

## Narratives of resilience: Applying Emmy Werner's framework to Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle*

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### Abstract

*This article employs Emmy Werner's resilience theory to analyze Jeannette Walls' memoir, *The Glass Castle* (2005). It examines how the dynamic interplay of risk and protective factors shaped Walls' developmental trajectory, enabling her to overcome profound childhood adversity. While prior scholarship has often focused on trauma, dysfunctional family dynamics, or feminist readings of the text, this study offers a focused literary-psychological analysis through the lens of resilience. Werner's framework, derived from longitudinal studies of at-risk children, provides a robust model for understanding mechanisms of positive adaptation despite significant hardship. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive methodology, the analysis identifies salient risk factors in Walls' childhood, including severe poverty, parental neglect and instability, and her parents' alcoholism. Concurrently, it delineates key protective factors that fostered resilience: her innate problem-solving skills, a strong sibling alliance, external support from educators, and her internal determination. The findings demonstrate that Walls' resilience was forged within a context of persistent risks but was catalyzed by specific protective elements that facilitated adaptive coping, academic success, and ultimate socio-economic mobility. By applying Werner's psychological framework to a literary memoir, this study bridges disciplinary boundaries, illustrating how personal narrative can empirically model the constructs of developmental psychology. It argues that *The Glass Castle* functions not merely as a story of trauma, but fundamentally as a narrative of hope and human capacity for resilience.*

**Keywords:** Emmy Werner, Jeanette Walls, Memoir, Resilience theory, *The Glass Castle*

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### Introduction

In recent decades, growing concern for mental health has prompted academics to examine personal narratives in literary works, particularly memoirs, as spaces where psychological experiences of hardship are expressed and interpreted. This trend aligns with developments in developmental psychology, where resilience theory has become central to understanding how individuals, especially children, adapt to chronic risk and adversity (Ann & Masten, 2018). Literary narratives of survival range from stories of refugees to memoirs of childhood neglect, providing valuable insights into how suffering is narrated, remembered, and transformed into meaning (Dhini & Haryanti, 2025).

Jeanette Walls' memoir, *The Glass Castle* (2005) exemplifies this intersection between literary narrative and psychological inquiry. The memoir recounts Walls' childhood marked by extreme poverty, parental neglect, instability, and emotional betrayal under the care of her parents, Rex and Mary Walls. Despite prolonged exposure to adverse conditions such as homeless, hunger, and lack of parental protection, Walls eventually attains personal and professional success as journalist and author. Her narrative thus raises a fundamental question that extends beyond personal testimony of

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how individuals exposed to sustained childhood adversity develop adaptive strengths rather than long-term dysfunction?

Since its publication, *The Glass Castle* has received widespread critical and popular attention. The memoir remained *The New York Times* bestseller list for more than eight years and received several awards, including the Christopher Award and the Alex award from the American Library Association. Scholars note that Walls' narrative powerfully depicts survival amid hardship while revealing contradictions within family relationships (Umar & Hardiyanti, 2023). This reception underscores the memoir's significance not only as a literary work but also as a cultural text that resonates with readers navigating experiences of adversity.

Existing literary scholarship has examined *The Glass Castle* from multiple perspectives. Social and moral readings interpret the memoir as a critique of poverty, family, responsibility, and social values (Umar & Hardiyanti, 2023; Venibha, 2024). Formal and stylistic studies analyze Walls' narrative voice and structure, highlighting how shifts between warmth and neglect shape readers' engagement with trauma and memory (Shyshkina & Lysenko, 2024). Psycholiterary approaches apply psychoanalytic frameworks to explore identify formation, anxiety, and defense mechanism within the text (Guo & Ge, 2019). Studies of family dynamics further reveal how dysfunctional parental behavior coexists with unconventional emotional bonds that influence Walls' development (Deepthi, 2018).

While these studies provide valuable insights, most analyses remain descriptive, focusing on the presence of hardship or moments of perseverance without systematically examining how resilience develops over time. In other words, previous scholarship often identifies what Walls experiences but does not adequately explain why and how she adapts successfully despite chronic risk. As a result, resilience appears as an implicit outcome rather than a process shaped by identifiable protective factors.

At the same time, empirical research in developmental psychology offers well-established models of resilience that emphasize the interaction between risk factors and protective influences across the life course (Mesman, Vreeker, & Hillegers, 2021; Chang, 2023). These studies conceptualize resilience not as an innate trait but as a dynamic process shaped by individual capacities, relational support, and external opportunities. However, such empirically grounded frameworks are rarely applied systematically in literary analyses of memoirs, including *The Glass Castle*. When resilience is discussed in narrative studies, it is often limited to specific contexts such as grief memoirs or therapeutic writing, without mapping the full configuration of risk and protective factors over time (Snauwaert, 2021).

This gap is significant because memoirs like *The Glass Castle* offer detailed longitudinal narratives that parallel the life-course focus of resilience research. Without applying a structured resilience framework, literary analyses risk overlooking how narrative form, characterization, and plot development represent adaptive processes rather than merely recount trauma. Addressing this gap would shift critical attention from trauma-centered readings toward a more nuanced understanding of positive adaptation within adverse environments.

Emmy Werner's resilience theory provides a particularly suitable framework for this purpose. Based on her landmark longitudinal study of children growing up under high-risk conditions, Werner demonstrated that a substantial proportion of individuals exposed to poverty, parental absence, and instability developed into competent and resilient adults due to the presence of protective factors (Werner, 1995; Konnikova, 2016). Werner identifies three primary categories of protective factors: individual strengths such as problem-solving skills and autonomy, supportive relationships within the

family or peer group, and external systems including schools and mentors that foster self-esteem and opportunity ([Müller, 2019](#); [Jean-Thorn, 2022](#)).

This framework is directly relevant to *The Glass Castle*, in which Walls' childhood reflects various risk factors such as chronic poverty, parental neglect, and instability, as well as protective influences such as sibling bonds, personal determination, and educational opportunities. Within Werner's theoretical lens, the memoir can be understood as more than a narrative of pain, presenting resilience as a developmental process constructed through the interaction of psychological resilience and social context.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze Jeannette Walls' resilience in *The Glass Castle* using Emmy Werner's resilience theory. This study investigates how risk and protective factors are embedded in narrative structure, characterization, and life experiences to reveal resilience in Walls' memoir as a continuously evolving process of adaptation, rather than a static response to trauma. In doing so, this research contributes to literary scholarship by integrating empirically grounded resilience theory into the analysis of memoir, offering a more systematic understanding of how narratives of adversity also function as narratives of growth and self-determination.

## Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach to textual and narrative analysis. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex human experiences, as it focuses on a small sample and emphasizes depth over breadth ([John, 2017](#); [Nariswari Hartati, 2022](#)). This approach allows for a detailed examination of specific individuals and contexts, making it appropriate for analyzing the psychological resilience of Jeannette Walls as portrayed in her memoir *The Glass Castle*. The approach used in this study is the literary psychology approach. According to Jonathan Kellerman, psychology and fiction go hand in hand because both psychology and literature seek to better understand human beings. There is a very strong connection between psychology and literature, as both disciplines deal with human beings, their lives, feelings, thoughts, suffering, desires, passions, conflicts, and so on. A writer pours out the hidden voice of their internal world, along with its various aspects, as expressed within a literary text. ([Dar, 2022](#)).

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, aiming to interpret the text through a psychological lens while remaining attentive to literary form and narrative strategies. The methodology aligns with the principles of interdisciplinary literary studies, which allow for the integration of psychological theory into literary interpretation. This design is particularly suited to resilience analysis, since the memoir format itself narrates developmental trajectories over time, paralleling the longitudinal nature of Werner's work.

The primary data source is *The Glass Castle*, focusing on narrative episodes that highlight Jeannette Walls' interactions with family, community, and external contexts that shaped her adaptation to adversity. To support the analysis, additional references from online sources and academic journals are included. Ultimately, the findings are summarized and presented in the conclusion as the final stage of this research.

The analysis follows a textual coding procedure inspired by qualitative research practices. First, key narrative events in *The Glass Castle* were systematically identified through close reading. Second, these events were coded and categorized according to Werner's tripartite model of resilience factors, including individual strengths, familial support, and external protective systems. Finally, the coded data

were interpreted in relation to Walls' developmental trajectory and long-term life outcomes to examine how resilience is narratively constructed over time.

## Results and Discussion

The results of this study are interpreted in relation to the formulated research problems and analyzed through Emmy Werner's resilience framework. To demonstrate the dynamic interaction between adversity and adaptation, the discussion is organized into three interrelated sections: (1) risk factors, (2) protective factors, and (3) the resilience of Jeannette Walls.

### Risk Factors

In the narrative under study, Jeanette Walls and her siblings' childhood was marked by various adverse conditions that align with the concept of risk factors in Emmy Werner's resilience framework. In Werner's model, risk factors refer to biological, psychological, and environmental conditions that increase a child's vulnerability to negative developmental outcomes. These include chronic poverty, family instability, parental neglect, and social marginalization, especially when these difficulties are cumulative and persistent over time ([Werner & Smith, 1992](#); [Werner, 1995](#)).

#### Instable residence

According to Werner's resilience framework, frequent changes of residence during childhood can be interpreted as an environmental risk factor that increases exposure to stress, weakens social bonds, and disrupts healthy psychological development, especially in the context of parental instability. In *The Glass Castle*, residential instability is a recurring pattern in the Walls family, as decisions to relocate were often made impulsively by Jeannette's father without consideration for his children's developmental needs.

This instability is illustrated when Walls describes how her family repeatedly fled in the middle of the night:

*We were always doing the skedaddle, usually in the middle of the night. I sometimes heard Mom and Dad discussing the people who were after us. Dad called them henchmen, bloodsuckers, and the gestapo...* (Walls, 2005, p. 15)

Although these sudden measures were described by Rex Walls as bold or necessary for security, they were in fact an attempt to avoid debt collectors, which exposed the children to prolonged uncertainty and fear. The uncertainty caused by moving house, especially if it happens repeatedly, can disrupt children's sense of security and stability ([Emma & L. B., 2023](#)). In Jeannette Walls' experience, this instability coincided with bullying and sexual abuse, which exacerbated her developmental vulnerability.

Bullying in Werner's cumulative risk model, peer bullying functions as a significant social stressor that undermines emotional well-being and a sense of belonging, particularly when combined with poverty and family instability. Defined as repeated abuse of power ([Ahmed, 2022](#); [Menesini, 2017](#)), bullying in *The Glass Castle* is closely linked to Jeannette's socio-economic marginalization.

Jeannette describes being physically attacked and humiliated by peers:

*A few days after school, four Mexican girls followed me home and jumped me in an alleyway near the LBJ Apartments. They beat me up pretty bad, pulling my hair and tearing my clothes and calling me a teacher's pet and a matchstick. (Walls, 2005, p. 40)*

*Other kids wanted to fight us because we had red hair, because Dad was a drunk, because we wore rags and didn't take as many baths as we should have, because we lived in a falling down house that was partly painted yellow and had a pit filled with garbage, because they'd go by our dark house at night and see that we couldn't even afford electricity (Walls, 2005, p. 152).*

These experiences demonstrate how poverty and parental neglect exacerbate social exclusion, reinforcing Werner's concept of cumulative risk. However, when siblings begin to fight back collectively, their response signals the emergence of a protective factor, Solidarity among siblings, which partially mitigates the psychological impact of constant bullying. One example that illustrates this is found in Walls' memories of repeated bullying by her peers based on her family's poverty and social stigma. Instead of accepting this harsh treatment, Walls and her siblings responded by strengthening their emotional bonds, providing support and protection for one another. This mechanism of mutual adjustment enabled the protagonist to survive prolonged bullying without internalizing feelings of worthlessness or social exclusion. [Extreme Poverty](#)

Within Werner's framework, chronic poverty is a major environmental risk factor that restricts access to basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education. Prolonged economic hardship increases parental stress and heightens children's exposure to neglect, hunger, and social marginalization. In *The Glass Castle*, this risk is most visible through constant food insecurity.

Jeannette describes recurrent hunger following the loss of credit at the commissary:

*We did eat less. Once we lost our credit at the commissary, we quickly ran out of food. Sometimes one of Dad's odd jobs would come through, or he'd win some money gambling, and we'd eat for a few days. Then the money would be gone and refrigerator would be empty again (Walls, 2005, p. 60).*

This chronic deprivation illustrates how parental neglect, compounded by economic hardship, resulted in children's basic developmental needs going unmet. As [Evans and Kim \(2022\)](#) suggests, extreme poverty leads to resource isolation, which in the Walls family's case extended beyond food to essential medical services. This was highlighted when Jeannette reflected on their lack of dental care:

*Mom and Dad had no money for braces, of course—none of us kids had ever even been to the dentist—but since I'd been babysitting and doing other kids' homework for cash, I resolved until I could afford braces myself. (Walls, 2005, p. 186)*

Although these examples confirm the accumulation of risk factors described by Werner, they also form the basis for Jeannette's emerging resilience. Her decision to finance her dental treatment herself through babysitting and odd jobs demonstrates a proactive response to her environment, a key characteristic of resilient individuals who strive to overcome social marginalization despite parental neglect.

### Parental Abandonment

The lack of sustained parental care constitutes a key environmental risk in Werner's cumulative risk theory, since it destabilizes children's foundational feelings of safety and relational trust. In *The*

*Glass Castle*, neglect manifests through inadequate supervision, poor hygiene, and emotional unavailability ([Vanderminden, 2019](#)).

One of the most severe examples occurs when Jeannette is left unsupervised at the age of three:

*I could hear Mom in the next room singing while she worked on one of her paintings. Juju, our black mutt, was watching me. I stabbed one of the hot dogs with a fork and bent over and offered it to him. The wiener was hot, so Juju licked at it tentatively, but when I stood up and started stirring the hot dogs again, I felt a blaze heat on my right side. I turned to see where it was coming from and realized my dress was on fire. Frozen with fears, I watched the yellow-white flames make a ragged brown line up the pink fabric of my skirt and climb my stomach. Then the flames leaped up, reaching my face. (Walls, 2005, p. 6)*

This life-threatening incident highlights a severe lack of parental supervision. While her mother chose to focus on painting, Jeannette was left to perform adult tasks such as cooking that were far beyond her developmental capabilities. The lack of a parental 'protective shield' is a classic risk factor in Werner's model.

Furthermore, neglect appears in the form of physical maintenance and grooming, as observed by Grandma Smith:

*Grandma Smith, she brought into her bedroom and sat me down at the vanity table... she'd try to run her long metal comb through my hair, cursing out of the corner of her mouth because it was tangled, "Doesn't that goddamn lazy-ass mother of yours ever comb your hair?" she once said. I explained that Mom believed children should be responsible for their grooming. (Walls, 2005, p. 84)*

Mrs. Jeannette regarded this neglect as a philosophy of 'self-responsibility'. However, from a developmental perspective, this refusal of basic care reflected a failure to provide a supportive environment that could foster a sense of worth. On the other hand, Grandmother Smith's intervention acted as a temporary protective factor, providing the consistent care that Jeannette did not receive at home.

Finally, the most damaging aspect is the emotional unavailability that forces Jeannette into "parentification" or extreme self-reliance:

*I did try to talk to my mom. I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the beatings, fearing that if I did, she'd try to butt in and she'd also only make things worse. (Walls, 2005, p. 129)*

Jeannette's reluctance to seek help indicates a breakdown in the bond between child and caregiver. Within Werner's framework, the absence of supportive adults to provide emotional validation during stressful situations such as bullying leaves the child to deal with psychological trauma alone. The accumulation of physical danger, lack of care, and emotional isolation creates a 'cumulative risk' that Jeannette must ultimately overcome.

### Sexual Harassment

Within Werner's resilience framework, exposure to violence and exploitation are extreme environmental stressors that significantly increase a child's cumulative risk. These traumatic experiences are most damaging when 'protective factors,' particularly adult intervention, are absent. In *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette's vulnerability was exacerbated by her parents' failure to act as a

‘protective shield’ when sexual abuse occurred, which [Valik \(2023\)](#) defines as ‘unwanted sexual attention’ from peers or others, which can occur even in childhood.

The first major violation occurs in Battle Mountain with Billy Deel:

*Billy smushed his face against mine, then grabbed my hair and made my head bend sideways and stuck his tongue in my mouth. It was slimy and disgusting, and when I tried to pull away, he pushed in toward me. The more I pulled, the more he pushed, until he was on top of me and I felt his fingers tugging at my shorts. His other hand was unbuttoning his own pants.* (Walls, 2005, p. 79)

Although Jeannette managed to escape thanks to her self-preservation instincts, this incident constituted a serious violation of her safety. Her trauma was exacerbated by a harsh social environment and her young age, which, according to [Valik \(2023\)](#), can lead to unspoken or unmanaged suffering if supportive adults do not intervene.

The breakdown of the protective family structure becomes even more evident during her encounter with her paternal uncle, Stanley:

*I felt Stanley’s hand creeping onto my thigh...A few minutes later, the hand came creeping back. I looked down and saw that Uncle Stanley’s pants were unzipped and he was playing with himself.* (Walls, 2005, p. 170)

This incident was particularly damaging because the perpetrator was a family member. In Werner's theory, the family should be the primary source of protection; here, the family became a source of threat. Jeannette's feelings of betrayal and confusion highlight the absence of external regulation; she had no adults she could rely on for protection or emotional validation. As a result, these experiences added to her ‘cumulative risk’, forcing her to rely entirely on her internal resources to survive in a hostile and exploitative environment.

### Protective Factors

Although the narrative highlights severe childhood difficulties, it simultaneously rejects deterministic portrayals of trauma. The protagonist's ability to survive and adapt demonstrates the existence of supportive mechanisms that can reduce the damaging impact of ongoing risk. This dynamic reflects Emmy Werner's concept of protective factors, which serve to shield against psychological damage and facilitate resilience even in highly disadvantageous environments.

### Sibling Bond

Within Werner’s resilience framework, close and supportive relationships function as key protective factors that buffer the negative impact of adversity and promote positive adaptation. Supportive sibling relationships, in particular, provide a sense of cohesion that fosters emotional security, empathy, and cooperative problem-solving, thereby reducing vulnerability to psychological distress ([D’Silva, 2023](#)).

Despite the numerous hardships they faced, the relationship between Jeannette and her siblings remained strong, positive, and supportive. On one occasion, when Jeannette was bullied, her brother Brian stepped in to defend her, demonstrating the emotional solidarity and protective bond that existed between them, as illustrated in the following narrative:

*The next day when I got to the alley, the Mexican girls were waiting for me. Before they could attack, Brian jumped out from behind a clump of sagebrush, waving a yuca branch.*

*Brian did fairly well fending them off until the yucca branch broke. (Walls, 2005, p. 41)*

Beyond receiving protection, Jeannette also actively contributed to her siblings' well-being, reflecting reciprocal support within the sibling unit. Her concern for her sister Lori's future illustrates how sibling bonds extended beyond emotional comfort to strategic planning and mutual responsibility:

*I thought Lori was amazing, and I had no doubt she would become a successful artist, but only she could get to New York. I decided to go there, too, and that winter we came up with a plan.*

*We'd take care on extra work after school and put everything we earned into the piggy bank. Lori could take it to New York and use it to get established, so that by the time I arrived, everything would be set. (Walls, 2005, p. 208)*

Within Werner's resilience framework, such enduring sibling support constitutes a significant protective factor, as it provides emotional stability, shared meaning, and practical assistance that help mitigate the effects of chronic adversity.

### Presence of a Supportive Adult Outside the Family

In addition to familial support, Werner's resilience framework highlights the importance of supportive relationships outside the immediate family, including teachers, mentors, and community members, in fostering positive developmental outcomes among high-risk children.

In *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette receives crucial support from her teacher, Miss Bivens, who recognizes her intellectual potential and provides access to meaningful educational opportunities. Miss Bivens' encouragement enables Jeannette to participate in the school newspaper, offering both skill development and a sense of purpose, as shown in the following narrative:

*Miss Bivens told me that as far as she could remember, I was the only seventh-grader who'd ever worked for the Wave. I started out as a proofreader. On winter evenings, instead of huddling around the stove at 93 Little Hobart Street, I'd go down to the warm, dry offices of The Welch Daily News, where The Maroon Wave was typeset, laid out, and printed. I loved the newsroom's purposeful atmosphere. (Walls, 2005, p. 189)*

Mrs. Bivens' role went beyond academic teaching because she acted as a mentor who created a supportive environment in which Jeannette could imagine a future beyond her current circumstances. This kind of external support is consistent with Werner's emphasis on the role of non-family adults in expanding opportunities, strengthening self-confidence, and promoting resilience among children exposed to various risk factors.

### Intelligence and Problem-Solving Skills

Alongside relational support, individual attributes also play an important role in Werner's resilience framework. Cognitive abilities, curiosity, and problem-solving skills serve as internal protective factors that enable children to cope with difficulties more effectively.

From an early age, Jeannette demonstrates intellectual curiosity and academic engagement, as reflected in her eagerness to participate in class discussions:

*The other students didn't like me because I was so tall and pale and skinny and always raised my hand too fast and waved it frantically in the air whenever Miss Cook asked question. (Walls, 2005, p. 40)*

Jeannette demonstrates notable intellectual ability, which becomes one of her strengths in navigating adversity. Her intelligence eventually earns her an opportunity to work as a proofreader for the school newspaper, *The Maroon Wave*. Her exceptional skills earned her the position of editor-in-chief, even though such a role was usually designated for senior students.

*When I was a junior, Miss Bivens made me the editor in chief, though the job was supposed to go to a senior (Walls, 2005, p. 216).*

Within Werner's framework, such individual strengths enhance adaptive capacity by enabling children to access resources, build self-efficacy, and actively shape their developmental trajectories despite persistent adversity.

### Resilience of Jeannette Walls

The discussion of protective factors provides a foundation for understanding how resilience is ultimately formed in the protagonist's life. Rather than emerging suddenly, resilience in *The Glass Castle* develops through gradual psychological and emotional processes shaped by prolonged exposure to adversity. This section examines how Jeannette Walls' resilience unfolds over time, in accordance with Emmy Werner's conceptualization of resilience as a dynamic and developmental outcome.

Jeannette Walls' journey of resilience begins to take shape as she gradually realizes that her family is fundamentally dysfunctional. Her father's struggle with alcoholism and her mother's emotional detachment prevents them from fulfilling their roles as stable caregivers. According to Emmy Werner's framework, this recognition represents a vital cognitive shift where a child learns to differentiate themselves from a dysfunctional system rather than internalizing blame. Jeannette's growing awareness that her father's dream of the "Glass Castle" is merely an illusion reflects this process of psychological distancing and emerging independence.

This awareness becomes evident when Jeannette confronts her mother about the family's future, suggesting that separating from her father might be necessary to prevent further harm. As illustrated in the following narrative:

*I was Dad's last defender, she continued, the only one who pretended to believe all his excuses and tales, and to have faith in his plans for the future. "He loves you so much," Mom said, "How can you do this to him?"*

*"I don't blame Dad," I said. And I didn't. But Dad seemed hell-bent on destroying himself, and I was afraid he was going to pull us all down with him. "We've got to get away." (Walls, 2005, p. 175)*

Her mother's rejection of this suggestion highlights a total absence of parental support. Nevertheless, Jeannette's willingness to propose solutions demonstrates emotional maturity and agency. Within Werner's theory, such problem-solving orientation functions as an individual protective factor that enables children to cope adaptively with chronic adversity.

Driven by a determination to break free from poverty, Jeannette begins taking concrete steps toward self-reliance. Despite ongoing instability, she actively seeks part-time work such as babysitting and tutoring to gain financial autonomy. These efforts reflect what Werner describes as adaptive

functioning, where individuals utilize available resources to gain competence despite persistent risk exposure. Jeannette's intellectual abilities further enable her to access formal opportunities, particularly through her involvement with the school newspaper, *The Maroon Wave*. This development is illustrated when Jeannette reflects on her work as a proofreader:

*The years I'd spent helping Mom check spelling on her student's homework had given me a lot of practice for this line of work (Walls, 2005, p. 189).*

This episode shows that Jeannette's skills developed through gradual learning and active engagement, not just natural talent. In Werner's framework, mastering such skills supports resilience by strengthening self-confidence and reinforcing a sense of personal competence. Through her work at the newspaper, Jeannette developed a clear future orientation and recognized the power of journalism in shaping public understanding. She discovered her new ambition to become a reporter, as reflected in the narrative below:

*Whenever I was at the Daily News, I watched the editors and reporters at work in the newsroom... What the reporter wrote influenced what people thought about and talked about the next day; he knew what was really going on. I decided I want to be one of the people who knew what was really going on.*

*After working as a proofreader in the seventh grade, I'd started laying out pages in the eighth grade, and in the ninth grade I began reporting and writing with articles and taking photographs. (Walls, 2005, p. 216)*

Jeannette's journey from proofreading manuscripts in seventh grade to becoming a journalist and photographer in ninth grade reflects consistent growth in self-confidence. A crucial moment in this development was her interview with legendary pilot Chuck Yeager. Her ability to interact professionally with such a prominent figure, earning praise as an 'aviation expert,' served as strong validation of her abilities. This success provided a significant boost to her pride and self-confidence, acting as a crucial protective factor in her psychological development.

Driven by a persistent desire to escape her circumstances, Jeannette's resilience culminated in a concrete plan for self-liberation. She began to imagine a life outside Welch, specifically targeting New York City to pursue a career in journalism:

*Once I had graduated from high school, I'd move to New York, enroll at a city college, and then get a job with AP or UPI, the wire services whose stories unspooled from the Welch Daily News Teletypes machines, or with one of the famous New York papers. (Walls, 2005, p. 220)*

Despite experiencing inner turmoil about her decision to move to New York, Jeannette eventually decided to go there for a better future.

*I'd been speaking hypothetically about moving to New York a year early. But as I walked, I realized that if I wanted to, I could up and go. I could really do it. Maybe not right now, not this minute—it was the middle of the school year—but I could wait until I finished eleventh grade. (Walls, 2005, p. 221)*

Her decision to move to New York was certainly challenged by her father, but Jeannette remained firm in her stance and managed to move to New York to live a better life. However, the path toward establishing a stable life in New York is far more difficult than it appears and is marked by numerous

challenges. Jeannette found her youngest sister Maureen involved in drug use and decided to leave for California. Not only that, after Jeannette successfully graduated from college, she had to go through the devastating loss of her father who died of a heart attack.

Despite the adversity she faced from childhood into adulthood, Jeannette Walls was eventually able to attain stability by pursuing a successful career as a writer and journalist in New York. Moreover, her relationship with John Taylor, a supportive and caring partner, contributed significantly to her emotional well-being. Through her journey depicted in the memoir, it can be concluded that Jeannette Walls successfully demonstrated her resilience, supported by several protective factors as well as her own persistence. In light of Emmy Werner's theory of resilience, Jeannette can be seen as a child who despite growing up in an unfavorable environment, was able to develop into a responsible adult and actively pursue opportunities that lead to a better future.

Drawing on Emmy Werner's resilience theory, this study positions Jeannette Walls as a resilient individual who develops adaptive independence despite prolonged exposure to cumulative risk. While previous studies predominantly interpret *The Glass Castle* through trauma, family dysfunction, and social marginalization ([Umar & Hardiyanti, 2023](#)), as well as internal conflict and identity formation ([Guo & Ge, 2019](#)), this analysis shifts attention toward the interaction between environmental risk and protective resources. In particular, the narrative highlights sibling solidarity and teacher mentorship as relational buffers that support Werner's claim that resilience emerges not from the absence of adversity but through sustained social support ([Werner, 1995](#)). Although the risk factors depicted in Walls' childhood align with established research on developmental adversity, her narrative diverges from typical maladaptive trajectories. Viewed through life-writing perspectives, this finding highlights resilience as a developmental and meaning-making process, offering an alternative to trauma-centered readings by emphasizing agency, growth, and positive adaptation.

## Conclusion

An analysis of the novel *The Glass Castle* through Emmy Werner's resilience theory shows that Jeannette Walls' life was shaped not only by hardship, but also by the ongoing interaction between cumulative risk factors and protective influences. Raised in a highly unstable family environment, Jeannette was exposed to constant vulnerability, including chronic poverty, parental neglect, and social isolation, all of which posed serious threats to her psychological and physical well-being.

However, this study shows that the presence of key protective factors, particularly sibling solidarity, academic competence, and support from non-family mentors, plays a crucial role in mitigating these risks and fostering resilience. By applying a psychological resilience framework to literary memoirs, this study demonstrates how a resilience-oriented approach deepens character analysis, moving beyond trauma-focused readings towards an understanding of adaptive growth and developmental change.

Ultimately, these findings emphasize that resilience in *The Glass Castle* should be understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed personal trait. Jeannette's journey is not simply a story of survival, but a complex illustration of how individual agency, combined with relational and institutional support, can balance severe environmental pressures. These findings suggest that literary memoirs such as *The Glass Castle* serve as valuable resources for examining human resilience, providing insights into how individuals adapt, recover, and achieve successful adult outcomes despite facing difficulties early in life.

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