

RUNNING HEAD: "THE GLASS CASTLE"

"The Glass Castle"

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SWK 554-354 Spring 2020

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The Glass Castle is a moving memoir of Jeannette Walls compelling life. Watching the Glass Castle, there are several different social issues presented. Watching this movie from a social work perspective was a very eye-opening experience. I found myself applying Erickson’s psychosocial theory. During my assessment of this intriguing life story, I also identified the social injustice of classism in the United States of America.

The issues identified neglect, medical and education, unsanitary conditions, homelessness, unemployment, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, discrimination, underlying mental health issues, physical and sexual abuse, hunger, and poverty. Poverty was the main issue in Jennette's and her sibling's life story. The family had no rules in the home, and they were never stable living in one place. The children did not go to school and would go days without eating. The father Rex Walls was abusing alcohol and could not provide for his family because he could not keep employment. The mother Rose Mary Walls was an artist and expressed that she couldn't stand the responsibility of providing for her family and rather concentrate in her paintings instead of making her child Jeannette something to eat, which caused Jeannette to get hospitalized for a severe burn. The family were living like nomads and traveled to Nevada, Arizona, West Virginia, and eventually on to New York City. Jeanette, her brother, and sisters had to fend for themselves and support one another during the dysfunctional of their family. The siblings helped each other along the way until they found the resources to leave home and start a new life.

This takes us back to our main character Jeannette Walls. The relationship that Jeannette Walls has with her father undoubtedly played an influential role in determining the person she became as an adult. Despite everything that Jeanette Walls went through with her family, her

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father was someone she looked up to growing up. With the trauma that Rex carried in his adult life, he made sure he built his children's self-confidence. He showed Jeannette how to believe in herself. One-night Jeannette thought she heard a monster under her bed. His father Rex did not tell her there was no monster; instead, he grabbed a weapon and went looking for the monster under the bed; he called it "demon hunting" (Walls 2005). This helped Jeannette's self-esteem and helped her face her fear to build up her confidence. Her father has taught Jeannette that she can do anything and to always believe in herself, and it showed in her adulthood.

According to Erickson's theory from my assessment, I do believe that Jeannette did positively go through the psychosocial stages. Throughout Jeannette Wall's life, the challenges and setbacks she faced often came with moments of comfort and clarity. It seems that when recounting her most memorable experiences, many times she concludes by pointing out a feeling of uniqueness due to a lesson her father taught her, or a moment of weakness he helped her overcome. It is undeniable that Rex had irresponsible actions that indirectly or directly harmed his children, but out of all of them, Jeannette was the only one who kept faith and love for him. In her story, Jeannette learns a valuable lesson from her father at the zoo, and again, it becomes characteristic for Rex to praise his children for their uniqueness. It is her trust in him that allows her to honestly and fully believe in him.

A certain calmness and fascination convey a unique experience. She did not seem anxious or afraid when she touched the cheetah; this is where you can see the faith she has in her dad. When the other visitors at the zoo gathered around and threatened them, Rex did not back down and did not let his children be put down by others. This moment affected her immensely, and it shows that it was made all the more special because she was able to do something no one else could (Walls 2005). Even with all the barriers that she faced, such as poverty, exposure to

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domestic violence, and having alcoholic father, Jeannette grew up to be an independent woman with a bright future in which I admired throughout the movie.

Erik Erikson was a famous psychoanalyst who studied human development; he believed that personality developed in a series of stages. Erikson's theory describes the impact of social experience across the whole lifespan. Erikson was interested in how social interaction and relationships played a role in the development and growth of human beings (Erikson,1975).

Jeannette Walls, in her memoir *The Glass Castle*, is a great example of Erikson's eight stages of development. Through the memories of her childhood and adolescence, we are able to underline her development from one stage to the next. It was evident that Jeannette faced some struggles through her childhood. For adulthood, Jeannette succeeds and has positive outcomes and is successful. As her memoir unfolds, you realize that it was part of her healing process. According to Erickson psychosocial development theory; a human being goes through different stages during their lifetime. From observation and study, Erickson's theory's main idea is focusing on how humans are faced with a challenge in each stage of their life and the way they face and achieve the crisis. This later determines and affects how fully developed a person a human becomes.

Jeannette had a very uncommon upbringing. There was a lot of trauma, uncertainty, inconsistency that she faced throughout her life. Jeannette and her family faced homelessness and poverty. Which were two factors that contributed to her developmental stages throughout her life. Throughout the film many scenes were from Jeannette's early childhood. In Erickson's third developmental stage Initiative vs. Guilt. During this stage which occurs during the child's third through fifth years. In planning, launching, and initiating fantasy, play, and other activity, the

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child learns to believe in his or her ability to successfully pursue goals. However, if these pursuits often fail or are criticized, the child may develop instead a feeling of self-doubt and guilt (Erickson,1963). In the film there was a scene where Jeannette at that time 3 years old was hungry and she asked her mother if she could make her something to eat, her mother was painting and asked her to make hotdogs by herself. This demonstrates initiative as she listened to her mother and was boiling hotdogs for herself. Jeannette took the risk in boiling hotdogs at the age of 3 years old, and she ended up lighting herself on fire by accident and ended up in the hospital. When her parents went to see her at the hospital, her parents and siblings did not bring the incident up or tried to put her down, this did not give Jeannette the sense of guilt for not successfully completing the task of making herself something to eat. Another example of initiative and guilt is that Jeannette was given a lot of responsibility at a young age. A specific scene was when Jeannette’s mother asked her children to ride in the back of the moving truck and Jeannette was responsible for holding her baby sister Maureen the entire trip. Erickson would say that these tasks strengthened Jeannette’s skills that she will later use as an adult. As a result, Jeannette gains independence and self-control. She will not have a difficult time setting goals and achieving them in adulthood (Erickson,1963).

For Erickson’s fourth stage, elementary and middle school years (6-11) the child must resolve the crisis between industry and inferiority. For this stage, which the child learns to be productive and to accept evaluation of his or her efforts or becomes discouraged and feels inferior or incompetent (Erickson,1968) During this stage, a child becomes more aware of themselves as individuals. It is important that a child learn the feeling of success; if not allowed

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enough success, they might develop a sense of inferiority or incompetence. Again, it is about the balance of industry and inferiority that leads to competence both intellectually and socially (Erickson,1968). In the film Jeannette and her siblings did not go to school, however her mother provided her and her sibling with many books to read. Despite the fact that Jeannette did not go to school she acknowledged that she was a smart girl. She read on her own and understood that education was important. Which later on lead her to go to college. By Jeannette knowing that she is intelligent even if she does not attend school she develops the sense of industry

As Erickson’s stages progress it leads to his fifth stage of development where the person must master the conflict of identity versus role confusion. They ask themselves the question, who am I? The person is concerned with how they appear to others and are searching for a way to define themselves (Erickson,1968). This is where Jeanette discovers her passion for journalism and goes to college for it. She will make a career of it in the future. This leads to Erikson’s sixth stage young adulthood, intimacy versus isolation which focuses more around love. Jeannette balances out intimacy and isolation as she is learning to be on her own and learning to love. In the film she is engaged to Erick. He was not very accepting of her family and tries to hide Jeanette’s truth on growing up. Jeannette during the film agrees with Erick because she “loves” him and is going to marry him. She learns a different concept of love beside her parents. Jeannette is willing to isolate herself from her mother and father because she is embarrassed of them and does not think they loved her. I believe that Jeannette feels this way because she is experiencing a different love with Erick and wants to lead a normal life. Towards the end of the movie Jeannette reflects on her childhood. As an independent woman that she is, she knows

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Erick is not a good fit for her and returns to her family and keeps succeeding in her future. If Jeannette would not have achieved the stage Erickson’s third and fourth stage she would not be as strong-willed and independent as she was portrayed.

Many other theories can be applied to this film, especially for Jeannette Walls. Developmentally we can see that Jeanette’s upbringing was unstable to say the least. As was previously mentioned she grew up in a very unstable environment, where there was food insecurity and insecurity of shelter. Though she lived with both her parents, the safety and security they should have provided to her and her siblings wasn’t there, she and her siblings were left to fend for themselves, leading to incidents like her catching fire because her mother didn’t want to cook. Physically speaking Jeanette developed normally there was no mention of any physical disparities. She ran, jumped, swam, climbed like any normal child, indicating that her gross motor skills were intact. She loved to write so this indicates that her fine motor skills were also intact. She and her siblings might have been a little slower and less coordinated than other children her age because their “fundamental needs were not being met in the form of nutrition, rest and sleep, opportunities to learn, amount of affection and extent of security, this could have affected their development.” (Ashford et al pg. 241)

In her memoir most of Jeanette’s memories were in the Concrete operational stage according to Piaget. This stage is characterized by conservation of objects, they can’t understand abstract objects or abstract concepts. A good example of this is when the family went swimming in the pool and Jeanette wouldn’t let go of the edge of the pool for fear of drowning. Her father Rex decided that he was going to teach her a life lesson while teaching her to swim. He goes into the pool, grabs her and throws her into the middle of the water. He goes on to do these three or four more times. Jeanette thought that her father was trying to kill her, but he explained to her

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that she couldn't live her life at the edge of the pool, but she had to venture out and swim, if she didn't swim she wouldn't accomplish anything. His lesson was an abstract concept that she didn't really understand at the time. What finally calmed her down is him telling her he would never let anything happen to her that he was always there. This too was an abstract concept, but it was also one that applied to the moment. There were many moments in the memoir that show us this form of thinking. She literally understood that her parents were not capable of giving her and her siblings stability, so she told her siblings if they were going to get out of this way of life they had to do it themselves, they had to support each other in everything. This is exactly what they did, and this allowed them all to become independent and successful.

Jeanette demonstrated that she was very emotionally mature. She constantly had to take on the role of adult starting at the age of three. She had to cook for her family because her mother didn't want to, she had to take care of her siblings, create a budget and save money because her parents didn't, she had to create the stable environment that she and her siblings needed to thrive. She did not have the luxury of egocentric thought patterns she always had to think of her siblings. Though Jeanette grew up in very uncertain conditions due to extreme poverty and alcoholism in her family she had the consistency of both parents and was able to take one role that gave her the confidence to be successful in life.

Jeanette Walls is a very independent woman that chased her dream and left her home because it was a toxic environment at that time. She decided to write her book and be successful in life. When it came to romance, her taste in men was not "her father type." She learned to fend for herself and not rely on her partner. She was focused on making her future life the way her way. In addition, the social injustice that I identified in the Glass Castle was classism. When we think of classism, we think of minorities and not the "white people." White people are also

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victims of classism and many live-in poverties. Despite the majority of the wealth in the US being held by white Americans, the majority of the American lower class is also white. Another important fact is that the majority of the American prison population is white and also suffers the same disenfranchisement upon release.

White privilege does not always trump classism but does help given the Eurocentric sentiments that are embedded in Western postcolonial society. A lower-class white person still has more opportunities handed to them than a fellow lower-class black person based on skin color (The paradoxical belief of the working-class white population is the feeling of superiority, social mobility, and resentment towards non-white groups including black and brown immigrants and Muslims (Barone, 1999). The dominant culture of the United States is one of white exceptionalism, which is reinforced through the media and society. However, a poor white person has a parallel struggle to a poor person of color, and regardless of white privilege, the cycle of poverty still cannot always be escaped (Barone, 1999).

With poverty comes homelessness for the Walls family. homelessness is a major public health problem that has received considerable attention from various sections of society including clinicians, researchers and policy makers. In 2016, 550,00 individuals were homeless in the United States as reported by the Department of Urban Development. The risk factors stated in the journal include child abuse, mental illness, substance abuse, the population includes large numbers of middle-aged men as well as a growing number of women and families. A study “Social Conditions of Becoming Homeless gives the result of 26 interviews conducted with people in Cheshire NW England revealed that becoming homeless is characterized by: A waning of resistance to cope with life's challenges. These challenges created by a series of adverse incidents in one's life

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As a group watching this movie and assessing Jennette's life story was a great learning experience. We watched this through a social work lens and applied our school learning throughout the movie. Even though Jeannette her childhood proves rather rough, she realizes this does not prevent her from obtaining her goals. While her life story serves as no fairy tale, she manages to find her "happily-ever after" through unrelenting faith and determination.

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