in *Nine Hills to Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village*. Creative practice is the subject of Twyla Tharp's *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life: A Practical Guide*. Kelsey Timmerman's encounters with the workers who produce our clothing and grow our food are his subjects, respectively, in *Where Am I Wearing: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People that Make Our Clothes* and *Where Am I Eating: An Adventure through the Global Food Economy*. *Something Must Be Done About Prince Edward County: A Family, A Virginia Town, A Civil Rights Battle*, Kristen Green's history of her hometown's struggle to achieve school desegregation, was the university's 2018–2019 Common Book. Full publication information for these books appears in the works-cited list.

[2] Jeannette herself substantiates the bipolar diagnosis when she states that she has "a wacky bipolar [artist] for a [mom]" ("An Evening").

[3] Analyses of "Poem on His Birthday" that proved most helpful in the preparation of this essay can be found in works by Ackerman, Burdette, Moynihan, and Tindall on the works-cited list.

[4] Tindall identifies the images of cage, chain, and bolt in stanza 5 as "Thomas' earlier vision of war" (286). A much longer summary of the poem is provided by Brinnin (269–70).

[5] A view of the writing studio's "stilts" with the Taf Estuary in the background is available at www.visitwales.com/explore/literature/laugharne-famous-attractions.

[6] A complication arises regarding the Welch house, however. A search for 93 Little Hobart Street turns up images of at least four different structures, which cannot all be the Walls family's former home. Google Earth finds the address, but the site is cloaked in foliage and shadow. According to one image, the house fell in and is no longer visible, so one cannot go there and look. Which house was theirs remains a mystery, but all of the images reflect the extreme poverty that Walls describes.

[7] See Matthew 13.31–32, 17.20–21; Mark 4.30–32; and Luke 13.19. Mustard seeds range in color from yellow to orange to light brown. Thomas's image emphasizes that they and the sun are similarly colored.

[8] Relevant references are Rex's blasphemy (42); miracles (69); Catholic school, nuns (95); the Ten Commandments, mass, God, Rex in church, religion as voodoo, Popes (104–05); God's willingness to overlook rule-bending (111); the Virgin Mary, Jesus's conception (114); prayer for Erma's soul (180); a hymn (182); the Catholic faith (188, 273); Pentecostals (206–07); "Mormon cults" and "God helps those who help themselves" (275).

[9] For Walls's descriptions of nature, see pages 18, 21, 39, 41, 49, 51, 59, 116, and 168.

[10] The phrase "blessed, unborn God and His Ghost" is from stanza 7. In Tindall's reading, "'His Ghost,' even if the Holy Ghost, means that God is as dead as the horseshoe crab whose ghost

haunts the shore; but dead God is 'unborn.' Referring maybe to Jesus before the Nativity, 'unborn' also means non-existent" (287). Rex, of course, expresses a similar position more crudely: religion is "'soul-curdling voodoo,'" and "'Jesus H. Christ is the world's best-loved bastard!'" (133, 114).

[11] This interpretation is in sync with Kidder's mention that the poem moves from man to angels and from man as an animal to man as "a spirit in love" (203).

[12] Jeannette, at nearly six feet tall and very slim, is physically similar to such a pillar. Another strong woman is Miss Jeanette Bivens, after whom she is named ("Mom suggested adding the second N to make it more elegant and French"). Bivens is described as "the first person in [Rex's] life . . . who'd shown any faith in him" (203).

[13] For the geode, see pages 60, 90 124, 152, 183, and 239.

[14] For pride, see the pages noted in the exercise in the next section.

[15] This version of verse 70, from a Google search, is superior to the translation by Stephen J. Patterson and Marvin W. Meyer in Robert J. Miller's *The Complete Gospels* on the works-cited list. "Jesus said, 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you [will] kill you'" (316; verse 70; insertion in the original). The problem with this translation is that *do not have within you* understates the important point: what hinders ("kills") a person is what *is* within—things hidden in the unconscious and left unacknowledged.

[16] A similar point can be made regarding "Poem on His Birthday." As Korg states, "The poem reflects the duel between resistance [turbulence] and acceptance [order]" (121).

[17] Dean Nelson, the journalism professor who interviews her at Point Loma Nazarine University, erroneously states that Walls's only comment about happiness relates to her time in NYC ("An Evening").

[18] One qualification in NYC is that a comic-strip writer from *The Village Voice* interviewed Rex and based a character on him. Though tragic, Rex's downward trajectory still inspires humor.

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