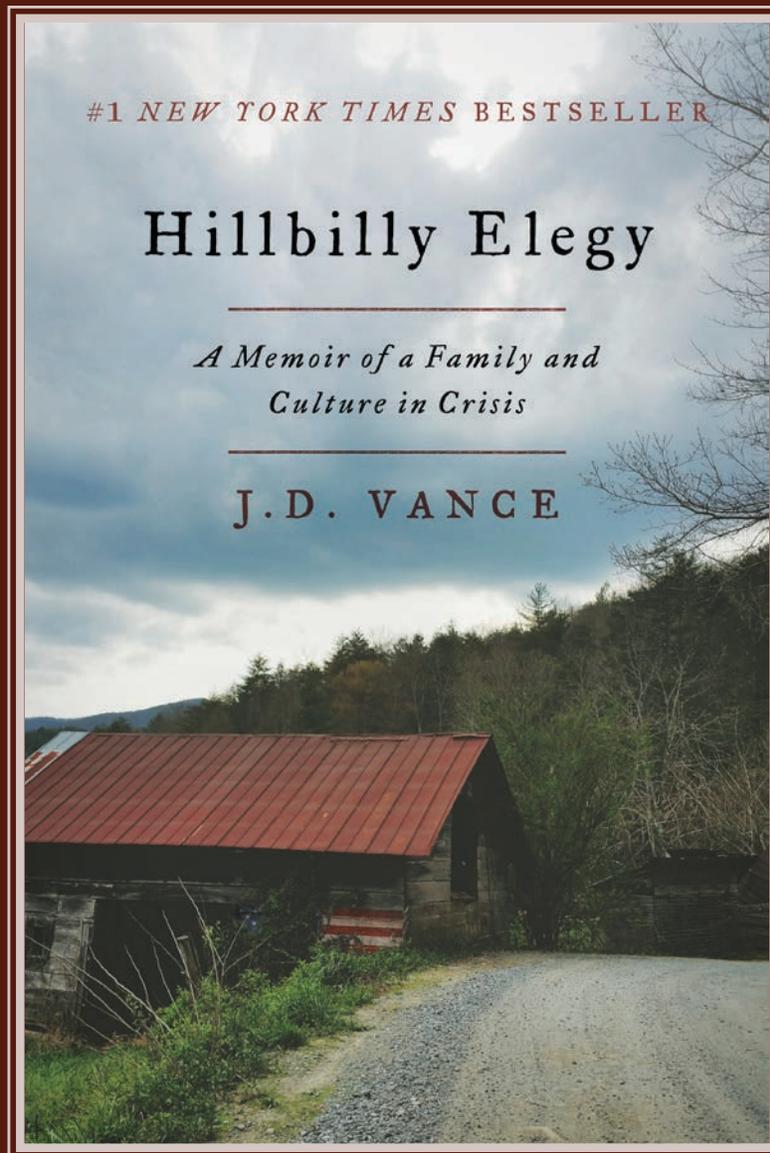


# A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO



“Vance’s description of the culture he grew up in is essential reading for this moment in history.”

—David Brooks, *The New York Times*



HARPER

HarperAcademic.com

**Contents**

About the Book	3
About the Author	3
Guided Reading Questions	4
Chapter 1	4
Chapter 2	4
Chapter 3	4
Chapter 4	4
Chapter 5	4
Chapter 6	5
Chapter 7	5
Chapter 8	5
Chapter 9	5
Chapter 10	5
Chapter 11	6
Chapter 12	6
Chapter 13	6
Chapter 14	6
Chapter 15	6
Writing Prompts	7

## About the Book

J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elogy*, part memoir, part social analysis, is a fascinating examination of culture, class, and the American dream of working class white Americans in Appalachia. *Hillbilly Elogy* explores how and when “hillbillies” lost faith in the American dream and in any hope of upward mobility through the prism of Vance and his mother and grandparents.

This examination of the personal and sociological problems facing America's white working class is a text that will engage college and university students and would spark many probing conversations if used in First-Year Experience and classroom adoption.

## About the Author

J.D. Vance is a former Marine and a graduate of Yale Law School. He has contributed to the *National Review* and is principal at a leading Silicon Valley investment firm. He lives in San Francisco with his wife and two dogs.

Find J.D. on Twitter at: <https://twitter.com/JDVance1>

## Guided Reading Questions

### CHAPTER 1

---

- What is Jackson, Kentucky like? Why does Vance have such an affection for the place?
- Class disloyalty is something Vance's grandmother, Mamaw, dislikes. How does she define class disloyalty?
- Why does Vance revere the Blanton men? What are they like, and why does Vance find them so appealing?
- What are some of the contradictions apparent in Jackson, Kentucky? How do these contradictions shape the town?

### CHAPTER 2

---

- What are Vance's grandparents, Mamaw and Papaw, like?
- How did Vance's grandparents get to Ohio? What are the two versions of the story of how and why they moved out of Kentucky?
- In this chapter, we learn about the migration of people out of Appalachia in search of jobs. What does this migration do for communities?
- In what ways do Vance's grandparents adapt, and not adapt, to their new life in Ohio? Do they see these changes positively or negatively?

### CHAPTER 3

---

- What are the ways in which Mamaw and Papaw lead two lives? Why is there such a split?
- In addition to class disloyalty, Mamaw also strongly dislikes disloyalty as a more general practice. Why does she dislike it so much? Or, conversely, why does she think loyalty is so important?
- In what ways do Mamaw and Papaw try to correct past mistakes they made? Do you think they end up correcting them?
- Are you surprised at the kinds of violence that Vance encounters at home? Do you think the family themselves consider some of their behaviors violent?

### CHAPTER 4

---

- Compared to Jackson, Kentucky what is Middletown, Ohio like? In what ways is it similar? And in what ways is it different?
- Why did Middletown experience an economic decline?
- What are some ways in which there are conflicts in attitudes towards work among the people of Middletown?
- If the American Dream does require forward momentum, could the people of Middletown achieve it?

### CHAPTER 5

---

- How do Mamaw's views on fighting evolve? Why do you think they change?
- What are the circumstances surrounding Vance's adoption?
- In spite of their shared love of books and learning, and the nurturing relationship they seem to have, Vance's relationship with his mother begins to change. What is the catalyst for this change, and what is its outcome so far?

## CHAPTER 6

---

- Describe the kind of relationship that Vance and his sister Lindsay have.
- What are the various ways in which this chapter discusses religion? Is religion something that is important to Vance?
- In what ways is the absence of a father figure significant to the ways in which Vance constructs and learns masculinity?
- When Vance reconnects with his biological father, he learns his side of the story surrounding his adoption. How does hearing his account change J.D.'s views? Do you think Vance manages to forgive his biological father?
- Does religion become a grounding force for Vance? If so, how?

## CHAPTER 7

---

- How big of a gap does Papaw's death leave in the family? How do different members of the family react to his death?
- On page 104, Vance talks about his and his sister Lindsay's shared fear of imposing on other people. How do Vance and his sister think of themselves as burdens? Are they in any way justified thinking of themselves that way?
- Vance's family goes through another reconfiguration when his mother enters rehab. Are you surprised at how Vance and Lindsay adapt?

## CHAPTER 8

---

- What are the ways in this chapter in which Vance's home life becomes more tumultuous?
- This chapter talks in some detail about education reform to help kids in poor Appalachia communities. How do you fix the issues in these school systems when the problems these kids face also stem from their lives at home?
- How do you think not being able to feel like you can drop your guard feels? What would that be like for Vance and his sister?

## CHAPTER 9

---

- How does living with Mamaw help Vance understand her better? How does he get to know her in ways he didn't previously?
- Working at the grocery store, Vance is exposed to how class difference and work ethic manifests itself in Middletown. The kinds of contradictions he brings up in Chapter 4 are evident here. Do you think Vance is justified in the anger he feels at what he sees?
- In what ways is the eternal hope Vance feels for his mother a series of complex emotions? Given the trajectory of their relationship, would you also feel hopeful if you were in Vance's position?
- Living with Mamaw gives Vance a chance at a stable home life. Do you think this stability is what manages to change Vance's life around? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 10

---

- How self-aware is Vance when he decides he isn't ready for college? Are you surprised by that amount of self-awareness from him?
- In what ways does the family split anew following Mamaw's death?
- How does the Marine Corps change Vance? What does it teach him?

## CHAPTER 11

---

- What is Vance's experience like in college? How is it similar and different to his peers?
- From Vance's analysis, why are people in places like Middletown, Ohio so distrustful of contemporary America?
- In what ways does the media and internet feed into the anxieties of the people of Middletown?
- How do these perceptions and views feed into attitudes towards government and aspects of American society?
- What is critique of modern conservatism does Vance offer? Do you agree with how he formed his theory?

## CHAPTER 12

---

- In what ways does being at Yale Law challenge Vance's identity?
- How does life at Yale make Vance more appreciative of his background and where he comes from in some ways?
- We learn of an incident at a gas station where Vance lies to a woman about not going to Yale. Is his lie an example of protecting against the class disloyalty Mamaw despised so much? Why or why not?
- How is seeing social mobility as a lifestyle change, in addition to a change in money and economics, significant? How does that recontextualize how we think about social mobility?

## CHAPTER 13

---

- How did Vance's experience during FIP highlight his class difference from his peers?
- What is social capital? In what ways did social capital come to help Vance?

## CHAPTER 14

---

- From what you know of Vance's life, what kind of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) did he have?
- How would you describe Vance and Usha's relationship? What kinds of behaviors does Vance notice in his relationship that he traces back to his upbringing? What kinds of things does he want to change?
- On page 231, Vance talks about the difference between personal choice and cultural inheritance. How do you distinguish between actions and reactions based on personal choice versus cultural inheritance?
- Do you think Vance has come to terms with his feelings for his mother? Or do you think his feelings for and about her will constantly evolve?

## CHAPTER 15

---

- What is the "uneasy truce" Vance strikes in caring for his mother?
- When J.D. and Usha get married, they both change their last name to Vance. Why is the change significant for both of them?
- What public policy lessons does Vance outline from his experiences? How could they help the hillbilly community?

## Writing Prompts

- How would you describe the kind of effect Mamaw had on Vance? Do you see her as a larger-than-life presence in the book? Is there humor in her philosophies and ways of seeing, thinking, and talking about the world, in spite of any gruffness she may project?
- The ability to adapt is a significant theme in *Hillbilly Elogy*. What are ways in which adaptability, or the success or failure of people or towns to adapt to circumstances or surroundings, is present in the book? What is significant about these adaptations and their respective successes or failures?
- In what ways does *Hillbilly Elogy* encourage sympathy for conditions in which the hillbilly community finds itself, while simultaneously refusing to accept excuses for it?
- Vance talks about hillbilly culture suffering from a lack of agency and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. How do we see Seligman's "learned helplessness" in *Hillbilly Elogy*? How does it deepen the crisis for this community?
- Thematically, in what ways is loyalty celebrated in *Hillbilly Elogy*? In what ways is loyalty problematic?

For more teaching guides, please visit [HarperAcademic.com](https://www.harperacademic.com).

