The Glass Castle Close Analysis

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Often times, the finger of blame is righteously pointed at a parent if he has failed his duty in raising his child. If he abuses his child, compromises her safety, and disregards her needs, society immediately condemns him. As the child grows up, perhaps even the child will feel disgraced by her parent. However, sometimes all it takes for the child to completely forgive the parent is one redeeming quality, one little aspect of his character that holds such an influence on the child that it will always make her unquestionably love him. In the book, *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls is that child, recounting her favorite childhood memories spent with her father Rex Walls as some of the best moments of her life, regardless of Rex’s obvious irresponsibility and destruction wrought onto other aspects of her life. Despite the many instances in which her father failed to protect his children, refused to take responsibility for them, and even stole from them, Jeannette still loved him until his dying day for two reasons: one, for his constant ability to make her feel special, and two, because he is a never-ending source of inspiration.

Through her account of the Christmas in which her father gave his children stars for presents, Jeannette continually portrays Rex as an intelligent and loving father and teacher, describing the memory with admiration and contentment in her tone. Although Jeannette begins by saying, “we had no money at all,” the matter of fact tone and lack of regret suggest the minimal significance of her family’s financial struggles as it is easily overshadowed by the significance of this moment (39). The capitalization of “Dad” reflects Jeannette’s overall admiration for her father, in addition to her father’s ability to brave the cold because, “the cold never bothered him” (39). In addition, Rex has an ability to make her feel special, introduced by the way in which he “took each of [the] kids out into the desert night, one by one,” describing that the stars were “one of the special treats for people like [Jeannette]” (39). Her father contrasts their family with the “rich city folks” and leads her to think, “We’d have to be out of our minds
to want to travel places with any of them” (39). Moreover, Jeannette’s use of simplicity in the syntax and simplicity in her description of her father helps portray the experience as so significant as to not even need words The short syntactical structure of the sentences conveys the straight-forwardness of the story. Jeannette describes her father with very simple diction, as she repeats, “Dad said,” over and over; she did not use stronger verbs such as “exclaimed” or “described” (40). Her use of basic language strips her experience of any falsehood and leaves only the purity of her experience.

Her father’s ability to make her feel unique is thus one of the main reasons why she holds onto him when others give up on him, as that ability gave her one of the most significant moments of her life. The sentence “And he gave me Venus,” albeit short, conveys a lot of meaning (40). The short syntax emphasizes the action of her father giving the special present. Perhaps an emphasis on the word “me” also depicts the uniqueness she feels, not to the mention the fact that she was able to receive a planet when her other siblings received stars as presents (40). It becomes obvious that Jeannette’s admiration accumulates at this moment as she continues to describe the experience in positive terms. The final quote at the end of the passage, as her father says “Years from now…you’ll still have your stars” is another strong example of her father emphasizing her uniqueness, as he clearly sets the Walls children apart from the others by giving them a present others could have never received (41).

In another story in which Jeannette describes playing with matches with her brother Brian and accidentally setting her home on fire, the strength of her father’s knowledge is what inspires her and makes that experience memorable. The animal and water imagery describing the “snapping yellow flame,” “dissolv[ing] into an invisible shimmery heat” convinces Jeannette to be all the more impressed that her father actually knows about it and tells her about “the
boundary between turbulence and order” (61). Again, his ability to make her feel special, as one of the only people who “got a little too close” to the fire that even physics “haven’t figured…out yet,” helped mollify the tension from the situation and inspired her greatly, for even the last words of the memoir makes a reference to that moment (61, 288).

When Jeannette learns how to swim, despite the fact that her father purposely dropped her into the water, Jeannette still finds a way to rationalize her father’s actions because she felt as though it was just his way of inspiring her to learn. At the end of that passage, Jeannette describes her father’s explanation for her actions as his trying to teach her life lessons such as “you can’t cling to the sink your whole life,” and “if you don’t want to sink, you better figure out how to swim” (66). Although to an average person, nearly letting a child drown in order to teach her how to swim may be too extreme and perhaps unforgivable, Jeannette takes in Rex’s explanations wholeheartedly and readily agrees. She even says, “I figured he must be right [because] there was no other way to explain it” (66). The quickness in her forgiveness suggests the strength of her father’s influence over her, as it seems that even with only a few justifications she is able to convince Jeannette that he means the best for her, even if he caused her to suffer.

Jeannette also 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 wholly believe in him. A certain calmness and fascination conveys the unique experience Jeannette shared with her father; Jeannette’s use of ordinary verbs to describe the action of her father such as “Dad slowly raise his right hand,” “calmly put his hand,” almost commends him for being brave and calm (108). Interestingly she did not seem anxious or afraid when she touched the cheetah, indicating the extent of her faith in her dad. When the other visitors at the zoo gathered around and threatened to throw them out, Rex clearly contrasts the difference
between “his kids” and “these fools,” making her feel all the more special (109). Her last thought, “none of them had ever had their hand licked by a cheetah,” is filled with pride and satisfaction from this experience (109). Judging from her tone, 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.

Finally, during her last visit to see her father as he confirms that he is dying, Jeanette admits how inspirational he is to her. The syntactical change in the length of the sentences reflects her father’s continuous effect on her, even as he is about to die. She sums up her relationship in two clear, complex sentences, saying, “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 had” (279). The uniqueness that he makes her feel fuels her affection for him. Ironically, just as he had a special love for her that was only for her, she was the only person in his life who held onto his love and respected him regardless of his other issues. The last two sentences in her memory, as she “just smiled” and “and then [she] closed the door” are relatively simple and short, especially when compared to the length of her first statement (279). The change in structure is perhaps a reflection of her change in character when she is around him, as it seems to turn from very sentimental to almost cold and curt. Perhaps it is because she is older that she has finally reevaluated her upbringing and realized that she just cannot escape Rex’s control and influence over her, even as he was dying.

Throughout Jeannette Wall’s life, the challenges and setbacks she faced were often juxtaposed 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 less her father taught her, or a moment of weakness he helped her overcome. It is undeniable that Rex performed some terrible and irresponsible actions that indirectly or directly harmed his children, but out of all of them, Jeannette, and “Mountain Goat” was his special name for her, was the only one who kept faith and love for him (116). It was his power to make her feel special and inspire her that helped her believe in him when no one else would.