

A Lacanian Psychoanalysis Interpretation of Jeannette Walls in *The Glass Castle*

Lei Guo¹, Zhen Ge^{2*}

¹The Associate Professor of North China Electric Power University in China, No. 689, Huadian Road, Lianchi District, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China

²The Post-Graduate Student Majoring in English Language And Literature of North China Electric Power University in China, No. 689, Huadian Road, Lianchi District, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China

*Corresponding author: Zhen Ge

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Abstract

Psychoanalytic concepts have become an indispensable part of people's daily life, which not only can help them better understand human behaviors and thoughts but also enable them to understand literary texts more accurately and clearly. Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Mirror Stage, gives a new perspective for texts. This paper will illustrate the detailed experiences about Jeannette Walls in *The Glass Castle* by three Orders of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which can give enlightenment to the perplexed young people in the modern world.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic concepts, Jacques Lacan, Walls, *The Glass Castle*, three Orders.

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INTRODUCTION

The Glass Castle is written by Jeannette Walls [1], which narrates the adventurous experiences of her family. The novel consists of five parts. Each part of the novel describes the different stages of the family. It was a strange and lovely family because of their adventurous spirit and luxuriant imagination.

Walls' family had six members that a couple and four children. This parent was not like a common person with a fixed job and solid wage. They didn't even have economic income. Rex, Walls' father, was an alcoholic person but loved science and math books, biographies and history and always made empty promises. This couple had a land worth a million dollars but they gave up it instead of moving around the countries. They chose a wandering life. Meanwhile, their children must follow them because they didn't get a clear and complete cognition of themselves. In the journey, their children suffered from hunger, field survival and finally decided to escape away from this home because they wanted to get others cognition and find their true position. In other words, they began to form their subjectivity. However, when they achieved their dream, they find the true meaning of life is following your heart.

Walls is the author of this novel, following her growth line, we can discover that how Walls realizes her personal subjectivity and becomes an independent

woman without her parents' interruption, and how forms a complete thought and a unique judgment. By mean of Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, we will have a whole understanding of Walls. It also shows that Walls' growth line is referred to as three orders of Lacan. The significance of this paper is that gives enlightenment to people and inspires people to know themselves more clear and complete.

Definition of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

M. H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham [2] states that Jacques Lacan, "the French Freud," developed a semiotic version of Freud and he was a French psychoanalyst after World War II who has many famous psychoanalytic theories. The famous theory, Mirror Stage, means that babies from 6-8 months can recognize themselves by the mirror. However, they can't recognize clearly the images of the mirror. Then they know the images and understand there are different from others. There have some keywords of Lacan that include subjectivity, Other and other. Subject activity is a keyword for his theory, which is not a common word. If you want to understand Lacan's theory clearly, you must make full sense of this word because it has important meaning. Moreover, Lacan raises up three orders that the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order and the Real. And in *The Glass Castle*, Walls's growth line makes a complete illustration of the three orders. Through the three orders, Walls forms her subjectivity and becomes a complete person. Other and other are

other important words, which mean different canons of yourself. Next, I will use a capital O instead of Other and a small o instead of other.

Mirror Stage

As Lois Tyson [3] said, Mirror Stage was an important psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, which Lacan describes as “formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience.” The infant’s activities in Mirror Stage have an identifiable function that infant’s cognition is a distortion of the object. It is a psychological development of the infant between six and eight months, what Lacan calls the Mirror Stage occurs. Besides, the infant’s consciousness is innocent as well as he or she can’t judge what is real and illusion. In fact, in the Mirror Stage, all he or she experiences are illusions because he can’t recognize him completely and explicitly. He only can see the image from the mirror, but he can’t regard the image as himself. He knows an image is an object but he doesn’t think that he is a man and the image is made by him. His cognition is not complete. M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham [2] pointed out that Lacan thinks the infant learns to identify with his or her image in a mirror, and so begins to develop a sense of a separate self, and an (illusory) understanding of oneself as an autonomous subject. It is fragmented. In his mind, mother and he must need each other and he regards mother only belongs to him.

In short, the infant is an illusion and fragmented but he develops a sense of himself if he had identified with the whole image of him that can be reflected in the mirror. In this stage, the infant’s cognitions obey the pleasure principle and he thinks that he can get anything that he wants. The illusion of this stage is fulfillment and control.

Three Orders

The Imaginary Order

From Lacan’s perspective, Mirror Stage initiates the Imaginary Order that represents the world of images. Besides, he puts forward the Symbolic Order and the Real. In the Imaginary Order, the child experiences the images by means of the image and not language. The child notes the unconscious, conscious, and imagines things like images in the Mirror Stage. And these images are illusory and unreal. The source of the Imaginary Order is the infant’s relationship with his or her body. Lacan thinks that the relationship between the Ego and the reflected image in the Mirror Stage means alienation of the infant. It is deceitful. Besides, the representation of this stage is that the relationship between mother and infant is undivided as well as they both have satisfaction. In this world, children’s cognition is illusion because he thinks that he can control everything in the world and he thinks his mother belongs himself.

In the Imaginary Order, the child is not explicit and clear due to he is puzzled by the representation,

deception, and imagination. He thinks his world is perfect without any destroyer and he and his mother is an organic one that cannot be divided. The child develops his cognition for himself and he knows that he is a whole part but his cognition for this world is illusory.

All in all, the Imaginary Order means a perfect and metalanguage world of the child. The main difference between the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order is whether language is involved here.

The Symbolic Order

The second is the Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order domains the human culture and social order because the infant can classify the misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and errors of perception by means of experiences. In Imaginary Order, the child regards his world with a perfect and delight but with the powerful interruption language, he recognizes the mother is not only belong to him. He knows the father’s existence and considers the father as the enemy. Because of this conflicted relationship, the infant produces desire that obtaining the mother’s attention. The child forms a clear cognition of his environment and world, and he begins to find others’ cognition. It shows that this separation relationship is his experience of loss. And he will seek substitutes great and small for that lost union with his mother.

Above all, the Symbolic Order changes his mother into another in his preverbal world and things separate from his mother and himself. He wants to obtain his mother’s attention. The small a (autre: other) and the capitalized Other appear and have a different meaning. A small means an idealized union with his mother, and it can be defined as the mother’s influence on baby. On the contrary, Other with a capital O influences everyone.

The Real

The Real is the third moment of the realm of infant’s cognition. It is not synonymous with reality and not objective. The meaning of the Real Order is difficult to understand because it is outside language and uninterpreted. If choosing a word to describe the Real, it must be intelligent and difficult to comprehend. The Real is something we can’t know. The trauma of the Real is created by creations of society, but it gives the infant, nothing except those meanings. It gives some realization but the true reality that the ideologies society is beyond our capacity to explain and control.

In short, the Real is an ideal world and people will get a new insight into life. In the following sections, it will give a comprehensive interpretation as an example of Walls in *The Glass Castle*.

Three Orders of Walls in *the Glass Castle* The Imaginary Order

The infant is in the Imaginary Order from birth to six months. In this stage, the infant's development of cognition obeys the pleasure principle, which means he observes and interprets the world only by his image. This stage has no language's interruption. An infant doesn't have a clear cognition for himself. Jaques Lacan [4] summarized that the subject has to place himself in adequation with the thing, in a relation of being to being—the relation of a subjective being, but one that is truly real, of a being aware of being, to a being one knows to be.

In *The Glass Castle*, Walls, the second daughter of the Wall's family, was described as an innocent girl without correct cognition. Because of her special parents, her life was full of amazement. So, she was always depending on her parents and believed them. She didn't know what is the difference between her family and the common family. She had great expectation on her parents and depend on them in her mind even they ask she do some homework when she was three old years. Because her father had not a steady job and her mother always concentrated on her painting career, their children must master the capacity for survival early. In Imaginary Order, Walls was illusory and contented with the existing condition, which also means that she does not an idea to blame her parents' irresponsibility.

When she was three years old, they were living in a trailer park in a southern Arizona town. Maybe you can't imagine a three years old girl can cook hot dogs standing on a chair in front of the stove. But it was true and happened in this novel. Her mother did not like cooking much in that she said that "When in the same amount of time, I can do a painting that will last forever?" While Walls was hurt by fire, her mother was painting in the next room. The painting is about her mother's life. When they went to the hospital, the nurses and doctors kept asking her questions: How did you get burned? Have your parents ever hurt you? Why do you have all these bruises and cuts? Walls answered them that her parents never hurt her, and she got cuts and bruises playing outside and the burns from cooking a hot dog. In Walls' mind cooking the dog was easy and she explained the details of cooking dog. Doctors said she was lucky to be alive. And this time, nurses were surprised and want to protect this girl from this lifestyle. It shows that Walls has some illusions for herself and she doesn't know what is the common family life and she is only following her parents' steps.

Besides, Rex said Walls' burn need to breathe and clashed with the doctor, and they had to leave this place. Walls was unconscious for her body and she thinks that her mother belongs to her. From the above mentioned, Walls always pays attention to the world by close observation with the spirit of inquiry. This is the psychological character of a newborn. Walls' images of the world are described as discontinuous. In other

words, these images and observations occur usually at the same time or not. Because Walls was destroyed by fire, she was puzzled about this matter and asked her father some questions for defining her subjectivity. Her father said it represented her adventurous spirit. She was satisfied with this condition because her cognition was not completely.

In other words, Walls' cognition was limited, which means she cannot judge what is a real image or not. The second example is about Walls' Christmas gift. Most children will get an expensive gift except the Wall's children. As we all know that Walls' parents had not a job and economic income. Rex loved to talk about the stars with children and taught them to identify the constellations and how to navigate by the north star. It was new for children. Rex sent a star to Walls as a Christmas gift and named her favorite star as Venus. He explained that "Years from now when all the junk they got broken and long forgotten, you'll still have your stars." What an amazing gift! What a unique education way! Although Walls' parents were poor and could not afford expensive presents, they still sent gifts to their children. Their gifts were unique and eternal. They sent stars as gifts to their children instead of fancy toys and expensive gifts. Walls did not feel sad because her cognition was illusory and incomplete. This plot shows Walls' satisfaction in the Imaginary Stage and she didn't think her future and dream.

Because their life was wandering, they had many adventurous experiences. Walls thought it was common like many other families, and her parents always were right. In that time, she still had some illusions about the relationship between her parents and her and she had a desire for her parents. She was eager for her parents' attention. Her whole mind is about her parents. In Imaginary Order, she thought that her parents loved her because they knew her thought and gave her a star as a Christmas gift. It likes the infant's Mirror Stage. Because Walls was young, she did not have full cognitive ability. She did not know everyone is an independent and complete man. But it was changed by a great quarrel between her father and her mother. The reason for the quarrel is money, or more accurately, and they have no sense of responsibility for the home and their children. However, Walls still believed them. Walls' cognition was given by her parents' experience. She was passively receiving the cognition of the world and didn't ponder her subjectivity and her interest. In the novel, Walls had a lot of experience with her family and she regarded her life was perfect. She was content with so clever parents and enjoying the wandering life.

From the above, Walls always lived an illusory world and her cognition was not completely and clearly. She had independent power but could not judge the distinction of the relationship between the world and her. She thought that her parents belonged to her and

she could get anything that she wants. But it was wrong cognition and she needed to correct it in the Symbolic Order.

The Symbolic Order

The Symbolic Order is the second stage in the Mirror Stage. In this stage, it produces Oedipus complex and the Law and the infant wants to get his mother's attention. Although in Imaginary Order, Walls' cognition of the world is illusory and limited, now in Symbolic Order she develops her cognition and tries to find her personal subjectivity.

Walls' cognition improved, she produces this loss of desire, which personal, individual and private. The reason for this desire resulted from a quarrel. In Imaginary Order, Walls always thought her parents loved her even they had no job and indifferent her sometimes. But it had really changed by a great quarrel between her father and her mother. The reason for the quarrel was money and interest, or more accurately, and they had no sense of responsibility for the home and their children. They blamed each other and began the fight. Walls realized that her family was not comfortable and sweet. In short, it was a family full of conflicts and unstable factors. After the quarrel, Walls wanted to comfort and care for her mother, but her mother was not sad and talked good words about her father. At that time, Walls got a new cognition for the relationship between her parents and her.

Her parents were indifferent and unsuccessful as a couple of parents. In their mind had no place for their children and all were their private things. Other appeared in this stage. Small a means an idealized union with her parents and it can be defined as the mother's influence on babies. But Jeanette lost this union because of her parents' irresponsible actions. On the contrary, Other with a capital O appears and it influences everyone. In the Symbolic Order, Walls could control herself and had the right judgment for the world and herself. She broke the mirror images and illusions. When she failed to obtain her parents' attention, she began to find a capital O of social cognition.

And another example was that her father's action destroyed her thought and expectation. Because her brother all knew how to swim, only she had never learned. She was afraid of drowning and describes the scene that "I worked up enough nerve to make my way around the entire length of the pool, clinging to the side." Her father Rex helped her learn to swim together and encouraged her to be brave. He pushed her into the shallow to have her learn how to swim. He did it again and again so that finally she did it. Rex said to her that he loved her and never would have let her drown. But Rex told Walls that "If you don't want to sink, you better figure out how to swim." Nevertheless, it is the right educational way, which will increase her potentialities to swim to the greatest. From this plot of

her father, Walls knew she must be independent and found her true exist meaning. Her parents could not always with her and help her. Their educational ways were uncommon and she disagreed with it. Walls' psychology had changed in that time. It likes infants forms a right cognition for himself.

From the perspective of the novel, Walls' father always made empty promises for his children but in Imaginary Order, she believed him and tried her best to finish it because it also was her dream. Now in the Symbolic Order, Walls had a complete cognition for the relationship between her father and her, and she thought the promise will never fulfill. So, her psychology was changed by these things.

In the novel, Walls described her second husband John how to the thought of the scar. John thought the scar meant that she was stronger than whatever it was that had tried hurt to me. It is a brave spirit. He described it as "smooth" and "interesting". It shows a recognition of herself and represents the reflection of her subjectivity. Besides, her father gave a promise to Walls that builds a glass castle and always draw his design sketch, but he was still drunk beer. The glass castle was Walls' dream, but he did not think highly of this glass castle. Walls gave up him and the loss of desire changed too. She knew that thanks to her parents' unique education but she wanted to get social recognition. And the unique way was to escape away from this home.

All these changes are due to the interruption of "language", which is a tool for understanding who am I and what am I. Language means that Walls had the ability to recognize the world and she knew that she was a man. Then she decided to escape away from her home in New York City. New York is Other for Walls. In the novel the description of Walls' psychological activity that "I studied my face in the mirror and wondered what New Yorkers would think when they looked at me." Walls was not confident but she was eager for a new cognition. Symbolic Order psychological changed by the development of her cognition for herself. Her previous cognition was broke. In New York, she became different. She had a department and a beautiful room. "our department was bigger than the entire house on Little Hobart Street and way fancier. It had shiny oak parquet floors, a foyer with two.....My favorite room was the bathroom. It had a black-and-white tile floor, a toilet that flushed with a powerful whoosh....." Walls had a sweet life and she was happy. Later she had a good job and a boyfriend, Jim. Walls liked this life because it was different from an adventurous life. Her life was calm and predictable.

It was well known that in the Symbolic Order, the infant can control the world and obtain cognition from a capital Other. Meanwhile, Walls was able to

recognize her fault that the material life is not fit her. Then she resigned her magazine work and found the values between her husband and her were completely different. She became a writer and moved into a new apartment. Her career was a cognition for her and a milestone in her life. She has great expectation for her New York life. It represents our ability to establish ourselves in and contribute to the outside world: our social image and recognition.

The difference between the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic is whether the subjectivity has a whole cognition. From Walls' growth line, her psychological changes are so clear that to strengthen the understanding of the novel.

The Real

As we mentioned above, the Real is difficult to master and understand. It is something we can't know. We feel ideology but cannot feel the real thing behind the ideology. In short, the Real is an ideal world and people will get a new insight into life.

Walls experienced the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order by ideologies. As Lacan said in Zhang's [5] books: Just as what is rejected from the symbolic register reappears in the real, in the same way the hole in the real that results from loss, sets the signifier in motion. It seemed Walls got what she was eager for but she still was vacant. Andrea Irvin [6] states that Walls' father never builds the glass castle; however, with determination and perseverance, Walls' own dream becomes a reality. Walls had the right judgment for the world. When she achieved her dream and had a sweet life, but she did not know the understanding of the Real. The Real is both the Imaginary and the Symbolic to avoid and control. In other words, it is hard to define that we may never know whether it existing there.

Walls had been found her subjectivity and became an independent woman. Through her marriage with Jim, she really knew what Rex said was right but she still could not understand it. It is the inaccessible world. In the novel, Rex said that Walls was not fit for her editor job and she should be a great writer because that is her childhood dream, and her marriage was bad. Walls resigned her magazine a good job instead of becoming a writer to narrate her stories to the world. And she broke the marriage with Jim and knew John.

Every child had own life and was happy. Brian had become a decorated sergeant detective, Lori lived with their mother Mary, and Maureen was still living in California. Walls' cognition is that a childhood of fight and imagination is influential rather than giving them a rich and comfortable life. But in real life, it is hard to achieve it. The critical stage of the Real is an insight into things. In the novel, Walls' family got together on Thanksgiving Day and all the children thanked for Rex.

They experienced a wandering life once and learned how to survive and acquire knowledge, and now they gradually understand the significance of life and close to the Real. However tremendous difficult situations Walls is faced with, she will have a pure heart to overcome them and will be a true man. Maybe Walls had reached the Real and she gave up something she did not like. The Real barely exists in life except in the literary works.

CONCLUSION

Walls' psychological development was a long and complicated one, and finally, she identified her personal subjectivity. Lacan's theory includes three major orders that the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Only through these stages could Jeanette establish her subjectivity.

In *The Glass Castle*, Walls had a great spiritual power to deal with the difficult situations and it was a perfect interpretation of the Lacanian psychological theory. In the beginning, Walls was an innocent girl who totally depended on her parents and did anything her parents ask. Her activities were passive without her own thought. Then, she realized that her parents did not belong here and it was her imagination. It was illusory and incomplete. In addition, Walls knew the importance of her subjectivity and found true meaning for herself. The process of self-realization of Walls shows Lacan's theory. Walls finished her identification of subjectivity through the illusory Imaginary Order, the clear Symbolic Order and intelligent Real order. Finally, her sublimation of character is truly realized.

Many readers think the novel *The Glass Castle* only emphasizes the importance of family, but this paper reveals Walls' psychological changes and illustrates how it helps her become a true man. Moreover, it is of great significance to study the process of his growth line with the theory of Lacan. The acceleration of modern life and the pressure of work make people unable to seek the realization of subjectivity. The use of the media also makes people's subjectivity poorer, and the numbness of the soul makes them adapt to life without considering the realization of the subjectivity. So, studying the literary texts using Lacan psychological theory not only has literary significance but also has a profound social meaning. First, the process of self-realization cannot finish immediately, and it needs time. Second, the reflected image on the mirror is important because it is beneficial for people to recognize themselves and form their subjectivity. Third, social regulations are the standard and measure of the formation of a person's subjectivity. Only recognize it, identify with it, obey it, the subjectivity of human beings can be finally established and they become a complete person.

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