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ANNA CORNELIA SALVATI

*Scripps College*

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**THE SUBTLE DISTINCTIONS OF MEMOIR: RECLASSIFYING JEANNETTE**

**WALL'S *THE GLASS CASTLE***

By

**ANNA CORNELIA SALVATI**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR KOENIGS**

**PROFESSOR PRAKAS**

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## Introduction

I have never been one for fantasy. I always loved reading fiction, but I rolled my eyes at elves and witches and fell asleep during *Lord of the Rings*. I wanted the stuff of real life. I wanted interesting family dynamics, love triangles, tumultuous friendships. So naturally, I developed an obsession with *Pretty Little Liars*. There are seventeen books in the series, and I read fifteen I would have made it to the end, but my 7th grade teacher emailed my parents saying that since I insisted on reading trash for English credit, she was forced to ban me from reading anymore of the series. Though trash they were, books like these appealed to my own fantasy about being older.

I was frustrated about the ban and sad to lose my favorite series. However, after being cut off, my mother suggested I read *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, it was something “of quality”. *The Glass Castle* was the first memoir I ever read, and I was smitten. It revealed all kinds of interesting interpersonal dynamics; it told a story about a young girl going through life—elementary, middle, high school, college—except it was all real. She dealt with changing schools, bullying, and wanting boys to like her, and to these things I could relate. But she also struggled through abandonment and neglect from her parents, poverty, and abuse. In these moments of difference, I felt like a friend listening in support. What stood out to me then and still stands out to me now, is that the book captures real life in a visceral and gripping way. Each time I read this book, I am continually reminded that these memories are real experiences lived by a real person. Each time, I am hit with emotion and empathy in a way fiction has never moved me before.

In understanding the individuality of memoir as a genre and a literary form, I think it is important to grasp the ways in which it differs from the novel. Both serve as interesting mediums for human interaction. Even through the page, memoirs and novels can cultivate real connections between the readers and the characters, or the reader and the memoirist. However, there is endless freedom in being able to relate to a fictional character. The fictionality of the character, as well as the lack of a concrete visual, grants it flexibility that allows the reader to manipulate the character to fit their vision. In comparison, the memoirist is a real, defined person. Not only does this limit the readers imagination, but it also feels more intrusive and voyeuristic. As people peer into real lives and real minds of people they have never met before, there is a tension between intimacy and distance that novels could never instigate. Rather than inserting themselves into the story, readers take the back seat as they listen to someone's personal experience and absorb insight, often bringing depth and appreciation back into their own lives.

Memoirs are based around the same theme: the experience of real life. However, even within one theme there is great variance. The variety reflects the reality that though life has shared experiences, each person's life is personal and unique to them. That is the beauty of the genre.

*The Glass Castle* has left readers with one of two reactions. Either they found the book to be "amazing" and "insightful" or, as some found it, "depressing" and "narcissistic". Amidst the "Community Reviews" section of *Goodreads*, readers have been engaging in an interesting and contentious conversation. One reviewer said:

It's not that I hated *The Glass Castle*, it's just that it irritated me with its self-conscious narrative style. Too much "look at how horrible things were!" and not enough detail or challenges to make me really care... (Goodreads).

They clearly found the book to be a display of victimhood, focused on the “horrible things”.

Another reviewer found it upsetting and shocking that Walls could express any amount of love towards her parents despite everything that had happened. They wrote:

*The family that betrays together stays together? Love? Like the love her father expressed as he tried to sell her young body to a stranger? Like the love her mother conveyed by allowing them to live in filth, be homeless, be neglected, hungry, unclothed and so on? These parents were the most loathsome narcissists I've ever had the misfortune to meet”* (Goodreads).

This reviewer appears to believe that just choosing to forgive her parents and accept her family means that Walls extols their behavior. They found that her book is “celebrating impotence and enabling and neglect” with “no retribution” (Goodreads). Similarly, one reader said, “The whole thing comes off as twee and cloying, amounting misery to romanticism when it should really be horrifying” (Goodreads).

It is interesting to think about the ways in which readers digest a memoir. Because it is someone’s personal experience, the text is less up for interpretation and the memoirist is more vulnerable to judgment. Because Walls did not necessarily abide by the reader’s expectations, many reviewers found her book to be nothing more than a show of her personal problems; many readers did not see beyond the more depressing moments of the book.

In fact, *The Glass Castle* is often associated with terms like “misery memoir” and “misery porn.” The book is even regarded as a significant text in founding the Misery Literature genre. It is a popular and hefty genre including books like *A Child Called “It,”* *Angela’s Ashes*, and *Girl Interrupted*. These books are described as “pornographic” by the ways in which they commodify trauma for entertainment. In line with the criticisms that the work received, these

terms suggest that the text is nothing more than an exhibition of trauma and a tale of “woe is me” written by the sufferer. Repeatedly referring to *The Glass Castle* as a misery memoir deprives the book of its dimensionality and depth. Walls’s suffering is explicit. She relies on the reader to use the text and read between the lines to see that the story is about much more than just misery. Implicitly, her book is about family, identity, and survival.

In this paper, I will begin by exploring the history of memoir, the rise of the “misery memoir,” and I intend to challenge the generalized use of the term. Though the cultural rise of trauma memoirs is real, the genre cannot be a blanket term for memoirs that discuss trauma. I have selected *The Glass Castle* as my evidence because although it includes disturbing details, Walls effortfully tries to reorient the reader’s focus. The term misery memoir is inadequate to describe *The Glass Castle* because it is not about misery. It obscures Walls’s message that in order to achieve self-acceptance in the present, one must revisit and forgive the past. The text is a declaration that she cannot simply be defined by the abuse. By paying attention to the book’s organization, Walls’s use of language, and how she internalizes the perception of others, it becomes clear that the book is about Walls overcoming the shame that has accumulated over the course of her life.

### **Memoir vs. Autobiography**

The Merriam Dictionary defines “memoir” as a “narrative composed from personal experience.” While this is true, this definition is also applicable to autobiographies and biographies. So, what makes the memoir stand alone?

Many scholars do indeed note a difference. Published in 2003, Linton Weeks interviews John Baker the editorial director at Publishers Weekly and asks him what the difference is between the autobiography and the memoir. Describing the traditional autobiography, Baker

states, “[it is] more factually inclined, dry, less full of personal information. It's an objective account of one's life, written in the same way that a biography would be written”

(Weeks). Autobiography, being rooted in facts, is more likely required to undergo fact checking or is liable to being caught in an unfaithful retelling of someone's life story. Memoir, being rooted in the individual's memory, can express history in ways other forms cannot. The memoirists' biases are allowed to color the text. Rather than feeling untruthful, the intimate and personal details create a version of events that is true and unique to the individual writing it.

In the literary world, the genre is often lumped in with journal or diary entries, and letter writing. As it compares to the autobiography, the memoir is often looked down on. It has even been considered the “poor relative of autobiography discourse” (Rak 484). Many critics deem the memoir non-literary. American author and professor, G. Thomas Couser, explains that to some, “the memoir is at best glorified gossip, at worst, naked narcissism” (Couser, Ch. 2). These individuals are also likely to hold the belief that “writers write novels while anyone can write a memoir” (Couser). The memoir receives great backlash because of its dual existence as both creative literature and nonfictional literature.

But arguably, the memoir individuates *because* of its malleable form. There is more room for personal embroidery of the facts and subsequently, memoir appeals to the reader's desire for a truthful narrative that still feels like a story. Due to its poetic and fluid nature, the genre gained recognition as an art form of its own, tying it closer to the novel than the biography (Couser). At the same time, the memoir exists as both a parallel and an opposition to the novel. Couser explains that the two genres exist in a “complex” and “reciprocal” relationship. He writes, “life writing to some degree created the readership of the novel...Novels may therefore have helped to whet readers' appetite for actual life writing.” (Couser). Though the novel possesses more

freedom in its ability to tell “life stories,” the two genres create worlds based on a current reality; one works to create and work within an *imitation* of reality while the other works with truth and memory in order to retell real-life *as* a story.

The malleability of the memoir is also unique in that it allows the memoirist to share their story while maintaining control. In analyzing Susanna Kaysen’s, *Girl Interrupted*, Couser posits that the “innovative form” of memoir is essential to framing Kaysen’s discussion about mental health, the role of the patient, and the lack of agency. Couser writes, “Here, as narrator, she assumes control of her story, which was denied to her as a patient, when her chart was composed by others” (Couser). Although the book is about a young girl who is admitted into a psych ward, Kaysen writes about teenage relationships and romance, rebellions and pranks, trips to the ice cream store, etc. The form of memoir allows her to share her real-life story framed by moments she finds most meaningful and significant. In many similar ways, Jeannette Walls often challenges the reader’s expectations with her choice in tone and language. In moments that may seem upsetting or problematic, Walls chooses to inscribe them with humor or even beauty. This demonstrates the ways in which she can assert control over the story and the narrative structure.

The literary form of memoir is paradoxically so abstract, and still so defined. Its ambiguous nature allows for all kinds of true stories to take shape; individuals can claim the form and make use of it however feels most fit. Nonetheless, as each text is personalized by the writer, the material quickly becomes defined by their unique and singular experience. It belongs to one person’s memory, one person’s version of events.

### **History of the Memoir**

For centuries, people have found value in writing down and sharing their personal accounts. Scholars purport that the earliest *form* of memoir dates back to ancient times,

specifically ancient Rome. Approximately written in 50 BCE, the written works of Julius Caesar were recovered and analyzed. The *Commentaries of Julius Caesar* describe nine years of battle and are written in third person for the purpose of being read out loud to Romans awaiting news. He writes, “Caesar, being uneasy about the retreat of his soldiers, orders hurdles to be carried to the further side of the hill...” (Yagoda, Ch. 2). As still seen today in modern memoir fashion, this excerpt demonstrates the ways in which Julius Caesar finds importance in revealing his own emotional state. Expressing his “uneasiness” allows his readers access into his internal world at the time, granting them a heightened understanding of the situation.

The personal nonfiction narrative continued to develop, and it took shape in religious confession texts and autobiographies written by prominent Renaissance writers and artists. As printing became cheaper, writing escaped the small, closed circle of authority and was accessible to those without religious prestige, or special rankings or positions. Nonfiction narratives notably gained popularity amongst Quakers in the form of journal entries. Many of these accounts depicted personal “spiritual journeys” and exhibited “striking egocentrism” (Yagoda). Some of these early qualities of memoir can still be found today. Many people publish works detailing their path to finding God. Khalil Rafati, founder of Sunlife Organics, published his memoir detailing his drug abuse and how reconnecting with his faith saved his life. As seen in the remarks of reviewers of *The Glass Castle*, narcissism— “ego-centrism” —remains one of the most common criticisms of memoir.

Moving away from religion, the secularization of literature allowed for the writing of memoir to become even more accessible and desirable to the common man. Yagoda explains that for about one hundred years it was understood that eminences, the pious, and people with “exciting, unusual or somehow stirring stories” could write memoirs (Yagoda, Ch. 3). This

transition sparked lots of controversy and was thought to have imbued the genre with ego and narcissism. In the 1820s, there was an influx of books written from new perspectives across all classes and about all subjects. As the genre began to appeal to figures like “tradesmen” and “artisans,” many worried that the genre was being used to retell shocking accounts that, though true, appealed to voyeuristic interests and offended the literary form (Yagoda). Yagoda quoted one anonymous writer from *Blackwood’s Magazine* who said memoir was not for those who try to “excite prurient interest that may command a sale” (Yagoda). Where the memoir once strictly belonged to a religious and reputed sphere, secular writings were produced by working men, often revealing scandals and secrets.

### **The Memoir “Boom” and the Writers Who Rose with It**

The genre experienced a significant increase in production during the 90s. Around that time, memoirs and autobiographies written by famous people, politicians, and notable figures were already integral parts of the American fabric. American literary scholar, Nancy K. Miller, posits that the Clinton presidency defined the 90s due to initiating an inversion of the personal and the public (Miller 1). The media’s coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal was so graphic, sexual, and personal, that they revolutionized the public’s expectations. Miller remarks that along with “internet mania” and “dot-com culture,” the scandalous presidency brought about “a paroxysm of personal exposure” and heightened the insatiable need for public figures to expose their personal lives (Miller). Both Clinton’s and Lewinsky’s memoirs sold millions of copies. Since then, autobiographical accounts like these have been recognized as both political and economic tools.

The political memoir has become standard practice. Candidates can use memoir to connect with voters and build support, or post-presidency, to stay relevant and shape their

legacy. Similarly, it remains custom for celebrities to write their own memoir after achieving a certain amount of credibility. The political and the celebrity memoir are both essential to the book market because they ensure sales due to their ensured audience, their preexisting fanbase (Couser, Ch. 6). Today, Amy Poehler, Mindy Kaling, and more recently, American model, Emily Ratajkowski, have all published their own non-fiction writings about their lives and success. Although they already have fame and notability, these books are still radical in the literary world because these memoirists were not originally known for their writing.

However, an important aspect of the 90s boom was that many works rising in popularity were not written by famous people. Like what occurred amidst the 19th century, the 20th and 21st century displayed a growing interest in works written by individuals who lacked notability. While celebrities were continuing to claim real estate in bookstores, concurrently, memoirs written by ordinary people, previously unknown to the public, were gaining recognition. According to American memoirist, Mary Karr, these memoirs—often referred to as the “nobody memoir” —are “episodic.” Rather than following a linear storyline, or building towards the individual's peak or success, these memoirs are organized by life’s “happenstance” and universal “themes.” Just like real life, moments naturally blend and bleed into the next (Karr, Preface).

Unlike the political and celebrity memoir, the “nobody memoir” was required to “earn readers the old-fashioned way” (Couser, Ch. 6). Not having a platform to ensure sales, nor a face or a story easily recognized by potential readers, Couser explains that the “nobody memoir” must recount an “extraordinary story” and it must be a “page turner” (Couser). As a result, many of these autobiographical accounts depict lives of trauma and abuse. American journalist and novelist, Lorraine Adams created a system of classification and put 200 memoirs into a spreadsheet in order to determine the most common themes across “nobody memoirs.” Her study

concluded these memoirs can be sorted in three different types: Mental catastrophe, physical catastrophe, and finally the most popular, the abusive childhood memoir (Adams, “Almost Famous”). As stories based on suffering have increasingly made sales, they have brought Misery Literature to fruition.

### **MISERY LITERATURE: THE GENRE**

Misery literature is a literary genre defined by stories that grapple with neglect, alcoholism, sexual abuse, etc. The misery *memoir* is an extension of the genre and suggests to the reader that these events are true life events that have happened to the memoirist. Misery lit can also be referred to as “misery porn”, “trauma porn”, or more specifically, “pathography.” The OED defines the term “pathography” as “the study of the life of an individual or the history of a community with regard to the influence of a particular disease or disorder; (as a count noun) a study or biography of this kind.” The term “pathography” was popularized in 1988 by Joyce Carol Oates in her article for *The New York Times*, as she discussed the increase in biographical accounts that were structured around “dysfunction, disaster, and disease.” Comparing pathography to hagiography, she claimed that the former was “hagiography's diminished and often prurient twin” (Oates, “Adventures in Abandonment”). This comparison harks back to the tensions around the secularization of autobiographical forms. Rather than promoting religious figures or preaching higher morals, the misery memoir is often an exposé of secrets and abuse. These books appeal to voyeuristic and prurient desires because they grant the reader access into darker internal worlds; ones that may greatly differ from their own. While the memoir and the novel can both be salacious, pervasive, and grossly thrilling, the misery memoir has a leg up because it reveals true details.

As Adams's data has proven, there is a real historical phenomenon of memoirs that highlight trauma as the main focus. However, the title "Misery memoir" is controversial and contested. It is commonly used to define and describe memoirs that are written by individuals who exist outside of the limelight, and this has sparked upset. Many speaking against the term argue that it "cheapens" the writer's lived experience and pornographizes their suffering. Another destructive quality is that it encourages "literary hoaxes" (Rak, Ch. 1). The desire for media to provide readers with stories of real trauma can influence the publishing process. Because "trauma sells," publishers seek out such stories, and as a result, authors have tried to appeal to these desires—even if their story is not true. This dynamic puts pressure on writers as they subscribe to the idea that their life must spin a tale of distressing turmoil—otherwise no one will read it.

In order to participate in this discourse, and further challenge the generalized use of the term, it is important to establish a solidified definition of what the misery memoir is. In her book, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*, Anne Rothe analyzes the structure and composition of a misery memoir, providing a clear and succinct definition of what it is.

#### **LIT REVIEW: Anne Rothe's Commentary on the Misery Memoir:**

##### **Reviewing Chapter 7 of Anne Rothe's, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media***

Titled, "Selling Misery," chapter 7 of Anne Rothe's book, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*, discusses misery literature and grapples with the marketability of misery, as well as the ethics of publishing stories of suffering for entertainment. According to Rothe's understanding, the misery memoir creates a world where there is nothing

beyond abuse and dysfunction. Furthermore, she believes that it promotes the idea that meaningful lives are those that entail a childhood of extreme pain and suffering, that people are defined by their abuse rather than their remarkable achievements, and that as a result, the misery memoir glorifies suffering.

She begins her chapter by discussing the origins of memoir as a genre more generally. When the popularity of autobiographical writing stalled in the 1990's, publishers began to seek out "author survivors," figures who could provide inspirational and dramatic plots based on what they survived over the course of their life (88). Rothe notes this as an important transition for the memoir genre. By "reorganizing around trauma," the subgenre, misery memoir, gained popularity for being a true account that revealed the intimate and lurid lives of ordinary people, while remaining books that read like fiction (87). In comparison to a journal or a collection of diary entries, these memoirs resemble the fictional novel because as they try to appeal to a readership, they maintain a structure resembling a plot and a climax. As Rothe describes it, the misery memoir "constructs a melo-drama of suffering and redemption around ethically simplified conflicts of good versus evil embodied in the characters of villain and victim" (88). In the end, Rothe finds that the misery memoir is unethical because it displays violence and abuse for profit and because, by spotlighting trauma in that way, it wrongly suggests that it is only extreme suffering wherein meaning lies.

Rothe builds her argument by threading scholarly research and data throughout her personal statements and beliefs about misery literature. In the opening of her chapter, she cites the work of Nancy K Miller, agreeing with her statement that the Clinton Era is remembered for a radical "paroxysm of personal exposure" (87). Discussing the unprecedented scandals that occurred during the Clinton presidency and how biographical accounts were published and

consumed, Miller's work properly frames Rothe's early observations about the popularity of the memoir. From the president to celebrities, the memoir initially fed the public's insatiable appetite for personal details about public figures. Reflecting on cultural changes, Rothe transitions from discussing personal non-fiction narratives about famous people to those written by ordinary people that are centered around trauma and suffering—also known as the misery memoir. Unlike the celebrity memoir, the misery memoir is usually associated with unfamiliar writers, unknown individuals. According to scholars like Benjamin Kunkel and Michael Bernstein, there is a formula that these memoirists follow and as a result, written experiences are “greatly diminished” and are “dominated by accounts of extremity” (88). Kunkel and Bernstein find that by identifying suffering and victimization with power and meaning actually “ennobles” and honors the trauma that has occurred.

Transitioning from the scholarly conversation to the journalistic discussion regarding misery literature, Rothe begins a deep dive into what English author and journalist, Sam Leith, identifies as the “competitive pornographization of suffering” (90). Citing popular misery memoirs like Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"*, and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Rothe shares, “the idea that you're close to real suffering is the selling point, not the writing” (91). To reveal just how well trauma sells, Rothe then provides important points of data regarding book sales. The annual Bowker Industry Report revealed that sales in autobiographical books have risen from \$170 to 270 million USD from 1990 to 2011 (90). This increase can be greatly accredited to misery memoirs, for example, HarperCollins Publishers reported a 31 percent increase in annual profits from selling misery memoirs (90). Rothe also notes that in Britain, most misery memoirs are sold in supermarkets in order to target their predominantly female audience (90). As a result, one's personal and traumatic life story is lumped between weekly

magazines and puzzles; their trauma is equated to celebrity gossip and the only intention is to get the book sold, even if it happens in a nonliterary or educational environment, like a supermarket.

Illuminating the ways in which the genre has grown increasingly reliant on stories of trauma for sales, Rothe's use of scholarly work and data successfully proposes the notion that the misery memoir can be problematic and even pornographic. By incorporating the work of psychologists, theorists, and journalists, Rothe has placed the misery memoir in a larger conversation, one that grapples with the ethics of publishing personal traumas for meaningless consumption. She has effectively put forth the idea that the successful commodification of misery has corrupted the market for memoirs and inappropriately verges on celebrating suffering.

### ***The Glass Castle Analysis:***

Various scholars refer to *The Glass Castle* as a defining piece of misery literature. In 2009, American author and journalism professor, Ben Yagoda, published an in-depth analysis of the history and the progression of memoir. Like Rothe, Yagoda noted that misery literature began as an American phenomenon, and he identified *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls as one of the four pieces that "originated" the genre (Yagoda, Ch. 1). On the surface, *The Glass Castle* embodies some qualities of the misery memoir. Rothe posits that from American to international texts, the misery memoirs are formulaic replicas of each other regardless of "thematic diversity". Rothe writes:

The texts are nonfictional accounts depicting experiences of extreme victimization and suffering, and the main characters are suffering women or children... Even their cover

designs are rather similar, as each includes a photographic image of a woman and/or child, presumably the protagonist (Rothe 92).

Selling over 2 million copies, *The Glass Castle* does in fact detail the “suffering” and life struggles of Jeannette Walls—both as a child and later, largely due to being a woman—and furthermore, the cover displays an image of a black and white photo of a little girl. Objectively, the book fulfills some of the stereotypes surrounding the misery memoir and, as a result, many are inclined to identify it as such.

Beyond the surface however, the book greatly departs from Rothe’s very distinct definition of the misery memoir. Her compiled research creates a clear and concise understanding of the ways in which the misery memoir is a specific genre of literature that focuses on trauma. While the *Glass Castle* recalls abuse and various disturbing events that Jeannette Walls experienced, the book is focused on her *overcoming* of adversity and mending of relationships with herself and her family. By opening her book with a moment from her adult life and then diving into her childhood, she is showing the reader that there is a world outside of the abuse. By including her interactions with others, and by means of intentional organization and use of language, Walls’s book defies the misery literature genre because it highlights Walls’s individuality, tenacity, and desire to look beyond damage and shame.

### **A. The Perception of Others**

Published in 2006, Jeannette Walls’s memoir, *The Glass Castle*, tells the story of her challenging and remarkable childhood. Growing up on the move, often without basic needs like clean clothes and food, Walls and her siblings had to take matters into their own hands and fend for themselves. As she grows older, the perception of others appears to be a double-edged sword. In one sense, seeing her family through the eyes of others motivates Walls to learn about the

world without her parents' influence, and to begin developing her own perspectives. However, it also complicates and destabilizes her connection to her family as she develops a heightened awareness that her family is estranged from "normal" society. Though she recalls various moments of mistreatment and harm, she has many fond memories as well. But it is the ways in which her family differs from other families that pushes her to reject them and to feel a deep sense of shame. Ashamed by her parents' struggles, Walls loses herself as she tries to run away from her past. It is only when she stops prioritizing what other people think and confronts this internal conflict created by her genuine love for her family and her deep desire to escape from them into normal society that Walls finds self-acceptance and release.

As a very young girl, Jeannette begins to become aware that other people view her family as different. Describing her earliest memory, Jeannette remembers cooking hotdogs in boiling water, alone, at just three years old and watching her tutu catch flame. She ended up being rushed to the hospital and surviving, but she had suffered serious injuries. After describing the incident to doctors, Jeannette remembers that the medical staff began asking her questions about her relationship to her parents, how she got burned, and finally, why she was cooking hot dogs by herself. After explaining that her parents have never hurt her, and cooking hot dogs was easy, she observes, "two nurses looked at each other, and one of them wrote something down on a clipboard. I asked what was wrong. Nothing, they said, nothing" (10). Noting the "look" that the nurses exchanged, Walls is sensing that they share a strange feeling about her situation. After she asks, "what is wrong," it is apparent that the nurses look suspicious and concerned about her safety and well-being. By including this scene in her memoir, Walls is revealing just how young she was when she first started realizing that her family was something out of the ordinary. While

she was aware that the medical staff seemed extra curious about her home life, she herself didn't see anything "wrong."

As she grows older, this awareness inspires her to educate herself about the world in ways she never had before. After being bullied and feeling like an outcast, Walls desires to be part of a bigger community. She writes, "I wanted to join some club or group or organization where I could feel I belonged, where people wouldn't move away if I sat down next to them" (203). By explaining that others "move away from her" Walls is again revealing that she is conscious of the ways in which people perceive her. However, unlike how the nurses' judgments had no immediate effect on her, the feeling that her peers are judging her motivates her to try and fit in. Later, Walls decides to join the school newspaper, *The Wave*. She explains:

When my work was done, I read the stories on the wire services. Because we never subscribed to newspapers or magazines, I'd never known what was going on in the world, except the skewed version of events we got from Mom and Dad...I began to feel like I was getting the whole story for the first time, that I was being handed the missing pieces to the puzzle, and the world was making a little more sense. (205)

The newspaper not only grants her a sense of "belonging", but it also grants her the gift of information. She is able to learn about and better understand the world in a way she was never able to before. Existing as their own little society, her parents instilled in Walls a "skewed version of events," *their* unique and personally constructed version of the world. Her desire to seek out a community outside her family was borne out of her recognition that other people found Walls and her family to be strange and abnormal. She began to equip herself with tools for survival: information was an essential tool in achieving her independence and individuality.

The awareness of how they are perceived by others also fuels Walls's desires to change herself and her family to fit her new and idealized standards. Trying to fit into their new neighborhood, Walls recalls wanting to fix up their home on Little Hobart Street. After trying to convince her parents to clear the garbage out of the front yard, Walls writes, "I was convinced that people might be more accepting of us if we made an effort to improve the way 93 Little Hobart Street looked... 'It would make us fit in a little bit,' I pleaded with Mom" (157). Seeing their house, the way that the neighbors and passersby saw their house, makes Walls feel self-conscious and embarrassed. She does not necessarily want to "improve" the looks of their house simply because she thinks it should look better but rather because other people look down on it. By suggesting that it would help them "fit in a little better," Walls reveals that she sees her house as a reflection of her family—how others see the house is how they see them. This moment is important because the house on Little Hobart Street is symbolic of both the family's poverty and their chaotic household. With zero insulation, trash in the yard, neither sewage nor running water, electricity on the rare occasion, the house bares on its surface, everything that Walls tries so hard to hide (151-152). What cuts her the deepest is not necessarily these poor conditions, but rather her deep distress over the fact that others *can see* these conditions and will judge them accordingly.

Her embarrassment about 93 Little Hobart Street motivates Walls to paint it. Hoping a nice coat of yellow paint would spruce up the place, she explains:

I kept looking for other ways to make improvements. One day, Dad brought home a five-gallon can of house paint...It was nearly full of bright yellow paint. A layer of yellow paint, I realized, would completely transform our dingy, gray house. It would look, at least from the outside, almost like the houses other people lived in. (157)

Walls knows the yellow paint wouldn't "completely transform" their house because it would only change its outward appearance; it would not change the conditions they were living in. She seems to be aware that addressing the issues inside, the core problems, is either impossible or overwhelmingly difficult. The most she can conceive of doing is changing her outward appearance, like the house she lives in, so that others will be fooled into thinking she is like them. Feeling as though she could never actually be one of those "other" people, she desires to at least be perceived as one. Illustrating all the ways in which she tried to conform suggests that although their living conditions were below standard and even dangerous, she was truly traumatized by her alienation and lack of belonging.

Years later, Walls is working as a columnist in New York, and she refuses to speak honestly about her parents. When the topic was unavoidable, she admits she lied. She explains, "True or not, I was convinced that if all these people found out about Mom and Dad and who I really was, it would be impossible for me to keep my job" (270). Her column and "these people" are tangible markers of a new world that she has found away from the chaos of her family and her childhood. However, worrying that everyone might find out "who [she] *really* is," reveals that even though she has achieved the life she's always dreamed of it does not truly belong to her. As a means for survival, Walls exists in two split identities. Even though she may still feel like an outsider, she is no longer being treated like one. Like the yellow paint, the lies allow Walls to hide her true self, mold her exterior to fit the norm, and ensure that she will not be cast aside again.

However, as Walls comes to realize, her attempts to "fix" everything were superficial. Having so deeply internalized the perception of others, Walls shaped her life according to how others live; how she thought she should live. When the book opens, she is married, living on the

Upper East Side, and her parents are homeless in New York City. Grappling with this tensioned reality, she writes:

I'd tried to make a home for myself here, tried to turn the apartment into the sort of place where the person I wanted to be would live. But I could never enjoy a room without worrying about Mom and Dad huddled on the sidewalk grate somewhere. I fretted about them, but I was embarrassed by them, too, and ashamed of myself for wearing pearls and living on Park Avenue... (4)

As she describes her apartment on Park Avenue and her “pearls,” it is clear that she has physically detached herself from her previous life. With a successful job, stable marriage, and an ornately decorated apartment, she now lives as the “person [she has] wanted to be” would live. However, this is an interesting moment in the memoir because it reveals a tear in her façade. After escaping to New York, starting over, and even after all the damage her parents caused, Walls cannot separate herself from them emotionally because she cares about them. Even though her parents are the ones who often caused her harm, here she “worries” and “frets” about their well-being and feels “ashamed” for living her own life, disconnected from them.

Unlike what would be expected of a misery memoir, there is no apparent dynamic between the victim and the villain. Walls has always loved her parents and her decisions to leave and detach herself from them were motivated by her desire to fit in with others. The duality of Walls's feelings towards her parents illuminates the great complexities within their relationship and challenges the reader to see them beyond their actions.

## B. Language

When applied to *The Glass Castle*, the term “misery memoir” is misleading because Walls is not miserable. Walls’s intentional use of language makes it apparent that even through the adversity, she maintained a zest for life and experienced a lot of joy.

Throughout the book, Walls describes many of her painful childhood experiences in vivid detail. Walls recounts starting at a new elementary school and being humiliated and bullied. Sitting alone at lunch and staring at her sandwich, Walls describes:

It was tasteless and greasy. I pulled apart the two slices of Wonder bread. Inside was a thin smear of lard. That was it. No meat, no cheese, not even a slice of pickle. Even so, I chewed slowly, staring intently at my bite marks in the bread to delay as long as possible the moment I would leave the cafeteria and go out to the playground.” (138)

The details of the sandwich, its insides containing nothing more than a “thin smear of lard,” create a visceral image of disgust. This description is heavy with sadness and in many ways, her “tasteless and greasy” sandwich reflects Wall’s state of being. The short, staccato syntax that follows, for example, “That was it,” and “not even a slice of pickle,” emphasizes the utter lack of effort that her grandmother put into making her sandwich; there are undertones of shock when she says, “not *even*.” The phrase “even so” sparks a comparison between her unappealing lunch and her experience at the school. She is so miserable at this new school, that she would rather take her time with the revolting sandwich than face the kids outside. Although she has not explicitly stated her unhappiness, her language and detail clearly illustrate her feelings of discontentment and neglect.

Later, Walls remembers living in the house on Little Hobart Street during the winter. Describing the climate, she writes, “It was so cold that the youngest, most fragile branches

snapped in the frigid air and very quickly, I started feeling it. I still had only my thin wool coat with the buttons missing. I felt almost as cold as the house” (175). With the helplessness of her “thin” and “buttonless” coat and the freezing house, it is apparent that they are living in miserable conditions. The description of branches “snapping in the air” evokes a fear of danger because survival seems out of one’s control. Understanding that Walls and her siblings are children, words like “youngest” and “fragile” mirror their positionality. This parallel between the kids and nature suggests that they too are very vulnerable and must find the means for survival.

In moments, her use of imagery actually highlights how her family is different. When describing what it is like when it rains in the desert, Walls explains that unlike the other parents, her parents allowed her and her siblings to play outside in the storm. She writes:

We splashed and sang and danced. Great bolts of lightning cracked from the low-hanging clouds, and thunder shook the ground. We gasped over the most spectacular bolts, as if we were watching a fireworks show. (22)

Here, the vibrant imagery illustrates the danger of the storm, as well as its beauty. Choosing to characterize the lighting as “great” and by describing thunder so powerful it “shook the ground” creates an intense and potentially hazardous natural environment. At the same time, the words also illustrate the magnificence of the storm. Using the word “spectacular” and explaining that she and her siblings “splashed and sang and danced” amongst such circumstances suggests that this is in fact a moment of beauty and pleasure, not of fear and peril. Walls’s language, even after noting that the other parents forbid their children from playing in the storm, reveals a sense of pride and pleasure that she derives from her unique childhood.

In another distinctive memory, Walls recalls the time her father brought the family inside the cage of a cheetah. She describes:

I could feel the cheetah's hot breath on my face. He looked right at me. His amber eyes were steady but sad, as if he knew he'd never see the plains of Africa again...The cheetah licked my palm, his tongue warm and rough, like sandpaper dipped in hot water. I felt all tingly." (108-109)

Again, this moment is both precarious and remarkable. Describing his "hot breath on [her] face," and their intense eye contact, Walls is showing the reader just how close she is to such a powerful animal, one that could kill her. However, instead of feeling endangered or scared, Walls describes a harmonious feeling shared between them. Details like his "steady but sad" eyes, his "warm" tongue licking Walls's palm, and insinuating that he misses his home, challenge the reader to see the cheetah in a new light. Looking through Walls's eyes, he is not a violent creature but a victim of displacement and entrapment and is capable of peace and connection. Walls is very aware that the other people surrounding the cage are concerned, but she is so immersed in this intimate moment with the cheetah she does not care.

With her use of vibrant and appealing language, Walls is pushing readers to let go of preconceived ideas about how people should live, as she was once limited by those expectations. Walls is also breaking away from the expectations of a misery memoir because she is highlighting the beauty within the suffering. The traumatic moments in her life are real, but so are the rare and unparalleled ones. In moments like these Walls understands that her family is different by way of knowing that no one else will *get* to have these experiences.

### C. Action

Not only does her spirit remain joyful and unafraid, but Walls does not wallow in suffering. As this is reflected in her writing, moments of distress are always interspersed between moments of action. After detailing how cold it was that winter, Walls shares that her mother said they must improvise new ways to get warm. Walls writes that she and her brother made the occasional “coal-collecting expeditions” and scoured the forest for “dead branches and logs” to make a fire (175-176). Describing the process, Walls writes, “Finding good, dry wood was a challenge. We trekked along the mountainside, looking for pieces that weren’t waterlogged or rotten, shaking the snow of the branches” (175). Here, Walls is articulating just how miserable the conditions are without emphasizing how miserable she and her siblings feel; she takes the time to describe how she handles the situation. As she explains how to find “good dry wood,” it appears as though through these experiences, she and her siblings are developing strong survival skills. In this sense, her term “expedition” has connotations of excitement, action, and adventure. At one point, Walls tries hiding checks in order to save money for food and clothes knowing that her father will spend their money on booze, but he finds them and takes the money anyway. Rather than fighting her father or expressing how upset she is, Walls applies for a job. She writes:

I was afraid that Mr. Becker wouldn’t give me the job if he knew I was only thirteen, so I told him I was seventeen. He hired me on the spot for forty dollars a week, in cash. I was thrilled. It was my first real job. Babysitting and tutoring and selling scrap metal didn’t count. Forty dollars a week was serious money. (214).

This excerpt reveals Walls’s tenacity because it illustrates her ability to survive on her own.

Lying to Mr. Becker about her age exposes the fact that she is too young to even have a job. Not

only does she avoid wallowing in helplessness, but she expresses that she is “*thrilled*” about her new job—even under the circumstances. The list of her previous money-making opportunities—like “babysitting” and “selling scrap metal” — exhibits her unrelenting ability to persevere through hardship.

Through her actions, the reader gets a sense of how severe and intense many of the situations are that Walls finds herself in. Yet, they also illustrate her capabilities. The skills acquired from these difficult moments grant Walls more agency. Rather than feeling vulnerable and abused, Walls chooses to stay in motion and take control. Her actions give her power when she feels powerless. Her actions also instantiate her refusal to be a victim, changing the focus from how she’s been harmed to how she overcomes it.

#### **D. Layout**

One of the most significant differences between *The Glass Castle* and the prototypical misery memoir is the manner of its organization. Walls opens her book with the description of an adult experience, and then dives back into her childhood instead of mapping out her life chronologically. As she transitions from the description of her experience as an adult to her childhood memories, her reflections serve as evidence for the reader, explaining how she grew to be so disconnected from her family and from herself. In this way, she communicates to the reader her need to revisit her past in order to finally accept where she comes from and who she truly is. Who she claims to be and the life she has in the first scene of the book is not the real Jeannette Walls. Nonetheless, it is the start of her journey as she begins to move forward. Beginning with who she thought she should be, the shame that consumed her, and ending with a never-before-seen version of herself—this organization highlights her arc of character. As it shows her grappling with how to feel about her parents and herself, the literary form of memoir

allows her to create an image of herself and her family that displays both the good and the bad. Furthermore, defying the misery memoir once again, Walls is immediately informing the reader that she has found a life beyond the abuse, neglect, alcoholism, and poverty, and that she holds unconditional love for her parents.

At the very beginning of her book, Walls and her mother engage in a very significant dialogue about shame and acceptance. In real time, this exchange with her mother happens before her father's death, yet Walls intentionally places it at the beginning of the book. By placing this encounter at the beginning, it sets the framework for the memoir. Walls writes:

“Mom, I saw you picking through trash in the East Village a few days ago.”

“Well, people in this country are too wasteful. It's my way of recycling...Why didn't you say hello?”

“I was too ashamed, Mom. I hid”

“You, see?... Right there. That's exactly what I'm saying. You're way too easily embarrassed. Your father and I are who we are. Accept it.”

“And what am I supposed to tell people about my parents?”

“Just tell the truth... That's simple enough.” (19)

While her mother and her father can live openly, true to who they are, Walls cannot accept them because she cannot accept herself—this appears to be the root of their separation. By asking, “what am I supposed to tell people about my parents?” Walls is revealing that even as an adult she is concerned with how people perceive her family. However, by including this exchange at the beginning of the memoir and concluding the scene with her mother's line “just tell the truth,” it seems like Walls is tired of worrying about what others think of her and wants to focus on mending her relationship with her parents. This exchange is imbued with significance and sets

the intentions for the book. Writing her memoir and unpacking her past is a way of expelling the shame and the guilt, not reliving the trauma. In doing so, she can finally begin to be honest with herself about who she really is.

By telling Walls to live truthfully, it seems as though her mother planted the seeds for Wall's memoir. Her father's death at the end of the book can be understood as the final catalyst that pushed her to confront everything she had hidden. When her father first informs Walls that he was dying, she is clearly taken aback by the news. Walls writes, "But despite all the hell-raising and destruction and chaos he had created in our lives, I could not imagine what my life would be like—what the world would be like— without him in it. As awful as he could be, I always knew he loved me in a way no one else ever had" (278). This quote illuminates the depth and complex nature of her relationship with her father because even while recognizing the pain and "destruction" he caused, she isn't willing to live without him. Grappling with her divided feelings, Walls is required to confront what he means to her, who he is to her, and how she feels about his death, and it appears as though she is saddened by the thought of him being gone completely.

By expressing this and acknowledging his unparalleled love for her, Walls is challenging the idea that her father is just a monster. Their exchange reveals that he is no such creature to her. Though emotions are not expressed explicitly, the two engage in a conversation that is heavy with emotional undertones. Walls writes:

"No, no snot-slinging or boohooing about 'poor ol' Rex... I don't want any of that, either now or when I'm gone."

I nodded

"But you always loved your old man, didn't you?"

“I did, Dad... and you loved me.”

“Now, that's God's honest truth.” (293)

This exchange reaffirms that Wall's feelings towards her father were never without love.

Throughout much of her young adult life, Walls relied on anger as the motivating force she needed to escape and begin her own life. However, by admitting she has “always loved her old man,” and he has “always loved her,” she is informing the reader that she never hated her father. Furthermore, she is not suddenly changing her feelings about him because he is dying. She *always* loved him, no matter what. Again, Walls is revealing the ways in which she can move away and live without her family physically, but even after everything her parents put her through, she cannot detach emotionally.

The moment of her father's actual death is surprisingly brief. In one of the shortest paragraphs of the memoir, Walls writes, “Two weeks later, Dad had a heart attack. When I got to the hospital, he was in a bed in the emergency room, his eyes closed. ‘It's just the machines keeping him alive at this point,’ Mom said.... An hour later, they turned the machines off” (280). Here, there is a lack of emotion and of writing. It is very factual and informative. However, it is the absence of emotional descriptors in recounting this moment of her father's passing that makes this moment impactful. It requires the reader to reflect on Wall's entire memoir, considering the whole and complex picture that Walls has painted of her father up to this point. It almost invites the reader to fill the scene with their emotions.

Rather than writing about her grief, Walls quickly turns to action again. She describes feeling restless and feeling the need to always be on the move. After picking up ice skating, Walls explains, “the fast paced, repetitive maneuvers distracted me... It took me a while to realize that just being on the move wasn't enough; that I needed to reconsider everything” (280).

In confronting her feelings about her father, she inevitably must confront her feelings about herself. Similar to the ways in which Walls moved to New York to run away from her family and everything she felt about herself, Walls is relying on “repetition” and “distraction” in order to run away from her feelings about her father’s death. All the confused feelings of betrayal, love, disgust, awe, bubble to the surface because her feelings about his passing are inextricably tied to her feelings about their relationship.

However, unlike how she ran away to start over and detach herself from her family and her past, following her father’s passing, Walls begins processing and reassessing everything. She writes, “A year after Dad died, I left Eric. He was a good man, but not the right one for me. And Park Avenue was not where I belonged” (280). This is the first time Walls acts out of her own volition—not her parents’ and not what she thinks other people want her to do. Recognizing that Eric is a “good man” but “not the right one for her” reveals that he and “park avenue” are representative of everything she *thought* she wanted. In drawing out feelings of love and loss, her father’s death also moves Walls to begin asking where she truly belongs and more importantly, what it means to belong. All her life she felt like an outcast, but when she was successful at fitting in, she ended up still feeling like an outsider; she didn’t recognize herself anymore.

### **E. A Family Reunion**

For most of her life, Walls assumed that modeling her behavior on the actions of others whom she perceived to be “normal” would lead to her own happiness. At the beginning of the book, she is in a conventional marriage, she has a successful job, and she believes herself to have a full circle of friends. As she begins to take stock of her life, however, she realizes that these superficial achievements have only served to further estrange her from herself. It is not until she stops trying to be someone else and opens up to her family that she is no longer ashamed about

who she is and where she came from. In the end, it is actually the things that made her and her family stand out that Walls celebrates. Illuminating a world beyond the abuse, in the text Walls reveals a rekindling of these connections.

In the last part of the book, Walls is divorced, living outside the city, and has reconnected with most of her family. As she sits around the Thanksgiving table with her husband and family for the first time, they raise a toast to her father and reflect on the life that they shared. She writes, “We started talking about Dad’s greatest escapades: letting me pet the cheetah, taking us Demon Hunting, giving us stars for Christmas” (288). Identifying her father’s wild actions as “great escapades” reveals a tone of admiration and pride. Memories like “petting the cheetah” and “Demon Hunting” are what stand out to Walls. Though it is unlikely that she will ever forget the times her parents neglected and even endangered her and her siblings, she chooses to place an emphasis on the beautifully galvanizing nature of their life. These “escapades” mark her family as different, but it is precisely their difference that she can once again celebrate.

This image of Walls gathered and reminiscing with her entire family marks significant growth. She has made meaningful changes in her own life, and as a result, she has achieved a greater acceptance of herself and an ability to appreciate the complexities of her parents and her upbringing. At the very end of the book, Walls writes:

We raised our glasses. I could almost hear Dad chuckling at Mom’s comment in the way he always did when he was truly enjoying something. It had grown dark outside. A wind picked up, rattling the windows, and the candle flames suddenly shifted, dancing along the border between turbulence and order. (288)

This scene starkly contrasts her opening scene with her mother because the family has found a way to be together again. Even though her father is gone, it appears as though Walls feels like

her family is whole. Her awareness of her father's presence, describing his "chuckling" and his admiration of her mother, illustrates their inseparable bond. Like how she was never able to shut out her parents completely, her father's death does not mean he is not still with them. The details of the storm brewing outside give rise to a familiar tension between the internal and the external. Internally, the family is safe and together again. The line "we raised our glasses," communicates that visibly the Walls' appear peaceful and even celebratory. However, the description of the "darkness" and the "wind rattling the windows" sets an ominous mood for their family reunion. The storm reflects the distinctive and twisted relationship Walls has with her family. The image of the border "between turbulence and order" reflects the thin line that Walls has walked her whole life. It reminds the reader that life can never be just chaos or just order.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Originally, I had planned to use this paper to highlight Jeanette Walls's text, *The Glass Castle*, as well as Susan Kaysen's, *Girl, Interrupted*. With my thesis, relearning life post-pandemic, and returning from a semester off, I was struggling with my own mental health during the first few months of this semester, and I decided to drop Kaysen's book and to focus solely on *The Glass Castle*. It was not that *Girl, Interrupted* discussed issues of mental health, but it was Kaysen's proclamation that psychotic breaks and even suicide are spontaneous for everyone—that there is a total lack of control over one's state of being. While this can be true, she failed to elucidate that there are usually genetic and environmental components that predispose someone to experience those breaks. Furthermore, Kaysen provided no sense of hope or aid in managing serious mental health issues. By directly addressing the reader and using descriptive terms to conjure up panic and darkness, there grew to be a blurred line between her experience and my

own. Because it was real, it felt more prescriptive, and her message that there is no world beyond struggle deeply affected me.

Reflecting on my experience reading these two texts, I think that my reaction to *Girl, Interrupted* illustrates the difference between a traditional misery memoir and *The Glass Castle*. Unable to shake the spiraling shared experience, Kaysen's text drew me into despondence and had me diagnosing myself. Though at many points I was in tears and on edge, Jeanette's story drew me in emotionally as well, but kept me afloat with her emphasis on perseverance and survival.

My intentions with this paper were not to criticize the misery memoir as a literary genre. I will not say that Kaysen should never have written her book because I believe writers should feel free to write about any subjects that interest them, especially when it comes to personal accounts of trauma and struggle. However, I do believe that memoirs have the capacity to influence readers to a particularly significant degree because they are real, and, given this potential impact, the memoirist should be conscious of their approach and the power of their words. I also think that in order to even sit down and write a memoir the author should have the intention of disseminating a greater meaning.

It is not that suffering cannot lead to meaning or insight, but, as scholars have noted, the mass production of misery memoirs dangerously puts forth the idea that suffering is the *only* path to meaning. It cannot be assumed that telling a tale of suffering has meaning itself. Stories that are purely about an individual's misery offer nothing other than a detailed account of abuse, addiction, or violence. Rather than appealing to universal themes about the human experience, these stories appeal to prurient and voyeuristic desires. They become the commodification of trauma for profit and entertainment; clickbait.

Labeling *The Glass Castle* as a misery memoir fails to acknowledge the hard work Walls has put into not being defined by traumas from her childhood. Though she provides the reader with details about her various disturbing experiences, her text does not prioritize them, nor does she drag the reader into a state of hopelessness. She reveals these moments of difficulty because they are part of her history. In doing so, she substantiates her message that life is what you put into it, not necessarily what hand you've been dealt. The literary form of the memoir allowed Walls to take the reader with her on her journey to self-acceptance. Her memoir reveals that accepting her parents for who they are and the truth about where she came from allowed her to finally enjoy the person she truly was. In great opposition with the misery memoir, Walls ensures the reader that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

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