Suggested Discussion Questions for J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*

1. In his introduction to *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance writes, “I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children” (p. 2) and states that for the people of Appalachia—the people with whom he identifies—“poverty is a family tradition” (p. 3). Certainly poverty is a nationwide epidemic, but why does Vance feel the cycle of generational poverty is persistent in the Appalachian region and the cities nearby? Why is the American Dream particularly elusive for the residents of Jackson and Middletown? Do you think the American Dream is attainable for residents of your hometown?

2. Vance discusses the inner conflict he feels as someone who has moved from poverty into a higher social class, musing that “Sometimes I view members of the elite with an almost primal scorn... But I have to give it to them: Their children are happier and healthier, their divorce rates lower, their church attendance higher, their lives longer. These people are beating us at our own damned game” (p. 253). While Vance’s income bracket has presumably shifted, his statement indicates that his identity remains tied to his working-class roots. Is Vance now one of “these people,” or do his childhood experiences excuse him from acknowledging his current privilege? Do you think it’s possible to completely shift one’s identity from one class to another? What factors define social class, and how is class membership determined?

3. In Vance’s view, race and class seem to be two separate issues. In the book’s introduction, he writes, “This is not a story about why white people have more to complain about than black people or any other group. That said, I do hope that readers of this book will be able to take from it an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without filtering their views through a racial prism” (p. 7-8). At the same time, Vance discusses how people of different racial backgrounds experience the world. He cites controversial political scientist Charles Murray’s 1984 book *Losing Ground*, calling it a “book about black folks that could have been written about hillbillies” (p. 144). What does this comparison say about
Vance’s view of race and class? Is it possible to look at how class and family affect the poor without considering race? What does Vance mean when he says, “filtering their views through a racial prism”? 

4. While working in the Ohio Senate, the senators and policy staff Vance worked with were debating a bill to curb payday-lending practices. Vance observed that these policymakers “had little appreciation for the role of payday lenders in the shadow economy that people like me occupied” (p. 185). Vance goes on to say that using payday lending once allowed him to avoid a significant bank overdraft fee, and that payday lending helped to “solve important financial problems” (p. 185). What is the role of payday lending? Is Vance’s experience representative of payday lending clients? Why does Vance include this anecdote when discussing his own experience of poverty? What are some of the issues related to payday lending? What are some alternatives to payday lending?

5. Vance cites a report by the Wisconsin Children’s Trust Fund stating that well over half of working-class people had suffered at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), and over 40 percent had experienced several (p. 226-7). He writes extensively about his own traumatic childhood: his mother’s drug addiction and arrest, the constant revolving door of father figures, and Papaw’s alcoholism, among others. Which of these experiences appear to affect Vance most deeply, and why? How does the author cope with and eventually break free from such a difficult childhood? Although Vance acknowledges Mamaw’s and Papaw’s tumultuous marriage as a key factor in his mother’s troubles—“Mom is the Vance child who lost the game of statistics” (p. 232)—in what ways do his grandparents’ actions and attitude contribute to his success?

6. Throughout his memoir, Vance talks about government policy and programs. At one point in the story, he describes his experience working at a grocery store and his encounters with customers using food stamps: I “learned how people gamed the welfare system. They’d buy two dozen packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash. They’d ring up their orders separately, buying food with food stamps, and beer, wine, and cigarettes with cash” (p. 139). How does Vance portray people receiving government assistance? How does this compare with his portrayal of his own family’s poverty? What other factors might impact the way people prioritize their spending? Are there other issues and complexities that contribute to the poverty he witnesses?

7. Poverty drives many residents of Jackson and other Appalachian communities to migrate to industrialized towns with better employment opportunities, but those opportunities gradually
erode. What role does globalization play in industrialized communities like Middletown? What factors cause some residents to stay, despite the economic warning signs?

8. Vance provides many examples of lives interrupted and plagued by addiction to alcohol and drugs, including his own mother’s. Though his mother’s drug addiction is ultimately what forces Vance to choose to permanently live with Mamaw instead of his mother, Mamaw persuades him to help his mother cheat on a drug test, saying, “I know this isn’t right, honey. But she’s your mother and she’s my daughter. And maybe, if we help her this time, she’ll finally learn her lesson” (p. 131). Throughout their lives, Vance’s mother struggles with her drug addiction, and Vance struggles with how much to help her, financially and emotionally. Were Vance and Mamaw enabling his mother to continue using drugs by helping her pass the drug test? What are some other examples of drug use that Vance includes in the book? Does his analysis of the drug epidemic provide a clear portrait of the problems facing America?

9. In the book’s introduction, Vance states that his success had little to do with his own intelligence or extraordinary ability, and much more to do with “a handful of loving people” who rescued him (p. 2). Despite this, throughout the book Vance draws attention again and again to the element of personal responsibility, perhaps nowhere so clearly as in relating Mamaw’s flood parable: “God helps those who help themselves” (p. 87). Where else do you see this tension between personal responsibility and the need for familial, governmental, or social support?

10. According to Vance, Mamaw “loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal” (p. 15). Later in the book, Vance relates a story in which he cannot bring himself to tell a stranger at a gas station that he is a student at Yale, acknowledging that this incident: “highlights the inner conflict inspired by rapid upward mobility: I had lied to a stranger to avoid feeling like a traitor” (p. 205). Vance has achieved everything Mamaw wished for him, so why does his success feel like a betrayal? In what way does Vance’s success echo or conflict with the role models he encountered throughout his life (e.g., the Blanton men, Mamaw and Papaw, his biological father)?

11. Reflecting upon his service in the Marine Corps and his childhood, Vance states, “Psychologists call it ‘learned helplessness’ when a person believes, as I did during my youth, that the choices I made had no effect on the outcomes in my life... If I had learned helplessness at home, the Marines were teaching learned willfulness” (p. 163). What do you think Vance means by this statement? How did the Marine Corps change Vance? What life skills did he find especially valuable, and how did his service, particularly his time in Iraq, affect his college experience and his perception of fellow students at Ohio State?
12. Vance discusses education in a multitude of ways. At one point he states, “In Middletown, 20 percent of the public high school’s entering freshmen won’t make it to graduation. Most won’t graduate from college” (p. 56). Though Vance struggled in school through much of his childhood, when he stayed with his grandmother his senior year, he was able to focus on school and found teachers who inspired his love of learning (p. 151). He remembers when Mamaw spent $180 on a graphing calculator when they had little money for other things like cell phones and nice clothes (p. 137). In the end, Vance goes on to earn a law degree from Yale. How does Vance view the role of education in society and its impact on his own life? What are the factors that allow someone to excel in school? And what is society’s role in ensuring external factors don’t impede educational opportunities?

13. In spite of his identity as a tall, white, straight male, Vance felt out of place at Yale, noting, “A part of me had thought I’d finally be revealed as an intellectual fraud, that the administration would realize they’d made a terrible mistake and send me back to Middletown with their sincerest apologies” (p. 201). From confusing financial aid forms, to social class signifiers (“tap or sparkling” water), to critical steps for professional advancement (membership in law journals), first-generation college students often encounter intentional or unintentional gatekeeping mechanisms which can communicate to these students that they don’t belong. What can be done to, as Vance puts it, “create a space for the J.D.s” (p. 256) of the world in higher education? How do systems work to discourage upward mobility and keep people within their social groups?

14. Given the examples he encountered throughout his life, Vance appears to associate religiosity and church attendance with success, and social isolation with poverty and poor choices. For Vance, religion also appears to be inextricably tied to familial acceptance. Reflecting on his inability to ask his father questions about evangelical theology, Vance notes: “I didn’t know whether he’d tell me I was a spawn of Satan and send me away” (p. 124). In his conclusion, Vance positions the young man Brian’s precarious fate with, among other things, “whether he can access a church that teaches him lessons of Christian love, family, and purpose” (p. 255). Does religion play a role in upward social mobility? Is participation in a religious group necessary for personal and economic success?

15. In chapter 11, Vance talks about conspiracy theories that he hears in his community. For example, he describes how people believe that President Barack Obama was neither born in the U.S. nor a Christian. Vance asserts that Obama “feels like an alien to many Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color. Recall that not a single one of my high school classmates attended an Ivy League school. Barack Obama attended two of them and excelled at both” (p. 191). Vance also notes that “Yale had educated two of the three most recent Supreme Court justices and two of the six most
recent presidents, not to mention the sitting secretary of state (Hillary Clinton)” (p. 202). Why did Obama’s success “strike at the heart of [this community’s] deepest insecurities” (p. 191) in a way that other government officials’ success did not? Does this narrative of “elitism” serve to mask other forms of exclusion, including racism?

16. In the introduction, Vance provides multiple reasons for writing his memoir and suggests that he wants people to understand the lives of poor people. When reading the book, do you see any tension between Vance’s telling of his own story and his cultural analysis of the “hillbilly” way of life? Can one person’s experience represent an entire group’s? Is Vance’s book more successful as a memoir, or as a cultural analysis? Why?

17. A number of people have pointed to Hillbilly Elegy to explain the results of the 2016 election. In the memoir, Vance recalls how at the age of 17, he realized that the “‘party of the working man’—the Democrats—weren’t all they were cracked up to be” (p. 140). He goes on to argue that people in Appalachia and the South “went from being staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation” (p. 140), and attributes a big part of this shift to white working-class people seeing other poor people take advantage of government assistance. Do you agree with Vance’s assertion? Are there challenges in using one individual’s experience to explain larger social shifts? Do you think this book explains the results of the 2016 election?

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