

The glass castle
symbol: fire



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ I wondered if the fire had been out to get me. I wondered if all fire was related... I didn't have the answers to those questions, but what I did know was that I lived in a world that at any moment could erupt into fire” (34).

Throughout the story, it is made more and more apparent that fire plays a persistent role in Jeannette's life. One of her most memorable incidents involving fire was at the very beginning of the book when she lit herself on fire at the young age of three. This resulted in severe third-degree burns, and consequently, Jeannette was admitted to the hospital. Ever since lighting herself on fire, Jeannette has had a certain fascination for this element. Just a few days after leaving the hospital, she related, “ Dad also thought I should face down my enemy, and he showed me how to pass my finger through a candle flame. I did it over and over...testing to see how much my finger could endure without actually getting burned” (Walls, 15). Opposed to living in fear of the source of her burns, Jeannette becomes obsessed with controlling the fire. She touches it with the knowledge that she can pull away at any point because she has power over the situation. By being able to maintain control, Jeannette loses her fear of fire and is rather enthralled by the flames. However, Jeannette's enthusiasm for the fire wanes due to an even more dangerous encounter with it. Due to her love of fire, she attempts to burn toilet paper and flushes it down the toilet for fun, but she accidentally sets her motel building on fire, endangering herself and her siblings. After escaping the building, Jeannette observes, “ I wonder[ed] if the fire has been out to get me...I lived in a world that at any moment could erupt into fire” (Walls, 34). At first Jeannette's interest in fire is innocent, but the night in her motel room Jeannette gets much closer to the flames than

she ever intends. Earlier in the story, when her father shows her how to put her finger through the flames, he is encouraging this kind of behavior, and the result is Jeannette is almost burned to death. At this point, Jeannette realizes that unpredictability may be alluring, but it also has the very likely potential to damage her.

Jeannette's relationship with fire metaphorically represents her complicated relationship with her father. She once loved her father for being erratic and different, but she comes to realize that she needs stability to live a safe life. She spends her early childhood believing in her father, and in the end, she is the one that gets burned by his actions. Earlier in the text, Lori asks Jeannette, " Do you like always moving around?" Jeannette's response is simply, " Of course I do!" (Walls, 29). Because Jeannette is only four years old at the time, she is very easily influenced by her peculiar surroundings. Consequently, she worships her father's strange antics, including their nomadic lifestyle. At first her father's unpredictability is exciting to Jeannette, but only because she experiences the disorienting events in small doses, such as allowing her to drown multiple times as a tactic to teach her how to swim for the first time. Though this event may seem drastic, it is minor in comparison to some of his actions later on in Jeannette's life, especially when they hit rock bottom and were forced to move to West Virginia. Eventually, her father breaks her trust and destroys her life through his alcoholism and selfishness. Her life erupts into flames and Jeannette is traumatized by her experiences with her father, just like she is traumatized by the fire in her motel room. The impact that Jeannette's father has on her is made apparent when she starts a life that is no longer dependent on her

father. When Jeannette meets the man she eventually marries, she thinks, "...I'd always been terrified I'd fall for a hard-drinking, hell-raising charismatic scoundrel like you, Dad, but I wound up with a man who was exactly the opposite" (Walls, 268). After experiencing what it is like to spend life with somebody as erratic as her father, Jeannette ends up desperate for stability. Fire symbolizes unpredictability and when Jeannette moves on from obsessing over fire, she is no longer putting herself in a dangerous situation. Likewise, when Jeannette moves on from trusting her father, she is no longer subjecting herself to constant abuse.