

Social Exchange Theory in The Glass Castle

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Introduction

Social exchange theory provides a useful way to examine relationships in Jeannette Walls's memoir *The Glass Castle* because the Walls family is held together by exchanges of care, loyalty, labor, hope, and emotional obligation that are rarely equal. The theory does not suggest that people calculate every relationship in a cold or financial manner. Rather, it asks how rewards, costs, dependence, alternatives, and expectations shape continuing interaction. In the memoir, Jeannette and her siblings receive imagination, adventure, and occasional affection from their parents, but they also bear hunger, instability, neglect, and fear. Their decisions to remain loyal, resist, leave, and later reinterpret the family can be understood through changing assessments of what the relationships provide and what they demand. Symbolic interactionism adds another dimension by showing how the family's identities are created through repeated stories and labels. Together, the two perspectives explain why the Walls children remain emotionally connected to their parents even as they work to escape the conditions their parents created. (Walls, 2005)

Social Exchange Theory and Family Relationships

Social exchange theory begins from the idea that relationships develop through interdependence. People provide material resources, affection, approval, protection, information, or status, and they also experience burdens such as conflict, effort, uncertainty, or loss. George Homans emphasized rewards and costs in social behavior, while later theorists examined comparison levels, alternatives, power, and reciprocity. A relationship may continue even when its costs are high if the person expects improvement, values nonmaterial rewards, sees no realistic alternative, or has become dependent on the other party. Family relationships are especially complicated because they involve moral expectations and long histories that cannot be reduced to immediate gain.

In *The Glass Castle*, exchange is unequal from the beginning. Children ordinarily depend on parents for food, shelter, safety, medical care, and guidance. Rex and Rose Mary Walls sometimes offer affection, stories, intellectual stimulation, and the promise of an unconventional life, but they often fail to provide dependable material care. Jeannette and her siblings increasingly perform responsibilities that should belong to adults: finding food, managing money, protecting one another, and planning for the future. The family remains emotionally connected because the parents' rewards are meaningful, yet those rewards do not cancel the serious costs of neglect.

The Glass Castle as a Promised Reward

Rex's proposed "Glass Castle" is the memoir's most powerful symbol of deferred reward. He describes an extraordinary solar-powered home that he will build once the family finds stability. To young Jeannette, the plan represents safety, creativity, and proof that her father's intelligence will eventually transform their circumstances. The dream therefore functions as a psychological reward in the exchange relationship. Rex receives admiration and loyalty, while the children receive hope. Because the reward is always located in the future, its failure can be explained away by the next move, lost job, conflict, or financial crisis.

The promise also reveals how expectations influence exchange. Jeannette does not evaluate her father only by present behavior; she compares the present with the imagined future he has taught her to expect. As she matures, the comparison changes. The foundation pit beside the Welch house, filled with garbage rather than becoming the base of a home, turns the dream into evidence of failure. What once sustained loyalty begins to expose the gap between words and action. Social exchange theory helps explain this change without suggesting that Jeannette stops loving Rex. She changes the weight assigned to his promises because experience has reduced their credibility.

Dependence, Power, and Unequal Costs

Dependence produces power within an exchange relationship. The party with better alternatives or greater control over valued resources can influence the more dependent party. During childhood, the Walls children have limited legal, financial, and social alternatives. Their parents decide where the family lives, whether money is spent on food, and whether the children receive care. Rex's charisma and Rose Mary's insistence on personal freedom also define what counts as normal. The children cannot simply choose another household, so they adapt to conditions they would later recognize as unacceptable.

Rex's alcohol use intensifies this imbalance. He may be affectionate and intellectually engaging when sober, but drinking redirects family resources and makes his behavior unpredictable. Jeannette repeatedly gives him trust, money, or emotional protection, hoping for the return of the father she admires. The exchange is unstable because the reward is intermittent. Occasional moments of warmth can become disproportionately powerful when they occur amid neglect. This pattern helps explain why harmful relationships may persist: unpredictable rewards can preserve hope even when the average cost is high.

Rose Mary creates a different imbalance. She values artistic independence and resists conventional domestic responsibility, even when her children need food and protection. Her philosophy teaches self-reliance, which can be interpreted as a reward because the children become resourceful. Yet self-reliance imposed on children is not equivalent to age-appropriate independence. The children pay for the mother's freedom by assuming adult burdens. A social exchange analysis therefore distinguishes

between the skills they gain and the neglect through which those skills were forced upon them.

Sibling Reciprocity as an Alternative Exchange System

The relationships among Jeannette, Lori, Brian, and Maureen create a more reciprocal system within the family. The siblings share food, information, protection, and plans. Their exchanges are not perfectly equal at every moment, but they are organized around mutual survival rather than parental authority. Lori's ambition, Brian's practical support, and Jeannette's determination become resources that the children combine. The plan to move to New York succeeds because they save money and reinforce one another's belief that an alternative life is possible.

This sibling network changes the balance of power. Social exchange theory predicts that dependence decreases when alternatives improve. As the older children gain employment, savings, education, and contacts outside the household, the parents' control becomes weaker. New York is not merely a location; it is an alternative relationship environment where the siblings can exchange work for wages, effort for opportunity, and mutual support for stability. Once this alternative becomes credible, remaining in Welch carries a higher opportunity cost. (Blau, 1964)

The siblings' cooperation also demonstrates that exchange theory should not be confused with selfishness. Reciprocity can express love and solidarity. Jeannette does not help Lori only because she expects a precisely equal return. Their shared history creates trust, and each contribution strengthens the possibility that all of them can escape. The relationship has both instrumental and emotional rewards. It shows that exchanges are embedded in moral commitments and identities.

Symbolic Interactionism and the Meaning of Poverty

Symbolic interactionism focuses on meanings created through interaction. People respond not only to objective conditions but also to the meanings they assign to those conditions. Rex and Rose Mary construct the family's poverty as adventure, independence, or resistance to conventional society. The phrase "doing the skedaddle," for example, turns sudden flight from unpaid bills or conflict into a family ritual. Such language protects the parents' self-image and teaches the children to interpret instability as excitement.

These meanings are not fixed. As Jeannette enters school and interacts with other families, teachers, employers, and friends, she encounters alternative definitions of home, hygiene, work, and parental care. The same conditions that once seemed adventurous become embarrassing or dangerous when viewed through new social comparisons. Symbolic interactionism explains why social acceptance

matters to her without reducing her development to a desire for status. She is learning that the meanings established inside her family are not the only possible meanings.

Labels imposed by outsiders also shape identity. Poverty can lead neighbors and classmates to interpret a family as irresponsible, inferior, or unworthy of friendship. These judgments can produce shame and isolation, even when the children did not create the conditions being judged. Jeannette's later reluctance to reveal her past reflects awareness that other people may use it to redefine her present identity. Her memoir ultimately resists that process by giving her control over the story.

Stigma, Secrecy, and Social Acceptance

The original essay associates Jeannette's move to New York with a search for social acceptance. That interpretation is partly correct but requires nuance. She wants safety, education, meaningful work, and control over her life, not merely approval from wealthier people. Still, stigma influences her choices. As a successful adult, she fears that her parents' homelessness will expose the past she has separated from her professional identity. The cost of disclosure appears to include judgment, pity, and loss of status.

Her mother's request that she tell the truth challenges this secrecy. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, truth-telling allows Jeannette to renegotiate the meaning of her childhood. If she hides it, outsiders retain the power to define poverty as shameful, while she remains divided between public and private identities. Writing the memoir turns a stigmatized history into a source of authorship and insight. The past no longer functions only as a social cost; it becomes material through which she understands resilience, affection, betrayal, and responsibility.

Leaving as a Change in the Exchange Balance

Jeannette's departure does not occur because one event suddenly makes the family relationship worthless. It results from accumulating evidence that the costs are unlikely to decline and that realistic alternatives now exist. Employment gives her money, school gives her skills, and her siblings provide a support network. Rex's theft of the children's savings makes the imbalance especially clear: the parents are not only failing to supply resources but also consuming resources the children created for escape. The comparison between staying and leaving therefore changes decisively.

Leaving also establishes boundaries rather than ending all attachment. Jeannette continues to love and interact with her parents. Social exchange theory can accommodate this ambivalence because relationships contain multiple rewards and costs at the same time. Rex may be neglectful and destructive, yet he also encourages Jeannette's curiosity and gives her moments of genuine connection. Rose Mary may fail in parental duties, yet she contributes creativity and a fierce belief in individuality. Adulthood allows Jeannette to accept some forms of connection while refusing the dependence that once made her vulnerable.

Limits of Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory illuminates dependence and reciprocity, but it cannot fully explain the memoir by itself. Family love is not a market transaction, and children do not freely negotiate the conditions into which they are born. Trauma, developmental needs, legal obligations, culture, and moral responsibility matter. Describing neglect only as a “cost” may understate its seriousness. The theory is most useful when it identifies patterns of power and alternatives, not when it implies that adequate affection can compensate for abuse or deprivation. (Cropanzano et al., 2017)

Symbolic interactionism also has limits. It explains how the family interprets poverty, but material hunger, unsafe housing, and lack of medical care remain real regardless of interpretation. Calling instability an adventure may change its emotional meaning, but it does not provide food. A complete analysis must therefore connect subjective meaning with structural and material conditions.

Conclusion

The Glass Castle portrays a family sustained by love, imagination, obligation, and unequal exchange. Rex and Rose Mary provide experiences that shape their children’s intelligence and independence, but they also transfer adult costs to children who have little power or choice. The promise of the Glass Castle preserves hope until repeated failure changes Jeannette’s expectations. Sibling reciprocity creates an alternative source of support, while education and employment reduce dependence on the parents. Symbolic interactionism explains how the family turns poverty into adventure, how outside labels produce stigma, and how Jeannette ultimately redefines her past through authorship. These theories do not excuse neglect, but they clarify why leaving is emotionally complex and why connection can survive after dependence ends.

References

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