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Expository Essay

### Mental Illness in *The Glass Castle*

Sometimes authors unknowingly develop characters with veiled mental illnesses. Therefore, many characters' actions depict psychotic tendencies. Within many books/novellas, writers create characters who are linked to being "madmen", but there is not enough evidence supporting the idea that a character *is*, in fact, a "madman". As mentioned in the article "Madness and Masquerade", taken from *The Georgia Review* by Michael DePorte; "whether someone is crazy as a loon is a profoundly unsettling question because it raises doubts about our ability to make the fundamental distinction between madness and sanity" (DePorte 636). It sparks questions about the unknown and makes readers wonder why others think and act the way they do. Is it insanity or is it just an unfamiliar difference that causes distress to others, because they cannot relate? In *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls, her father Rex Walls is the "madman". His personality is developed throughout the memoir in a way that makes him easily dislikeable to the audience. The narrator, being his daughter, mentions her families struggles as she was growing up. Rex would waste the small amount of money he made on alcohol rather than on his family's needs. This gives the audience an automatic pessimistic view of Rex because it is undeserving for kids to have to suffer from their parent's bad decisions. Rex is viewed as a "villain" throughout the memoir because of his attitude towards life. His attitude towards life is confusing because he wants to give his family everything, but his lack of motivation to do so makes the reader wonder whether he truly cares about his family. Based on Rex's mentality towards things

and his childhood traumas as portrayed in the memoir, the audience can conclude that Rex is mentally ill or a "madman", and evidence of similar examples found in "Madness and Masquerade" such as the study of the lunatic prisoner and the three men who thought that they were all Jesus can be used to support this claim.

Rex's intricate imagination is an encouraging aspect in proving his "madness". He has an idea of building a "glass castle" for his family. Everything would be glass— the stairs, the rooms, the ceiling. Rex tells his kids it would be perfect, and that is what the kids admire about their father. Jeanette writes about how convincingly he spoke of it, almost making it seem like their lack of money was the least of their problems. On the contrary, anyone from the outside hearing about this can tell that it is impossible. An idea from "Madness and Masquerade", highly qualifies the idea that Rex could easily just be a madman. "Suppose one prisoner becomes so bored with prison routine that he tries to escape, and he finds no way out... Suppose further that he tells mesmerizing stories of having learned in that world of light to see objects in the cave he could not see before and that none of the others can see now. Imagine that he goes on to describe them so vividly the prisoners begin to doubt their senses" (DePorte 646). The prisoner in this example finds no way out, and he knows it. He makes his own way out using his imagination. He reaches the point of genuinely believing something that's purely made up and actually "living" in this world. But a believable unknown is so mesmerizing to the other prisoners that they start to believe him. Rex is trapped in his life and the glass castle is his way out. It is purely how he wishes his life was instead, but it is so clear that that is impossible. It is a place where he would surpass all his problems because it is the opposite of what he has known all his life. In the memoir, Jeanette mentions that "When Dad wasn't telling us about all the amazing things he had already done, he was telling us about the wondrous things he was going to do. Like, build the Glass Castle" (Walls 25). Rex had built this "superhero" character of himself in front of his kids

with his stories, but actions speak louder than words. His episodes of constant drinking had brought his persona down so much that after years, his kids were starting to doubt him too.

A relation to Rex's past traumas also provides a concept to the audience that makes it believable that something is wrong with him. Jeanette brings the reader on a journey to dive into Rex's past to see what happened. As she discovers it, she is just as astonished, if not more, as the reader is. Jeanette points out that "as much as dad liked to tell stories about himself, it was almost impossible to get him to talk about his parents" (Walls 26), but nobody knew what he hated about them. At one point, Rex's family was devastated with no place to live. Their last resort was going to Rex's mother's house in Welch, West Virginia, but Rex was extremely resistant to the idea. Automatically at their arrival in Welch, Jeanette notices that Rex is acting weird. "He wasn't smiling, and he kept pulling at the skin of his neck as if he were itchy" (Walls 131), bringing a tense environment into the house. About a month into their stay, Rex and his wife, Rose, have to drive back to their old town of Phoenix, Arizona to finish some "unfinished business". The kids are left alone with grandma Erma (Walls 145). Jeanette details a moment in which she and her siblings are watching television. Then grandma Erma asks Brian, Jeanette's little brother, to come into her room so she could stitch up a hole in his pants. A couple of minutes later, Jeanette hears Brian protesting something, so she walks into the room to find grandma Erma groping Brian's crotch; Brian crying and trying to resist (Walls 146). A few weeks after this incident, Rex and Rose come back from Pheonix and the kids tell them all about what Erma had done to Brian. Rex does not even want to hear about it. Jeanette describes his response saying that "he was shaking his head, but wildly, almost as if he thought he could keep out the sound of my voice. He wouldn't even look at me" (Walls 148). The audience can easily suspect something about Erma's and Rex's past relationship: Did his mom molest him and is that what traumatized him? Rex's kids are found to be wondering the same things. As they are falling

asleep that night, they voice their concerns as to whether their father was molested. "Dad was really weird... Do you think she ever did something to dad like she did to Brian?" I asked." (Walls 148). Rex's newly discovered past plays a significant role in the development of his character. Without his devastating past, he would have been more attentive to his family and he would not try to run away from every problem that comes his way. By drinking, he finds an escape from his issues because that's how he is used to dealing with complications. His vision of the Glass Castle and creating this new version of life for himself is so believable, because this vision brings him peace. It gives him faith for a life that does not remind him of his traumatizing childhood.

A similar case is portrayed in a study in "Madness and Masquerade". "Mad" people are often compared to con artists in the ways that they create new identities for themselves. A state mental hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan had three patients, each claiming that they were Jesus. All three "Jesus Christs" were brought together, and each contradicted the other, "Each devised an explanation for the assertions of the other two: he was Jesus; they were phonies...These Christs had left ruined lives behind. Why should they want to return to their old selves?" (DePorte 643). A new identity served each of these patients as an escape from reality. They seek to gain a "greater control over the world around them than was possible as their former selves" (DePorte 643). Without these false identities, the patients felt hopeless and unable to control their lives. Fantasies turn into believable obsessions, taking over their minds. This relates directly to Rex, as he tries to escape what he had gone through and erase that part of his life. In Rex's case, the Glass Castle is his "Jesus". It is his new identity that's clearly unbelievable to many others but a reality in his mind, pushing his "former identity" away. That's why he doesn't want to mix his kids with his mom and his past. His addiction is rooted in past trauma. Consequently, the

experience described in Welch is a transforming point in the memoir, because it reveals so much about Rex's character, making it easier to label him as a “madman”.

Rex is a compelling character in *The Glass Castle*, just as the prisoners and three “Jesus’s” are in “Madness and Masquerade”. It is easy to see how Rex shapes his family and the ways they were brought up. His past determined not only his future, but also his family’s future. Initially, *he* influences his family. With his childlike belief of his Glass Castle, he gives his family an image of a future in their minds that they never receive. Even later, the recognition of his chilling past sways the mind of the audience to a darkness about him that was not yet expressed. The cases examined in “Madness and Masquerade” are good examples of patients with some signs of psychological malfunction, and they are also charismatic with Rex 's character. Often times, people feel the desire to escape reality, so they imagine themselves in a different scenario convincing themselves that they are truly a different person. They use their new identity to convince not only themselves, but others too, that they are a completely different person than the one originally presented. These actions are found in both the memoir and the essay making them easily responsive to each other. It is hard to distinguish various psychological disorders, so it is not possible to label Rex as anything other than a possible madman. Maybe he was not even a madman, perhaps he just had a vivid imagination influenced by his “demons”?

## Works Cited

DePorte, Michael. "Madness and Masquerade." *The Georgia Review*, 4th ed., vol. 44, Georgia Review, 1990, pp. 635–650.

Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: a Memoir*. Scribner, an Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2017.