

The Intersection of Class and Gender: A Study of Sallie Kincaid's Journey in *Hang the Moon*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interplay of class and gender in Hang the Moon, focusing on Sallie Kincaid's journey within the rigid social hierarchy of the American South during Prohibition. It argues that Sallie's experiences are shaped by the simultaneous advantages of class privilege and the limitations imposed by patriarchal norms. Although born into the influential Kincaid family, Sallie's authority is consistently undermined because she is a woman, placing her in a complex position where privilege and marginalization coexist. The paper highlights how power in Claiborne County is structured through wealth, reputation, and male dominance, with women largely excluded from leadership roles. Sallie's early life reflects this inequality, as her brothers are prepared for positions of authority while she is expected to remain obedient. However, her entry into the bootlegging business marks a turning point, enabling her to challenge traditional gender roles and assert her independence. Through resilience, negotiation, and emotional intelligence, Sallie redefines leadership by prioritizing loyalty and cooperation over fear and control. Furthermore, the paper explores the distinction between wealth and power, emphasizing that material privilege alone does not guarantee influence or respect. Sallie's transformation demonstrates that true authority is earned through competence, meaningful relationships, and moral legitimacy. Ultimately, her journey represents both personal growth and social resistance, illustrating how entrenched systems of class and gender can be challenged and reshaped through determination and agency.

Keywords: Privilege, Patriarchy, Hierarchy, Empowerment, Resilience.

In *Hang the Moon*, Jeannette Walls presents the American South as a society shaped not only by Prohibition-era violence and bootlegging but also by rigid structures of class and gender. Set during the Prohibition era (1920–1933), *Hang the Moon* reflects a period when the illegal liquor trade reshaped the economic and social landscape of the American South. The decline of lawful businesses and the rise of bootlegging created new opportunities for wealth and influence, yet these opportunities remained overwhelmingly controlled by men. Women were expected to uphold domestic responsibilities despite their increasing participation in public life. By situating Sallie's story within this historical context, Walls demonstrates how the social realities of Prohibition intensified existing inequalities of class and gender, making Sallie's pursuit of authority both socially unconventional and politically

significant. At the center of this world stands Sallie Kincaid, whose journey is not merely about inheritance or survival but about negotiating her identity within a system designed to confine her. Her life becomes a continuous struggle between what she has been given and what she is permitted to become. The forces of class and gender do not simply exist around her; they define her opportunities, restrict her voice, and shape the way others perceive her.

Sallie is born into privilege as the daughter of Duke Kincaid, from the opening chapters, Walls establishes Sallie's ambiguous position within the Kincaid family. Although she enjoys the privileges associated with the Kincaid name, she is rarely treated as an equal to her brothers. Duke Kincaid's decisions consistently reinforce the belief that leadership belongs to men, while Sallie's opinions are often dismissed despite her intelligence and courage. Through these domestic interactions, Walls reveals that patriarchal authority operates not only in public life but also within the family itself, making Sallie's struggle deeply personal as well as social. one of the most powerful men in Claiborne County. Her family name carries considerable influence, granting her access to resources, protection, and social status. Yet, this privilege remains incomplete. Her position is constantly undermined by her gender, as the society in which she lives assumes that leadership and authority belong exclusively to men. Contemporary feminist theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is not an innate quality but a social construct repeatedly reinforced through cultural expectations (*Gender Trouble*).

Sallie's experiences illustrate this idea, as she is judged not by her abilities but by the gendered roles assigned to her. Her gradual rejection of these expectations demonstrates how gender identities can be challenged and redefined through individual action (Butler). Sallie occupies a paradoxical position: she is both privileged and marginalized simultaneously. This contradiction shapes her inner world, creating a tension between her authentic sense of self and the identity imposed upon her. As Sigmund Freud suggests, "the ego is not master in its own house" (Freud 143), and Sallie's early life reflects precisely this condition. Her desires, ambitions, and abilities are overshadowed by forces beyond her control, particularly the expectations imposed by her father and by society. Within the Kincaid household, patriarchal authority operates as an unquestioned norm. Duke Kincaid rules with a combination of fear, charisma, and control, shaping not only the county but also the lives of his children.

Sallie's brothers are prepared for positions of leadership, encouraged to step into positions of authority, while Sallie herself is expected to remain obedient and silent. Her intelligence and resilience are acknowledged but not valued in the same way. This imbalance is not accidental; it is part of a larger system that defines women as secondary. Sallie

internalizes these expectations, but she also resists them, even if that resistance is initially unspoken. Her exile from the family marks a turning point in her life. Stripped of her place within the Kincaid household, she experiences both personal loss and social displacement. At the same time, Sallie's experience reflects a deeper psychological struggle related to identity formation. As Cathy Caruth explains, Walls portrays Sallie's exile as more than physical separation. Removed from the Kincaid household, she loses not only her home but also the social identity attached to her family name. Her isolation forces her to survive independently, exposing her to hardship and allowing her to develop resilience. Rather than returning as the sheltered daughter of Duke Kincaid, she gradually becomes a woman capable of making difficult decisions on her own. The exile therefore functions as the narrative foundation for her later transformation into a leader. Sallie's exile lingers within her, influencing her choices, her fears, and her determination to reclaim her place. In many ways, she becomes what Caruth describes as someone "possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 5), unable to fully separate herself from the memory of rejection and loss. At the same time, Sallie's experience reflects a deeper psychological struggle related to identity formation. According to Erik Erikson, identity is shaped through conflict and crisis, particularly during moments when individuals are forced to confront who they are in relation to society (Erikson 261).

Sallie's exile functions as such a crisis. Removed from the security associated with her family name, she must begin to define herself independently. This process is neither easy nor immediate. It involves uncertainty, self-doubt, and the gradual realization that identity is not something inherited but something constructed through experience. As Sallie grows older, she becomes increasingly aware of the contradictions within her world. She recognizes that men who are less capable than she is are nevertheless granted authority simply because of their gender, while she is denied opportunities despite her competence. This awareness deepens her sense of injustice but also strengthens her resolve.

Her journey reflects what Julia Kristeva describes as the fluid nature of identity, where the self is never fixed but always in process (Kristeva 11). Sallie is not defined solely by her past or her circumstances; she is constantly evolving, negotiating between the roles imposed upon her and the person she seeks to become. The world of Claiborne County reinforces these tensions through its rigid class structure. Wealthy families like the Kincaids occupy the top of the social hierarchy, while poor farmers and laborers struggle at the bottom. This division creates a system in which power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and survival often depends on one's position within this hierarchy. For Sallie, her class privilege provides a foundation, but it does not guarantee freedom. Her gender limits her ability to

fully access the power associated with her class, placing her in a position of partial inclusion and partial exclusion. Walls carefully depicts Sallie's entry into the bootlegging business as a challenge to conventional gender expectations. From a feminist perspective, Sallie's participation in bootlegging represents more than economic independence; it symbolizes her rejection of the restrictive domestic role assigned to women in early twentieth-century America. Rather than functioning as a passive observer within her father's criminal enterprise, she becomes an active decision-maker whose leadership is based on competence rather than inherited authority. Walls thereby challenges the patriarchal assumption that power and public leadership are exclusively masculine domains. Instead of remaining confined to domestic responsibilities, Sallie actively negotiates with suppliers, earns the loyalty of workers, and makes strategic business decisions. Her competence gradually earns the respect of individuals who initially underestimate her because she is a woman. By succeeding within an illegal trade traditionally controlled by men, Sallie demonstrates that authority is acquired through intelligence, courage, and practical judgment rather than inherited privilege alone. By engaging in bootlegging, she steps into a domain traditionally reserved for men, challenging both social norms and familial expectations. This decision is not merely practical; it is deeply symbolic.

Through business, Sallie begins to assert her agency, transforming herself from a passive recipient of privilege into an active creator of power. In doing so, she embodies Freud's idea that growth involves moving toward greater self-awareness and control, a process captured in his assertion that "where id was, there ego shall be" (Freud 80).

Sallie's actions reflect this movement from constraint to autonomy, as she learns to navigate the world on her own terms. What distinguishes Sallie's approach to power is the way she redefines it. Unlike her father, who relies on fear and domination, she builds relationships based on trust and loyalty. Throughout the novel, Walls repeatedly distinguishes inherited status from earned authority. Sallie's family name initially opens doors, but it cannot secure genuine respect. She earns the confidence of workers, business associates, and members of the community through her decisions and personal integrity. The novel therefore argues that social privilege may provide opportunity, but lasting influence depends upon individual capability and ethical leadership. She understands that authority is not simply about control but about connection. This shift in perspective allows her to succeed in ways that her father could not, creating a more sustainable form of leadership. Her success also forces others to reconsider their assumptions about gender, as she proves that a woman can lead effectively in a male-dominated environment. bell hooks emphasizes that feminism

seeks to challenge systems of domination rather than merely secure equal access to existing structures (*Feminism Is for Everybody*). Sallie's leadership reflects this principle because she does not imitate her father's authoritarian methods. Instead, she establishes authority through cooperation, empathy, and mutual respect, offering an alternative model of leadership that questions patriarchal definitions of power. At the same time, Sallie's journey is not free from internal conflict. The expectations of her society continue to shape her sense of self, creating moments of doubt and hesitation. This tension reflects the complexity of identity formation, as described by Erikson, who emphasizes that identity, is always in dialogue with social expectations (Erikson 263). Sallie must constantly negotiate between who she is and who she is expected to be, balancing her desire for independence with the realities of her environment. Her growing influence further highlights the distinction between wealth and power. While Sallie inherits wealth, she must earn power through her actions. Walls also critiques the assumption that social privilege automatically guarantees authority. Although Sallie's family background grants her access to influential networks, it does not protect her from gender discrimination. Her achievements therefore illustrate the intersection of class privilege and patriarchal exclusion, revealing how women from privileged backgrounds may still experience systemic barriers to leadership. This distinction becomes increasingly clear as she builds her reputation, demonstrating that authority cannot be taken for granted but must be established through competence and trust. Her journey suggests that true power lies not in material resources but in the ability to shape relationships and influence outcomes.

Trauma continues to play a significant role in this process. Sallie's past does not disappear as she gains power; instead, it becomes part of the foundation upon which she builds her identity. Caruth's insight that trauma persists through repetition is evident in the way Sallie's experiences continue to inform her decisions (Caruth 4). Rather than allowing herself to be defined by her trauma, however, she learns to integrate it into her sense of self, transforming it into a source of strength. Similarly, Kristeva's idea that the subject is never fully unified helps explain Sallie's ongoing struggle. She remains divided between her roles as daughter, leader, and woman, navigating the contradictions inherent in each position (Kristeva 133). This fragmentation is not a weakness but a reflection of the complexity of her identity, as she learns to reconcile different aspects of herself.

Ultimately, Sallie's journey is one of reclamation. By the novel's conclusion, Sallie no longer measures herself according to her father's expectations or the patriarchal values of Claiborne County. Her achievements result not from inheritance but from perseverance, strategic thinking, and emotional resilience. Walls leaves readers with the impression that

genuine leadership is inclusive rather than authoritarian, suggesting that social systems based on rigid gender hierarchies can be challenged through individual determination and moral courage. She does not simply accept the roles assigned to her; instead, she actively reshapes them, creating new possibilities for herself and for others. Her leadership challenges the structures of class and gender that define her world, demonstrating that these systems, although deeply entrenched, are not immutable. By placing Sallie's personal journey within the historical realities of Prohibition-era America, Walls suggests that social change emerges through individual acts of resistance against deeply entrenched systems of inequality. Sallie's success not only redefines her own identity but also exposes the instability of patriarchal power structures that depend upon excluding women from positions of authority.

Through resilience, determination, and self-awareness, she transforms her position from one of limitation into one of authority. In this sense, *Hang the Moon* presents Sallie's story as both personal and political. Her struggle for identity is inseparable from the broader social structures that shape her life, reflecting the interconnectedness of individual experience and collective systems of power. By tracing her journey, Jeannette Walls offers a compelling critique of a society in which power is unequally distributed while simultaneously highlighting the possibility of social transformation.

Sallie's story ultimately suggests that identity is not something inherited but something consciously constructed. It is shaped through conflict, refined through experience, and defined by the choices individuals make in the face of social constraint. Her rise to power does not erase the inequalities of her world; rather, it demonstrates that even within restrictive systems, there remains space for resistance, agency, and transformation. Through her journey, Sallie Kincaid emerges not only as a product of her society but also as a powerful force capable of reshaping it.

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