Hillbilly Elegy Study Guide

Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance describes the author's life up to this point and uses his experiences to illustrate the challenges facing hillbilly society generally. The memoir begins with a description of Vance's family in Jackson, KY. These relatives, he states, were part of a storied hillbilly family with a strong reputation in their community. They embodied many of the most prevalent values of this culture, most notably fierce loyalty to each other and a deep respect for personal honor that often dictated a violent response to perceived slights. Vance's grandparents, whom he calls Mamaw and Papaw, migrated from Jackson to Middletown, OH to work in an industrial steel mill. This experience was common among hillbilly families at the time, many of whom left their rural homes for urban areas. In Middletown, Mamaw and Papaw had three children, the author's uncle, aunt, and mother.

Although he lived with his father in early childhood, the two were separated when his parents divorced and would not reconnect for many years. J.D. spent the majority of his childhood living with his mother in Middletown, though he often visited Jackson, a place he will always consider his "home." J.D. also had a very close relationship with Mamaw and Papaw, who strove to support and encourage him to achieve high levels of success. This support became particularly important as J.D.'s mother became emotionally unstable and struggled with drug addiction. His middle school years, in which J.D. moved frequently due to his mother's constant change of boyfriends, were extremely challenging for the author. Eventually, he lived permanently with Mamaw, an experience he credits with allowing him to succeed in life. It is clear throughout his memoir that Mamaw was his single most important influence.

After graduating high school, J.D. joined the Marines for four years before attending college at Ohio State. This experience instilled him with a strong work ethic and the confidence that he had the ability to better his life through his own choices. This feeling, as Vance argues extensively, is largely absent from hillbilly society. He considers this to be a major cause of the decline and poor outlook of communities like Middletown. Following college, Vance attended Yale Law School, where the differences between his lifestyle and that of professional-class Americans became extremely clear. At Yale, J.D. met and began dating his future wife Usha. The two are happily married lawyers, but J.D. still feels that his hillbilly upbringing plays a major role in his life. Throughout the memoir, the author suggests how his society could be improved, most of which center around the need for its members to take responsibility for their own problems.

Prologue-Chapter 3

Summary

Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance is a memoir of the author's life and those of his family members. He begins the Prologue by stating that the existence of this memoir is somewhat absurd. As a 31-year-old lawyer, he has not accomplished anything particularly remarkable in his life. Instead, Vance claims that his ordinary accomplishments are noteworthy because very few members of his community, whom Vance calls "hillbillies," enjoy similar success. Hillbilly refers to members of Scots-Irish families living in Appalachia and Rust Belt cities in Ohio and Pennsylvania. These communities are deeply troubled. The majority of them are impoverished and have no significant hope for the future. Beyond economic distress, hillbilly society faces high rates of drug addiction, social isolation, and a breakdown of family structures. While outsiders attempting to address these problems generally focus on economic solutions, Vance believes a pessimistic culture that encourages social decay is ultimately at fault. Further, Vance argues that this reality is often overlooked in America's race conscious discourse. While he does not dismiss the hardship that minority racial groups have faced, he suggests that the term "white privilege" depicts too broad a distinction. Overall, this memoir is not intended as an academic study on this population, but rather a depiction of how it feels to live in this environment.

Chapter 1 begins with the author stating that his "home" was always Jackson, a small town in eastern Kentucky. While he lived primarily in Middletown, OH, Vance spent most of his childhood summers at his great-grandmother's house in Jackson. Vance, who moved frequently in Ohio, believed that Jackson was the one place that truly belonged to him, his sister, and grandmother, whom he calls Mamaw. While in Ohio he was the son of a single mother, in Jackson, his grandparents and extended family were well-respected. In particular, the author deeply admired his four great uncles, a group referred to collectively as the "Blanton men." For Vance, these men often filled the role of father figures that had been left vacant by his mother's rotation of husbands and boyfriends. He was particularly taken by their stories of the extrajudicial legal system on which hillbilly culture operated. In this system, honor held paramount importance and it was often necessary to defend one's honor, or that of one's family, with violence. At a young age, Vance admired his family's righteous stance, but gained a more nuanced view as he aged. Similarly, though he still loves Jackson, he has become aware of its deep flaws. This town, like many in Appalachia, suffers from extreme poverty, high rates of drug abuse, poor health, and a culture that reacts viscerally to criticism from the outside, while ignoring these problems. With concern, Vance states that these problems have become more mainstream throughout the country as hillbilly families left rural areas like Jackson for cities in other states.

Chapter 2 describes how Vance's family, like many others in Appalachia, left their rural homesteads for urban areas following WWII. Vance's grandparents, Papaw and Mamaw, grew up as neighbors, both members of families with storied hillbilly pasts. The

two hastily married and moved to Middletown, OH when Mamaw became pregnant. Papaw began working for Armco, a steel company that actively encouraged entire families to move from rural areas to industrial cities by giving priority to applicants who had family members working for the company. This practice was common among companies at the time, leading to a massive migration out of Kentucky and into Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. As a result, entire communities were transplanted to these industrial centers, bringing their hillbilly culture with them.

While these families generally enjoyed higher rates of economic success than their counterparts who remained, they faced backlash from their Northern white neighbors. The blunt, honor-based hillbilly culture conflicted sharply with communities that placed a higher importance on politeness and formal authority. The author describes a specific incident in which Mamaw and Papaw destroyed items in a pharmacy and accosted the clerk for telling their young son, Vance's Uncle Jimmy, not to play with an expensive toy. A reaction that seemed normal and expected for Mamaw and Papaw shocked those around them. Vance also describes his grandparents as deeply committed to the idea of the American dream. Though they acknowledged the struggles they faced in life they strongly believed that they could achieve anything through hard work and sought to relay this ethic to their children and grandchildren. While they strove to give their children the opportunity to advance beyond their own level of success, it became clear that this path was more complicated than it originally seemed.

In Chapter 3, Vance states that Mamaw and Papaw had three children, his uncle Jimmy, his mother Bev, and his aunt Lori, whom the author refers to as Aunt Wee. Beyond this, the family lost nine children to miscarriage, a trauma that Mamaw would endure for the remainder of her life. When Lori and Bev were still very young, Mamaw and Papaw's marriage became increasingly troubled. The author claims that while the family maintained a successful public face, with Papaw earning enough money to support his family in a large house, their private life was different. Papaw spent large amounts of time away from home and began drinking excessively. He also became involved with other women, often with the encouragement of his wife's own brothers. Mamaw began hoarding garbage and trinkets and became increasingly hostile to her husband. The two fought frequently, sometimes violently, and their children often witnessed these encounters. The couple eventually split, then reconciled and spent most of their day together for the rest of their lives, despite living in separate houses. Throughout this period, Mamaw and Papaw remained optimistic about their children's future, reasoning that if they had managed to escape rural Kentucky and lead a middle class life, Jimmy, Lori, and Bev could advance even further. Despite a difficult home life and diversions along the way, the author states that Jimmy and Lori had, in fact, become generally successful and happy adults. By contrast, his mother Bev struggled throughout her life.

Analysis

The Prologue and first three chapters of this memoir introduce both the major individuals in Vance's life and the concept of hillbilly culture generally. This is clearly the author's intention based on two statements he makes in the Prologue. First, he

suggests that the existence of this book is somewhat insane, given that he has not accomplished anything remarkable in his life. Second, he states that his goal is to depict the experience of growing up among the problems in his community. In this, Vance portrays himself as an exemplar of hillbilly society. The book will describe his life and those of his family, but it is intended to represent hillbillies as a whole. While many memoirs serve only to inform about one individual subject, the author suggests that his life can inform about an entire society.

There are two elements of hillbilly culture that Vance explicitly depicts as a framework through which the reader can understand his narrative. The first is an internal code of justice, independent from the traditional legal system. This code is primarily based on the concept of honor; one's reputation and that of one's family is paramount. This is most clearly demonstrated through the Blanton men, Vance's great uncles. These men had committed various violent acts, mostly in response to perceived slights. Vance himself describes them as extreme, yet they were highly respected in their community. Rather than being viewed as criminal or violent, their actions were necessary and applauded in their community. A second, related aspect of this culture is a strong suspicion of outsiders. Vance notes the reaction of his associates to a national news story about health problems in Appalachia as utterly scornful of those produced the story, claiming they had no business interfering in rural communities. On a more personal level, he describes how his grandparents, despite their failing marriage, were adamant that their family problems remain private. He notes in public, their family seemed quite happy and successful. Even his Uncle Jimmy, after moving out of the house, was prevented from seeing an injury Aunt Wee received, given that he was no longer a member of the household. Finally, Vance states that Mamaw admonished him against ever criticizing his older sister to non-family members, claiming the importance of family loyalty. These two elements appear frequently throughout the memoir and are partially at the root of the problems the author sees in his society.

Finally, this section introduces a major theme of the book: the juxtaposition of a shift in physical location with a maintenance of culture and life situation. Vance opens Chapter 1 by describing, Jackson, KY, the town that he always considered his "home." Like the author's life generally, Jackson is of both personal significance and representative as a center of hillbilly society. He describes the migration of rural families from towns like Jackson to industrial centers like Middletown, OH as a major change for these families, including his own. This gave them the opportunity to enter the middle class and provide the opportunity for their children to succeed even further. Despite this physical and economic change however, Vance argues that hillbilly culture remained with these families. This is clearly indicated by Mamaw and Papaw's reaction to the store clerk, a situation that seemed normal to them but was clearly inappropriate in their new home. More broadly, the author suggests that challenges faced by families in Jackson did not disappear when they moved, a point he will explore further throughout the memoir.

Vocabulary

pessimistic, cynicism, inculcate, macroeconomic, specter, agency, uninhabitable, foliage, deteriorating, raunchy, deprivation, impoverished, industrial, stigma, acute, ostensibly, embroiled, covet, parlance, unfathomable, nonchalantly, nadir, strife, tumultuous

Chapter 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4 begins with the author's birth in 1984. As stated previously, he would always consider Jackson, KY his home, but lived primarily in Middletown, OH. By the time he was born, Middletown was still similar to the city his grandparents had moved to in the 1950s. It was largely centered around the Armco manufacturing plant, with a large portion of its family and culture transplanted from rural Kentucky. At the time, the city also supported a thriving commercial area, with restaurants, bars, and a mall. Shortly after however, the city began to decline. Due mostly to the downsizing of the Armco plant, unemployment and poverty rose, while commercial businesses closed and the city's infrastructure decayed. Vance claims that this development went unnoticed by the majority of Middletown's residents who assumed that Armco would always be able to support the city with well-paying jobs for those without a college education. Further, families like Mamaw and Papaw always believed that their children would be more successful than they were, possibly by entering a white-collar career. Simultaneously, however, they never fully understood the steps necessary to reach this level of success. The author states that people in his community constantly cited the importance of hard work, without ever actually instilling a strong work ethic in themselves or their children. Teachers and parents rarely set high expectations for their students. The few who attended college were considered naturally talented, effort was irrelevant. Despite this atmosphere, Vance claims that he received a different message at home, allowing him to be successful.

In Chapter 5, the author explains that his father, Don Bowman, was his mother's second husband, whom she divorced when J.D. was a toddler. Shortly after, Mom was married to her third husband, Bob Hamel, who adopted J.D. when his father relinquished his parental status. The family, including J.D.'s older sister Lindsay, lived a relatively normal life close to Mamaw and Papaw in Middletown, allowing J.D. to visit his grandparents daily. From an early age, the author learned to value loyalty, honor, and toughness. Mamaw taught him how to win a fist fight, while implying that he should never start a fight, only respond when necessary to protect his honor. Overall, the author lived a childhood, recognizing that many aspects of his family mirrored those of the families around him.

This began to change when Mom and Bob decided to move to a rural area 35 miles away from Middletown. J.D., nine years old at the time, was devastated at having to leave Mamaw and Papaw. Following the move, Mom and Bob began to fight frequently and violently. Their fights were the first time J.D. was exposed to how married couples should resolve disagreements and he absorbed the idea that screaming, physical violence, and personal insults were not only acceptable, but normal. The constant strife became a major stressor for the entire family and J.D. began to struggle in school and gain weight. Following Mom's attempted suicide, she separated from Bob and returned to Middletown with her children. Even while living closer to Mamaw and Papaw, Mom

neglected her children and became abusive. On one occasion, Mom became extremely angry at J.D. while driving and pulled over to beat him as punishment. When the car stopped J.D. ran to a stranger's house who called the police on his mother. Mom was arrested and Mamaw and Papaw retrieved J.D. from the police, ending what he considered the scariest day of his life. At his mother's trial, J.D. lied to prevent her from going to jail. While his mother officially retained custody, the family tacitly agreed that both children could stay at Mamaw's house whenever they wanted to avoid Mom. Shortly after, J.D. visited family in California. While he had travelled before, this was the first time that he was not in an area dominated by people like him. This trip was exciting and enjoyable, but reinforced his feeling of belonging among hillbilly transplants.

At the start of Chapter 6, Vance states that, as a child, he hated being asked whether or not he had any brothers or sisters. Because of a complicated web of step and half siblings, he never knew exactly how to answer. The only person he truly considered his sibling was his older sister Lindsay, whom he loves and admires, despite having a different father. He claims that Lindsay, who is five years older, frequently played a maternal role and always seemed more like an adult than a child. J.D. only began to realize that Lindsay had her own aspirations, beyond being responsible for herself and her brother, when she auditioned to become a model. Though she was offered a second audition in New York City, the family was unable to afford the trip, leading to an argument that devastated Lindsay. Following this, a similarly disappointed J.D. asked Mamaw whether God loved him. The author goes on to explain that though Mamaw did not participate in organized religion, she was deeply religious in her personal life. Though she believed that God was always present, Mamaw felt strongly that individuals were still responsible for working hard to achieve their own success.

Following Bob's departure from the family, J.D. experience a series of revolving father figures, none of whom remained with his mother for very long. While he liked most of these men on a personal level, the constant change was a source of great distress. Further, Vance asserts that these men were never able to teach him how to interact with women or any other important aspects of masculinity. At this time, J.D. reconnected with his biological father, Don. Since divorcing Mom, Dad had remarried, fathered two children, and become very committed to his Christian faith. The author says that Dad fit the stereotype of a culturally conservative Christian, a stereotype that he claims is inaccurate, given the unexpectedly low rates or church attendance in this area. Although J.D. was uncomfortable with Dad's choice to relinquish custody after supposedly receiving a sign from God, he is drawn to the social support that the church provides. For a time, J.D. became very religious, attending church frequently when visiting Dad and immersing himself in the moral questions his beliefs created. Though he would later reject this faith, he states that his new church would provide important support in the coming months.

Analysis

A major theme that emerges in this section the lack of consistency in J.D.'s life and his community more broadly. The author begins in Chapter 4 with this broad sense,

describing how Middletown had declined from its thriving peak. This was mainly due to the collapse of Armco, the company that had provided numerous jobs and the city's economic lifeblood. Community members believed that this would always be the case and that they had little reason to fear for their future. In contrast, the author demonstrates that this was not true. Armco could not provide the consistent economic support needed and numerous families descended into poverty as a result. Further, this also signifies a lack of social consistency. As the economic health of the city suffered, so too did the family structures that supported Middletown's children.

This breakdown and lack of consistency is clearly demonstrated in the author's personal experiences. He states that early in his life, he enjoyed a stable, if unusual family situation in which his grandparents played a significant role. After moving away from Middletown with Bob however, J.D.'s life becomes more unstable. This move echoes the mass migration described by Vance in the first section in which hillbilly families changed their physical location, but brought their culture with them. In this case, the move only exacerbates underlying weaknesses in the marriage Bob and Mom and their inability to resolve conflicts productively. Further, it signals the beginning of inconsistent family relationships. J.D. and Lindsay are removed from, then return to life with their grandparents. Their mother became unstable and abusive at times, forcing Lindsay and Mamaw to play maternal roles. Further, the author describes a series of father figures who entered and left his life, culminating with reconnection to Dad. It is clear that he did not consider any one of these life events to be determinative or tragic. Rather, the combination of these factors deprived J.D. of a consistent base of support, leading to stress and poor performance in school. In this view, the author's interest in religion is best characterized as a search for some stabilizing force, rather than any particular of faith.

Vocabulary

exemplified, idyllic, incorporated, lucrative, eminently, industriousness, prestigious, cadence, admonition, shirk, transgression, somatic, omnious, sociopath, nonchalantly, cursory, pious, theology, cadence, capered, heretic, evangelical

Chapter 7-9

Summary

Chapter 7 begins with Papaw's unexpected death. Normally, J.D.'s grandfather would spend most of his day at Mamaw's house, but the family became worried when he failed to appear. By the time Mom, Mamaw, and J.D. went to his house to investigate, Papaw had been dead for over a day. Papaw's death was a tragic event for the entire family, but J.D. and Lindsay, in particular, experienced a level of guilt for taking advantage of Papaw throughout their lives. J.D. uses this event to explain that the ability to "take advantage" of someone was indicative of having a parent. Following Papaw's funeral in Kentucky, Mom became increasingly emotional and erratic. Vance notes that she seemed offended that anyone other than her would grieve for Papaw's death, given that he was her father. She also lashed out at her good friend Tammy and her boyfriend at the time, Matt. Following a particularly violent outburst, it was revealed that Mom was addicted to prescription narcotics and her father's death had exacerbated her existing problems. She was checked into a rehab facility, forcing Mamaw to raise Lindsay and J.D. alone. Aware of the increased burden, J.D. and Lindsay became more independent, and even relished the stability brought by their mother's temporary absence. Following Mom's release, the family participated in group therapy sessions, hoping to support her recovery. While J.D. was generally skeptical of this process, he did appreciate the effort Mom made to recover from her addiction. At one of the sessions, a homeless addict stated that he could promise to stop using drugs, but would probably fail by the next day. Vance realized later that this man was born very close to his own family homestead in Kentucky.

At the beginning of Chapter 8, Mom announced that she wanted J.D. to move in with her and her boyfriend, Matt. Although J.D. liked Matt, he angrily refused to move, given that he wanted to stay close to Mamaw and attend high school in his hometown. As a result, Mom forced him to attend anger therapy sessions. J.D. felt that the therapist, like his own mother, was an obstacle to overcome who could not understand his reluctance to living solely with Mom. Feeling any other option would place undue burden on his family members, J.D. announced that he would live with Dad. After only a few weeks however, the lingering questions the author had about his Christian faith made living with his father uncomfortable. He decided to live with Mom and Matt on the condition that he could visit Mamaw at any time and continue attending Middletown schools. Shortly after, Mom announced that she would be marrying a different man, her boss Ken. While living with the newly married couple, J.D. fought constantly with his similarly-aged stepbrother. At the same time, he felt distant from the rest of his family and unsettled by the frequent moves. As a result, he began struggling in school and experimenting with marijuana and alcohol.

The author begins Chapter 9 by explaining that although he hated living with Ken and his children, he felt uncomfortable telling Mamaw, again fearing that he would be a burden to her. Simultaneously, though Mamaw frequently emphasized the importance of

education, J.D. was very close to dropping out of high school. This changed, however, when Mom asked J.D. for a jar of clean urine, admitting that she could not pass a drug test to keep her nursing license. At Mamaw's urging, J.D. reluctantly complied, but this signaled a turning point. From this point forward, J.D., with his mother's agreement, lived solely with Mamaw. Throughout this period, his mother was seldom involved in his life. The author states that he loved living with his grandmother, but that it was challenging at times. He consistently felt that he was burdening a woman who should be enjoying her elderly life and Mamaw's strict discipline aggravated him at times. He also notes that Mamaw was incredibly fun to live with and that he began to understand her much better. She also insisted that J.D. perform well in school and his grades did indeed improve. At this time he also began working as a cashier at a grocery store. The author states that this gave him insight into how people regularly cheated the welfare system. Discussing this with Mamaw, he realized that they were both conflicted on the role of government. Though Mamaw, a loyal Democrat, would criticize the government for not providing enough services, she was angry and heartbroken at who those around her abused these services when they were provided.

The author extends this into a longer commentary on hillbilly society and cities like his. He notes that their problems have been studied extensively and no clear solution exists. To Vance, there are certainly economic reasons that hillbilly communities are struggling, but they also suffer from a destructive culture and psychology. He claims that many people refuse to work or raise their children properly. They do not work hard as students and do not encourage a strong work ethic in their children. They spend large amount of money on luxury items, burying themselves in debt for no reason. He states clearly that these conditions are not universal; there are many families who provide a stable life and optimistic future for their children. One such family was his own. Vance fully believes that he would not have succeeded like he did without the supportive environment Mamaw provided while he was in high school. While he could attribute this to a number of factors, he believes the most important is that he was happy.

Analysis

This section extensively explores the importance of parenting and the role that parental figures played in the author's life. Vance frames this concept by beginning with Papaw's death and describing how he understands a parent generally. Perhaps due to his unusual family structure, a parent was someone to "take advantage of." This unusual definition aligns with his life experiences. His mother was emotionally unstable and struggled with drug addiction; his father was absent for a significant portion for his life; and Mom's series of boyfriends could not provide a replacement figure. Given this, he depended heavily on his grandparents and sister to fill the role of a parent. While he certainly loved these individuals, he was keenly aware that their greatest value is the resources, both tangible and intangible, that they could provide.

Vance emphasizes this point by comparing his time living with his mother to the years he lived with Mamaw. Mom was unable to provide an effective home environment, as evidenced by J.D.'s troubles in school and desire to live close to his grandmother. By

contrast, Mamaw provided a stable and supportive home, allowing him to succeed in school and largely avoid drug and alcohol abuse. In this sense, Mamaw replaced Mom as J.D.'s parent. Vance expresses tremendous love for his grandmother, but he focuses on the tangible benefit of living with her. The author also broadens this idea to hillbilly culture generally. He notes that, while his society certainly faces economic challenges, a counterproductive culture is at the root of most of its pervasive problems. The most effective solution to this problem, he argues, is "parents" like him that provide for their children financially and instill a strong work ethic. From the myriad of examples he presents, it is clear that he is particularly pessimistic when he sees children whose parents to do not support them adequately and who lack a grandmother to fill that role.

An additional element in this section relates to the shift of geography without a corresponding change in situation. Given the decline in his community, one might expect that moving away to live with Matt or Ken would be a positive development in his life. In contrast, J.D. forcefully resisted these moves, wishing to remain with Mamaw in Middletown. This demonstrates that changing physical location would not produce a positive change in J.D.'s life. Instead, he wished to remain in a familiar environment, confident that he could be most successful there. Despite its imperfections, the stability provided my Mamaw's home is a powerful force in the author's life. Much as his family's migration to Ohio did not eliminate the cultural factors that plague hillbilly communities, moving away from his home would not address the problems J.D. faced.

Vocabulary

uneviable, chastened, invincible, aura, serenity, candor, emphysema, weariness, epitomize, devout, denomination, mired, resonate, frenetic, transgression, imbue, staunchly, adage

Chapter 10-11

Summary

Vance begins Chapter 10 by explaining that Mamaw encouraged him to play golf, believing that rich people played golf and the game would connect him to a more elite community. As his high school graduation approached, J.D. planned on attending Ohio State, like many of his friends. It was clear however, that college would put him in considerable debt. This, coupled with his still lackluster work ethic, convinced J.D. that he was not prepared to invest in a college education. Instead, with the encouragement of an older cousin, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. While most of his family accepted this decision, Mamaw was extremely resistant, giving a list of reasons why she objected to his decision. While she eventually relented, Mamaw was never happy about J.D.'s choice. Compared to most of his colleagues at boot camp, J.D. received a large amount of letters from his family, particularly, Mamaw expressing their support. The authors credits these with helping him succeed in this difficult environment. This environment, however, was instrumental to J.D.'s later success. Throughout his youth, the author claims he was plagued by a sense of self-doubt, something common among people in his community. Through boot camp and life in the Marines generally, he acquired a sense of confidence and discipline. He compared his new resolve and ability to tackle challenges to the learned helplessness endemic to his society. Beyond this, the Marines provided him with tangible life skills, such as an understanding of bank accounts and car loans. This new attitude was obvious to those around him when he returned to Middletown. J.D. finally felt like an adult, both in the way others treated him and in his ability to pay for Mamaw's health insurance. In his mind, this was a small way to repay Mamaw for everything she had contributed to his upbringing.

Eventually however, Mamaw's health deteriorated and she died halfway through J.D.'s four-year commitment service. This was a tragic event for the entire extended family and Vance believed that his family seemed close to collapse. This was augmented by the debt that Mamaw left behind, some due to the refusal of Mom to repay her many "loans," which nearly eliminated the value of her estate. Mamaw, like her family members, was buried in Kentucky and J.D. travelled to meet his family there for the funeral. Once again, Mom criticized J.D. and Lindsay for grieving too much, remind them that Mamaw was her mother, not theirs. The author remained stoic throughout these proceedings, but finally broke down in tears after nearly swerving off the road on his return to his base. To this day, he believes that Mamaw's divine intervention saved him from death. The final years of J.D.'s service were marked by only two significant events. The first was the jubilant reaction of a young Iraqi boy, to whom J.D. had given a pencil eraser, which encouraged the author to be more appreciative in his own life. The second was his time spent as the chief media affairs officer at a large base. His successful performance in this role, normally reserved for a far more senior officer, reinforced his new confidence in his own abilities.

Chapter 11 traces the author's time at Ohio State University (OSU) after leaving the Marines. After being away from Ohio, J.D. enjoyed the opportunity to visit his family frequently and live among people similar to him. Vance states that he maintained the intense work ethic he had learned in the Marine Corps, packing his schedule with courses, homework, and exercise. He was also extremely ambitious, determined to earn strong grades so that he could attend law school. In addition, he worked three jobs to provide enough money to avoid incurring student debt. J.D. was aware that such an intensive schedule, he normally slept only three or four hours each night, was harmful to his health, but he enjoyed his feeling of agency and invincibility after so many years of uncertainty. All of this was reinforced when a younger student in one of J.D.'s classes criticized those who fought in Iraq as stupid and violent butchers. While his Marine comrades spanned the political spectrum, J.D. was particularly offended by this comment and became even more motivated to finish college quickly. He eventually did so in only 23 months.

Before attending Yale Law School, J.D. returned to Middletown to work for a summer. He continued to be extremely active and felt an incredible sense of optimism about his future. This contrasted sharply with the pessimism he saw in those around him. It is this pessimism that Vance believes defines hillbilly society. He describes how people in Middletown detested President Barack Obama, not because of his race, but because he is starkly different from them. His success at Ivy League schools, his oratory skills, and his wealth were all foreign to this community. This contrast is particularly damaging at a time when many hillbillies feel insecure about their own futures and those of their children. Ultimately, however, the author believes this community must look within, and not to outsiders or the government, to explain this insecurity.

Analysis

This section presents a sharp contrast between the pessimism of J.D.'s upbringing and the optimism he feels after finishing college. This change begins with his time in the Marine Corps, which the author considers a defining moment in his life. While Mamaw sought to instill an appreciation for hard work and J.D. performed relatively well in high school, he felt unprepared for college, given his questionable work ethic. The Marines encouraged a dramatic change in this outlook. The author specifically cites the psychological concept of "learned helplessness," the idea that a defeatist mentality leads to failure, to explain this. His time as a Marine demonstrated that he was capable of conquering any challenge. J.D. maintained this attitude at OSU, allowing him to graduate in less than two years. Despite the individual efforts of people like Mamaw, this environment was largely absent in Middletown and cities like it. This community neither expected nor rewarded hard work. Even people who spoke of its importance were often unemployed because of their own choices. After only a few months of boot camp, J.D. notices a marked difference upon his return home.

The author extends the comparison by noting the optimism he felt about his future. Coupled with his Marine experience and college degree, J.D. was convinced that his own work ethic would lead him to success. By contrast, those around him felt

pessimistic about their future. They fail, however, to understand the cause of this pessimism. People in Middletown were eager to blame the government, most notably, President Obama for their economic struggles. Vance grants that this may be a contributing factor, but primarily blames the decadent culture. He cites the specific of a man who, because he was tired of waking up early, quit his job, later blaming Obama for his problems. Until this underlying culture changes, Vance argues, no outside intervention will be successful.

Mamaw's death in this section, a tragic event for J.D. and his family, is also symbolic of the author's departure from hillbilly culture. Throughout the memoir, Vance cites Mamaw as his primary anchor in hillbilly society. She was the one constant presence in his life and maintained deep ties to the family's ancestral home in Kentucky. In this way, she represents the influence of hillbilly culture in J.D.'s life. It is meaningful, therefore, that her death came at a time when J.D. was advancing in life as a Marine destined to attend college. Just as his new mentality and confidence became ingrained, his primary link to hillbilly society perishes.

Vocabulary

tirade, pique, embodiment, oscillate, stoic, disburse, diatribe, revitalization, elixir, tripe, enrapture, cynicism

Chapter 12-14

Summary

Vance begins Chapter 12 by explaining that he originally did not apply to any of the most prestigious law schools. After learning of a law school graduate who, unable to find a job, was forced to work at a restaurant, he realized how important it was to attend particular schools. He became particularly interested in Yale because of its small class size and reputation as a low-stress environment. It was also, paradoxically, his cheapest option because of its generous need-based financial aid. The author claims this reality, that the most prestigious schools are often the cheapest for low-income students, is largely unknown to kids like him. Yale was overwhelming to J.D., but in a positive way. He succeed in his classes, enjoyed the diversity of his classmates, and was interested in the history of the university. However, he also felt like an outsider in the Yale community. No one in his class shared a background like his. J.D. was the first person in his nuclear family to attend college and the first in his extended family to seek more than a bachelor's degree. To those around him, J.D. was an anomaly and he originally enjoyed the interest they showed in him. Over time, however, he became uncomfortable with papering over some of the more difficult details of his life and sought to be more open with his friends about the role Mamaw and other family members had played. Simultaneously, the author began to feel like an outsider in Middletown as well. At one point, he lied to a stranger, claiming he did not go to Yale, because he felt uncomfortable admitting it. These experiences showed him some of the drawbacks of social mobility. While an increase in wealth and quality of life are certainly positive, Vance realized that it also led to social discomfort. Working-class and professional-class people have vastly different lifestyles and the transition between the two can be dramatic and challenging.

In Chapter 13, Vance introduces Usha, the woman who would become his wife. The two began dating at the end of their first year in college and Usha was instrumental in helping J.D. navigate the intricacies of law school. She encouraged him to engage with professors and attend networking events, a previously foreign concept to J.D. Through this, and the annual law firm recruitment cycle, the author realized how important personal relationships and social capital can be in professional success. Even so, he struggled with some of the norms of professional dinners and elite society.

Another major resource for J.D. throughout law school was a professor, Amy Chua. Amy helped him set goals and determine which opportunities would help him reach those goals. In particular, J.D. became obsessed with getting a clerkship with a high-powered federal judge. Though she helped him with the application, Amy eventually encouraged him to withdraw from consideration. She claimed that, given his interest in public service, such a clerkship would be unnecessary and likely destroy his relationship with Usha. J.D. heeded this advice and, along with Usha, secured a clerkship in northern Kentucky following his first year of law school.

Chapter 14 begins with Vance explaining that, at the beginning of his second year of law school he felt extremely optimistic about his professional prospects. At the same time, he realized there were issues in his relationship with Usha. Usha noted that J.D. was like a turtle; when he became upset, we would withdraw completely into his “shell.” After a particularly angry outburst at this girlfriend, J.D. left their hotel in Washington, D.C. and wandered the city alone for a few hours. This, he realized, mirrored his mother’s practice of withdrawing to a hotel whenever she had a significant argument with one of her boyfriends or husbands. After finding Usha on the street -- she had followed him out of concern for his safety -- he realized he did not know how to appropriately address emotional disagreements. Compared to his role models, Usha’s family seemed to genuinely enjoy each other’s company and settle their differences constructively. In seeking to address these issues, Vance realized that he had been affected by what psychologists call “adverse childhood experiences,” traumatic events whose consequences affect someone’s adult life. He learned that frequent events like these cause a person’s brain chemistry to change, putting them constantly in a stressed and combative mood. He also realized that most of his family members had similar experiences. To this day, the author claims that he struggles to respond appropriately to stressful events. This realization caused him to extensively question what percentage of a person’s behavior is a predetermined response to their life experiences. This made him both fearful for his own prospects and more forgiving of his mother’s mistakes. The chapter ends at the time of Vance’s law school graduation, at which point, he states, he was still uncertain about the difference between love and war.

Analysis

In contrast to the optimism of Chapter 10-11, this section presents are more nuanced depiction of J.D.’s success in life. At Yale, the author became increasingly aware of the differences between himself and his classmates. Although the Marines and OSU were major turning points in his life, they did not produce the displacement that law school did. While J.D.'s academic abilities were comparable, most of his colleagues had a dramatically different social background. He gives an extensive account of his difficulties in social situations which others found completely normal. He concluded from these experiences that professional-class lifestyles are not merely are a wealthier version of his own. Social mobility, therefore, can be challenging, even given its positive effects. It is also telling that J.D. felt like an outsider in Middletown when he returned for visits. As he transitioned into upper middle-class society, he also lost some his connections and familiarity with his hillbilly community. Despite its flaws, J.D. clearly admires this community and loves his friends and family, yet he feels increasingly distant from them.

J.D.’s optimism is also affected by his relationship with Usha. It is clear that he loves his wife deeply, but their relationship exposed character flaws with which he continues to struggle. The author notes repeatedly throughout the memoir that his upbringing provided few positive examples of how couples should resolve disagreements. Many of those around him have been divorced and remarried multiple times. All of the fights that he witnessed as a child were aggressive, violent, and filled with personal attacks. His own experiences taught him to be suspicious of apologies and promises to improve. He

draws a sharp contrast between this and what he witnesses with Usha's family, who astound him with their lack of "drama" (225). Even now, Vance remains deeply impacted by his upbringing and concerned about its influence in his life. He demonstrates that while he has achieved "success" by any metric, some of the most insidious aspects of hillbilly culture are still deeply ingrained in his personality.

Vocabulary

accrue, forlorn, perjoratively, anomaly, gregarious, morass

Chapter 15-Conclusion

Summary

Chapter 15 begins with J.D. checking his mother, who had recently become homeless, into a cheap hotel in Middletown. The deterioration he viewed around the hotel, including a man passed out in his car after taking heroin, contrasted with his own stature in life. He was a Yale law school graduate and the former editor of the Yale Law Review. He lived in Cincinnati with his new wife and two dogs. The author states, however, that the simple fact that he was at this hotel demonstrates that his upward mobility was a more complicated story. Though he promised himself that he would stop helping his mother, J.D. became more sympathetic as he again explored Christian faith and began to understand the role a difficult childhood can play in someone's life. He remains somewhat detached from his mother, refusing to help her when his own financial or emotional priorities would conflict, but makes some effort to recognize the challenges she faced. The author states that he is frequently asked what the government can do to help communities and families like his rise out of poverty. Generally, he believes that no such solutions exist. In discussions with relatives, he determined that the single most important determinant of success was a supportive family member. Mamaw played that role in J.D.'s life, but he acknowledges that many children are not his lucky. Given this, he believes that the government should do what little it can to encourage these families dynamics by, for example, making it easier for extended family members to serve as foster parents. He also feels that the government should invest more heavily in early childhood education, rather than colleges that reach students too late to be effective. He admits that none of this, however, will solve some of the ingrained beliefs, such as the idea that getting good grades made you a "sissy" (245), that were so damaging.

The Conclusion begins with J.D.'s explanation of how poor and rich families celebrate Christmas differently. For families like his, parents were always obsessed with buying as much as they could possibly afford, and often things they could not. Rich families, by contrast, do not feel the need to spend a certain amount of money on their children. He uses this to demonstrate how these families increasingly live in two separate worlds. The author explains how he ate lunch with a teenager named Brian who reminded him of a younger version of himself. Brian's mother also struggled with substance abuse and it was clear that he did not always have enough to eat. The author admits that, save for a few instances of luck, he could easily have been like Brian, without a Mamaw or Papaw to intervene in his life. This was disconcerting to the author and he states, without knowing how to achieve this, that hillbillies need to stop blaming the government and companies for their trouble and figure out how to give people like Brian the opportunity to succeed. The memoir ends with J.D. recounting a nightmare he often had throughout his life in which a villain of some kind -- his mother, a Marine Corps drill instructor, a barking dog -- chased him around a tree house as he struggled to escape. In the latest version however, he was the villain chasing his dog Casper. He felt

Casper’s terror but when he finally caught him, he hugged him. When J.D. woke up, he felt relief that he had controlled his temper.

Analysis

This section uses various metaphorical anecdotes to summarize Vance’s primary arguments. The author begins by contrasting the hotel he is forced to find for his homeless mother with the success he has reached in life. He uses descriptive language, noting the size of the spiders in the hotel lobby and the elderly appearance of the 40-year-old clerk, to demonstrate the state of this area. As he makes this contrast however, he notes that situations like this are still obviously a part of his life. This demonstrates, generally, how aspects of his childhood continue to affect his adult life, despite that fact that he had “achieved the American dream” (236). He continues to address the impact his mother’s failings have had on his own happiness, even as he seeks to separate himself from her. Vance demonstrates this idea on a more emotional level by describing his recurring nightmare. Previous versions had always involved him being chased by a “monster” from his life, often his own mother. In this incarnation however, he was the monster, chasing his own dog out of anger. It is clear that his greatest anxiety was not the threat of others, but the destructive nature of his own temper. While J.D. has “escaped” many of his earlier challenges, he still experiences an internal struggle with his own emotions.

The author also describes that limited role he believes government can play in addressing the problems he presents throughout his memoir. He does this in a systematic way, but also through Brian, a boy he presents as a younger version of himself. He realized that Brian is at risk of continuing the cycle of poverty in his community because of a lack of a strong parental figure like Mamaw. Given this, he repeatedly claims that a supportive family structure is essential to individual success. Ultimately, this is not something the government can ever guarantee. This major idea, that hillbillies must solve their own problems, mirrors one of the first descriptions he gives of their culture. Vance states clearly in the Prologue that hillbillies are fiercely independent and skeptical of outsiders, particularly those that want to “solve” their problems. Now, he argues, they must stop blaming those same outsiders for causing their problems in the first place.

Vocabulary

confabulate, abysmal

Important People

J.D. Vance

J.D. Vance, referred to as J.D. throughout the book, is the author and primary focus of this memoir. J.D. was born in Ohio as a self-described hillbilly. He lived primarily in Middletown, OH during his childhood, but moved frequently between homes. J.D. was initially raised primarily by his mother and stepfather, his biological father having given him up for adoption after divorcing his mother. He was initially a happy child, despite his unusual family structure, but he became increasingly troubled as his mother became emotionally unstable. J.D. moved frequently between houses and a series of boyfriends, often experiencing emotional abuse from his mother. This instability was extremely stressful to Vance and he began to struggle in school. Before his second year of high school, he moved to live permanently with his grandmother, Mamaw. J.D. had always enjoyed a close relationship with Mamaw and he credits her guidance and support in allowing him to be successful.

After graduating high school, J.D. joined the Marines before attending Ohio State University. He states that the Marines instilled a sense of discipline and confidence, signaling a turning point in his life. J.D. eventually attended Yale Law school, where he met his wife, Usha. He is now a successful lawyer. J.D.'s story is one of success and social mobility, but he continues to struggle with some of the effects of his difficult childhood, most notably challenges in controlling and constructively expressing his emotions.

Mamaw/Bonnie Blanton

Bonnie Blanton, referred to as Mamaw throughout the book, was J.D.'s grandmother. Mamaw grew up in Jackson, KY as a member of what the author considers a prominent hillbilly family. At a young age, she moved to Middletown, OH with her husband as part of a significant migration of families from rural Appalachia to industrial towns in the Midwest. Vance claims that Mamaw always loved children and had aspirations of becoming of a children's lawyer that were never realized. After a series of miscarriages, Mamaw gave birth to three children, Jimmy, Lori, and Bev. Shortly after the birth of her two daughters, she separated from her husband, but the two remained close throughout their lives.

Mamaw is portrayed a "crazy hillbilly," who was deeply committed to her family and the traditional values of her community. She regularly threatened people with violence and often criticized her family members, though always with good intentions. Mamaw was incredibly close with Lindsay and J.D. throughout her life, often offering them a refuge when their mother became particularly hostile. Most notably, she allowed J.D. to live in her home as he finished high school and insisted that her grandson earn strong grades and go to college. Vance credits her deep belief in the idea of the American Dream and

her demanding attitude with allowing his eventual success. Mamaw died approximately halfway through J.D.'s Marine Corps service and was buried in her ancestral home in rural Kentucky.

Papaw/Jim Vance

Jim Vance, known as Papaw, was J.D.'s grandfather. Like his wife, Papaw was born in Jackson, KY as the member of hillbilly family with a storied history. He moved to Middletown, OH shortly after finishing high school to work at the Armco steel plant, as he would do for his entire working life. Though he played a secondary role to Mamaw, it is clear that Papaw's support for J.D., particularly when his mother became emotionally abusive, was incredibly important. Papaw died when J.D. was in middle school and was buried in rural Kentucky.

Mom/Bev

J.D.'s mother, whom he calls Mom, is the youngest child of Mamaw and Papaw. Compared to her siblings, Mom had a difficult life and struggled with drug addiction and a series of failed relationships. Throughout J.D.'s early childhood, Mom enjoyed a relatively stable relationship with her third husband Bob. After their divorce and the death of her father, however, it was revealed that Mom struggled with an addiction to prescription drugs. This, coupled, with a long list of boyfriends who quickly entered and left the family's life, created an unstable environment for J.D. and Lindsay. As her children aged, Mom became increasingly abusive, often erupting in angry outbursts, and was arrested multiple times. Occasionally, Mom managed to fight her addiction and continue working as a nurse, but she frequently relapsed, taxing her family's emotional and financial resources each time. In his adult life, J.D. is mildly involved with his mother and attempts to help her at times of crisis. Simultaneously, he maintains some distance, due to residual resentment and a desire to prioritize himself and those he is closest to.

Don Bowman

Don Bowman is J.D.'s biological father. When J.D. was extremely young, Don relinquished his parental rights, believing that decision to be in the best interest of his son. Eventually he remarried, had additional children, and became intensely religious. Don was was supportive of J.D. when the two reconnected and J.D. enjoyed spending time with his Dad's new family. While J.D. adopted some of his father's religious beliefs, he remained unsure about his faith and thus never became extremely close to Don.

Lindsay

Lindsay is J.D.'s older sister. Lindsay was born shortly after Mom graduated high school and played an important role in J.D.'s life. Particularly when their mother was absent or abusive, Lindsay took on a maternal role, caring for both herself and J.D. As she aged,

she sought more independence but remained close to her family in Middletown after her marriage. Lindsay and J.D. remain extremely close.

Aunt Wee/Lori

Aunt Wee is J.D.'s aunt and Mom's older sister. Unlike Mom, Aunt Wee is relatively successful in life and happily married. Although she remained present in J.D.'s life throughout the challenging events he experienced with his mother, J.D. was reluctant to draw on her for support, given that she had children of her own.

Usha

Usha is J.D.'s wife, whom he met and began dating at Yale Law School. Usha was instrumental in helping J.D. navigate the social environment of Yale and the law profession generally. She grew up in a stable family, whom J.D. observed love and enjoy each other, and thus provides a foil to the author's upbringing. J.D. and Usha live together in Cincinnati with their two dogs.

Amy Chua

Amy Chua was a professor at Yale Law School who became a personal mentor to J.D. Like Usha, she helped him navigate the more nuanced aspects of law school by helping him set career goals and determine which opportunities were worth pursuing. She convinced J.D. to turn down a prestigious clerkship in order to preserve his relationship with Usha.

Bob Hamel

Bob Hamel is J.D.'s legal father and Mom's third husband. J.D. lived with Bob during his childhood and generally liked him. Bob fought frequently and viciously with Mom and the two eventually divorced.

Matt

Matt was one of Mom's boyfriends, whom J.D. lived with during his freshman year of high school. J.D. genuinely liked Matt and remains in contact with him, but his relatively short presence in J.D.'s life was consistent with a lack of a single, stable father figure.

Objects/Places

Hillbilly

Hillbilly is the term Vance uses to describe people like him. Hillbillies trace their routes to Scots-Irish families in rural Appalachia and now also live in many small Midwestern cities.

Scots-Irish

Scots-Irish refers to the group of immigrants who settled in Appalachia and whose descendants Vance refers to as hillbillies.

Jackson, KY

Jackson is a town in rural Kentucky and the ancestral home of Vance's family. The author uses Jackson to symbolize rural hillbilly communities as a whole.

Middletown, OH

Middletown is a small, formerly industrial city in Ohio that is home to many hillbilly families who migrated from rural Kentucky.

Armco

Armco was a steel company that provided jobs to numerous hillbilly families following WWII, facilitating their migration away from rural Kentucky.

Rust Belt

The Rust Belt is a general term referring to the small industrial cities in the Midwestern United States.

Appalachia

Appalachia refers to the rural areas in the Appalachian mountains stretching from Pennsylvania to Alabama.

The Marines

The Marines is the branch of the American armed forces in which J.D. served.

Ohio State University

Ohio State University (OSU) is the college that J.D. attended for his bachelor's degree after serving in the marines.

Yale Law School

Yale Law School is the law school that J.D. attends after graduating from OSU.

Themes

The juxtaposition of changing physical location without changing life situation

Vance juxtaposes physical movement with situational constancy to demonstrate to the permanence of hillbilly culture. Typically in literature, a move between two locations is used as a device to signify deeper change in a character or plot. In his memoir however, Vance generally rejects this idea and argues that the major elements of hillbilly society persist regardless of their location. This is immediately clear in his description of the migration of hillbilly families from rural areas like Jackson, KY to industrial urban centers like Middletown, OH following WWII. This was a major economic shift for these families, but their culture remained largely constant. Vance states that many families, and even entire communities, uprooted collectively at the encouragement of companies like Armco. This ensured that the hillbilly values of rural areas travelled with them to urban ones. The author demonstrates this by noting that many of his friends referred to their hometown as “Middletucky” (21), a combination of “Middletown” and “Kentucky,” meant to depict the similarity between the two. The role of Kentucky, as a cultural constant, is also clear in the fact that J.D. considered Jackson his “home” throughout his entire childhood. He had never officially lived there, but the family significance of this location outweighed his actual physical connection to Middletown.

The author also presents a somber element to this theme in his later life. One of his most difficult periods was the time he spent moving between houses with his mother and her various boyfriends. In this case, physical relocation not only failed to positively change the conditions of life, it made them decidedly worse. Only when Vance lived with Mamaw and enjoyed a constant physical location was he able to make improvements in his situation. A second somber element to this theme is the way in which some of the most destructive aspects of his childhood continue to affect his adult life. As he aged, J.D. moved to multiple new locations with the Marines, to OSU and Yale Law School, and eventually to Cincinnati with Usha. Despite all these physical shifts, he still struggles with the emotional toll of his childhood homes. As with the migration of hillbilly families, these aspects of his community have remained influential on his personality, even as he moved away from Middletown.

A parent as someone who can be taken advantage of

J.D.’s conception of parents as someone to “take advantage of” (103) shaped his interactions with many of family members. The author first presents this theme following Papaw’s death while describing the guilt that he and Lindsay felt for their treatment of their grandfather. He states clearly that they both loved and admired him, but that Lindsay, in particular, tended to ignore him around her teenage friends. Like all of the parental figures in their lives, Lindsay and J.D. viewed parents in terms of the resources they could provide, not primarily as participants in a loving relationship. This is a result

of the generally neglectful treatment they received from their mother, forcing them to seek support from other family members.

This reality affected J.D. in two major ways: first, it made him reluctant to approach other family members as his mother's behavior deteriorated. Even though he was extremely unhappy and stressed living with Mom's boyfriends, he feared burdening Mamaw by mentioning this fact. As he viewed this, Mamaw should have been able to enjoy her elderly years and not be forced to care for her teenage grandson. A similar dynamic existed between J.D. and Lindsay. Although his sister played a maternal role in his early life, J.D. sought to maintain some distance as Lindsay entered adulthood, hoping to give her the opportunity to be independent from their damaged family. This reaction is understandable, but it likely damaged J.D. in the long-term. The author clearly argues that living with Mamaw was the single more important factor in his later success. Had he done so for longer and avoided many of the difficult moments he experienced with his mother, this would have been even more beneficial. All things considered, Vance has certainly succeeded in life, but it is likely that he would feel more comfortable in his adult relationships had he not been afraid to take advantage of his grandmother.

The tendency of hillbillies to cite the importance of hard work without engaging in it

Vance argues that the most significant failure of hillbilly culture is its aversion to hard work, despite the importance people claim to place on it. Early in the memoir, Vance notes that hillbillies constantly claim to be hardworking. This, he argues, is a central value in hillbilly culture. It also impacts a more general worldview in which people frequently criticize the laziness of others who abuse government systems for personal gain. Despite this stated position, however, the author argues that his society actually suffers from a serious aversion to personal responsibility and work ethic. He cites numerous anecdotal experiences of people quitting well-paying jobs because they did not enjoy them or welfare recipients claiming that they alone are deserving of such support, despite never having worked in their lives. He also incorporates academic research that verifies this argument. The values, Vance argues are also transmitted to children. He notes few families around him set high expectations for their students or encouraged them to earn good grades. Mamaw was an anomaly in this sense.

The author emphasizes this theme by contrasting it with his own shift in attitude upon joining the Marine Corps. There, he states, he became convinced of his own ability to affect the conditions of his life. He had joined the Marines precisely because he felt a lack of work ethic would doom him in college, but the military instilled in him the motivation necessary to complete a bachelor's degree in 23 months. As a result, J.D. possessed an optimism that was foreign to those in his hometown. Having actually pushed himself to succeed, the lack of motivation in communities like Middletown becomes painfully obvious. It for this reason Vance argues that government intervention will never be sufficient to solve the problems of hillbilly society. Instead, members of that

society need to genuinely acknowledge the importance of hard work, rather than just speak of its value.

The lack of positive examples in family and marital interactions

The most enduring effect of Vance's childhood is his difficulty in managing conflicts with Usha due to a lack of positive role models among married family members. J.D. earliest experiences with a married couple was living with his mother and legal father, Bob. While the author argues this relationship was stable for a time, the two had vicious arguments, primarily related to financial matters. It is from these experiences that J.D. "learned" how to resolve conflicts with one's spouse; screaming was necessary, violence was acceptable if the woman struck first, personal and hurtful attacks were encouraged, and the most effective tactic was to leave the house with your children and not tell your spouse where you were going. For J.D. these experiences were entirely normal. He even enjoyed watching his parents argue, viewing it like a sports game. Further, no one else in his life provided a better model. Although Mamaw and Papaw were close, they were technically divorced and had experienced their own violent arguments in earlier life. Aunt Wee and Uncle Jimmy were both happily married, but lived too far away to be truly influential. By the time Lindsay married, J.D.'s impressions of marital conflict were deeply set.

These childhood experiences clearly impact J.D.'s marriage to Usha. This is most clearly shown through his reaction to Usha when the two were staying in Washington, D.C. Like his mother, J.D.'s natural response to conflict was to escape the situation as quickly as possible, thus he left his hotel room and wandered the city for several hours. It was clear to him, however, that this type of response was unacceptable. When the two reunited, Usha made clear that he needed to learn how to communicate with her effectively. To emphasize this, J.D. describes his surprise at seeing the respectful and loving way Usha's family members interact. Unlike his own, they did not accuse each of other of disloyalty or criticize loved ones behind their backs. These relationship difficulties are the most prevalent aspect of hillbilly culture in Vance's adult life. Although he has managed to become economically successful, the lack of role model marriages continues to impact his relationships.

The role of outsider states

Vance repeatedly uses the concept of an outsider to depict the extreme differences between working-class and professional-class society. Early in the memoir, Vance states clearly that hillbillies do not like outsiders. Their insular communities, particularly in rural areas, pride themselves on the ability to address their own problems, without external interference. This suspicion of people unlike them is a defining characteristic of hillbilly culture and in many ways explains its enduring quality. Even as hillbilly families migrated to midwestern societies, they remained closely connected to those like them and generally avoided integrating into existing communities. This cultural aspect also

explains the entire existence of this memoir. Vance notes that many scholars have examined the problems of his society and published extensive findings and potential solutions. Hillbillies, however, have a strong tendency to reject any such “outsider” influence. Instead, the author clearly hopes that his own status as an insider will give his book more legitimacy.

Vance’s belief that he was an outsider at Yale emphasizes the differences between this community and his own. While he was academically capable of performing at law school, J.D. struggled with the social aspects of networking and navigating elite society. Without the help of Usha and Amy Chua, he probably would not have been successful. The author also presents the reverse of this dynamic in his return to Middletown just before and following law school. At that, J.D. felt like an outsider in his own community. His education, life experience, and sense of optimism all separated him from his former peers. The fact that J.D. experienced this in both environments is telling. As he integrated more into professional-class society, he became more distant from the working-class one of Middletown. This supports his statement that these two societies are vastly different. It was impossible for J.D. to secure a place in both communities; acclimating to one requires abandoning the other. It is clear from Vance’s experiences that a stark divides exists between them.

Styles

Structure

As a memoir, this book is structured in a generally chronological way. It begins with a general overview of hillbilly culture and its value, before specific depicting the history of Vance's family. This section is relatively short and quickly shifts to J.D.'s own life. Throughout the memoir, the author uses specific anecdotes to illustrate larger patterns in his life. For example, his mother experienced multiple cycles of recovery and relapse in her drug addiction, but J.D. describes only the most impactful of these events. Further, he frequently inserts examples of academic research to provide larger context to his narrative. While this story is about his life, it is intended to give insight into hillbilly society as a whole. Particularly in later sections, the author also incorporates specific suggestions on how to improve the prospects of people like him. By his own admission, government and other outside-imposed solutions would have limited effectiveness, thus he also describes the ways in which hillbilly society must change itself.

Perspective

Vance's perspective is that of someone who has directly experienced the events described. This is obvious, given that this is his memoir, but it also is a window into hillbilly society generally. While he inserts academic and statistical research, these elements are secondary to the emotional and anecdotal evidence he provides to support his arguments. It is clear that the author considers this perspective to be an important one. A great deal of work exists on hillbilly societies, but he notes that those societies are naturally skeptical of the input of outsiders. By writing this memoir, he hopes to avoid this stigma and reach audiences within communities like his own.

Tone

Vance's tone aligns with his basic thesis; he has been generally successful, but this success is rare among people who grew up like him. When describing his own life events, particularly those related to the Marines and OSU, Vance is extremely optimistic. He describes feelings of invincibility and the satisfaction he derives from working extremely hard. His descriptions of Yale present an idyllic environment and he lovingly depicts his wife Usha. By contrast, he uses a much more somber tone when presenting Middletown and his peers there. He often gives the worst examples of the concerning trends he observed and describes a general sense of hopelessness and pessimism. By interspersing his own experiences with these overall descriptions, the differences in tone, and thus outlook, become especially stark.

Quotes

So I didn't write this book because I've accomplished something extraordinary. I wrote this book because I've achieved something quite ordinary, which doesn't happen to most kids who grow up like me.
-- J.D. Vance (Intro paragraph 2)

Importance: This demonstrates that Vance considers his accomplishments to be ordinary, but remarkable because few people in his community accomplish even ordinary things. It provides the justification for writing this memoir.

But this book is about something else: what goes on in the lives of real people when the industrial economy goes south. It's about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It's about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it.
-- J.D. Vance (Intro paragraph 1)

Importance: This presents Vance's general thesis, that people in his community have compounded economic trouble with a destructive culture.

People talk about hard work all the time in places like Middletown. You can walk through a town where 30 percent of the young men work fewer than twenty hours a week and find not a single person aware of his own laziness.
-- J.D. Vance (chapter 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: This is one of several instances in which Vance claims that people in cities like Middletown laud hard work without every actually doing it.

Mom and Bob's problems were my first introduction to marital conflict resolution. Here were the takeaways: Never speak at a reasonable volume when screaming will do; if the fight gets a little too intense, it's okay to slap and punch, so long as the man doesn't hit first; always express your feelings in a way that's insulting and hurtful to your partner; if all else fails, take the kids and the dog to a local motel, and don't tell your spouse where to find you—if he or she knows where the children are, he or she won't worry as much, and your departure won't be as effective.
-- J.D. Vance (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: This demonstrates how Vance's early experiences with married couples taught him counterproductive ways to settle differences with his loved ones. These experiences eventually made it difficult for him to manage his relationship with Usha.

Despite the topographical differences and the different regional economies of the South and the industrial Midwest, my travels had been confined largely to places where the people looked and acted like my family. We ate the same foods, watched the same sports, and practiced the same religion. That's why I felt so much kinship with those people at the courthouse: They were hillbilly transplants in one way or another, just like

me.
-- J.D. Vance (chapter 5 paragraph 3)

Importance: Vance argues that although it occupies a large geographic area, hillbilly culture is universal to people transplants from rural Appalachia.

I'm sure that a sociologist and a psychologist, sitting in a room together, could explain why I lost interest in drugs, why my grades improved, why I aced the SAT, and why I found a couple of teachers who inspired me to love learning. But what I remember most of all is that I was happy—I no longer feared the school bell at the end of the day, I knew where I'd be living the next month, and no one's romantic decisions affected my life. And out of that happiness came so many of the opportunities I've had for the past twelve years.
-- J.D. Vance (chapter 9 paragraph 2)

Importance: Vance suggests that the primary reason he became successful was because he was happy while with Mamaw as he finished high school.

This is why, whenever people ask me what I'd most like to change about the white working class, I say, 'The feeling that our choices don't matter.' The Marine Corps excised that feeling like a surgeon does a tumor.
-- J.D. Vance (chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: This demonstrates one of Vance's major arguments, that members of his community need to take personal responsibility for their choices.

Social psychologists have shown that group belief is a powerful motivator in performance. When groups perceive that it's in their interest to work hard and achieve things, members of that group outperform other similarly situated individuals. It's obvious why: If you believe that hard work pays off, then you work hard; if you think it's hard to get ahead even when you try, then why try at all?
-- J.D. Vance (chapter 11 paragraph 1)

Importance: This supports Vance's argument about the importance of personal responsibility with scientific research.

For the first time in my life, I felt like an outsider in Middletown. And what turned me into an alien was my optimism.
-- J.D. Vance (chapter 11 paragraph 1)

Importance: Vance argues that, by being socially mobile, he has become an outsider in his own community. He also states the main difference between him and others in the community is his optimism about the future.

Each benefited from the same types of experiences in one way or another. They had a family member they could count on. And they saw—from a family friend, an uncle, or a work mentor—what was available and what was possible.

-- J.D. Vance (chapter 15 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote results from conversations Vance had with family members in which he concludes that the primary determinant of success is the presence of a supportive adult in a child's life.

However you want to define these two groups and their approach to giving — rich and poor; educated and uneducated; upper-class and working-class — their members increasingly occupy two separate worlds. As a cultural emigrant from one group to the other, I am acutely aware of their differences.
-- J.D. Vance (Conclusion paragraph 2)

Importance: Vance argues that upper-class Americans live in an entirely different society than working-class ones with a different set of norms and values.

But are we tough enough to do what needs to be done to help a kid like Brian? Are we tough enough to build a church that forces kids like me to engage with the world rather than withdraw from it? Are we tough enough to look ourselves in the mirror and admit that our conduct harms our children? Public policy can help, but there is no government that can fix these problems for us.
-- J.D. Vance (Conclusion paragraph 2-3)

Importance: In this quote, Vance uses the hillbilly respect for "toughness" to argue that his society needs to stop expecting conditions to change without significant effort on their own part.

Topics for Discussion

What are the general characteristics that Vance says are fundamental to hillbilly culture? How did hillbilly families adapt these elements to their new communities after migrating to northern cities?

This question ensures that students understand the basics of hillbilly culture and how it remained fairly constant even when many families left rural Appalachia.

Why does J.D. consider Jackson, KY to be his home, despite the fact that he lived the majority of his life in Middletown, OH?

This encourages students to understand the important role that his family's homestead plays in J.D.'s life, particularly as his anchor in hillbilly culture.

Describe J.D.'s feelings toward the actions of his family, particularly those of the Blanton men. How did his opinion of those actions shift over time?

This encourages students to understand why Vance admired his family's storied past a child but developed a more nuanced view as he aged.

What does Vance argue is the typical opinion of members of his community in regards to work ethic? How well does this opinion align with their actions?

This demonstrates to students that while hillbilly culture prizes hard work in theory, many of its members do not exhibit a strong work ethic.

At what point did J.D. truly begin to struggle in school and exhibit signs of extreme stress? Why did this occur?

This challenges students to consider the impact that Mom's emotional instability and alcoholism had on J.D.'s life.

Why did J.D. become interested in his father's religion? How did religion impact his relationship with his father?

This demonstrates that J.D. was interested in religion primarily for the support system a church could provide, not because of any particular faith. It also challenges students to consider why religion initially brought J.D. closer to his father, but eventually proved to be a dividing factor in their relationship.

How did J.D. and Lindsay define what a parent is? How did this impact J.D.'s willingness to reach out to Mamaw when he is dissatisfied with living with his mother?

This encourages students to consider why J.D. and Lindsay viewed parents in transactional terms. It also shows the impact this view had on J.D.'s unwillingness to burden Mamaw by asking her for help.

What impact did Mamaw have on J.D.'s life? Why does he consider her to be so instrumental in his success?

This encourages students to consider the importance of a stable home life and Mamaw's high expectations in determining J.D.'s path in life.

Why does J.D. consider his service in the Marine Corps to be a major turning point in his life? What important lessons did he draw from this experience?

This demonstrates why J.D. credits the Marines with instilling a sense of discipline and confidence and the importance those traits carry in the rest of his life.

Why did J.D. feel like an outsider at both Yale Law School and in Middletown? How does this relate to the concept of social mobility?

This challenges students to understand J.D.'s transition between two vastly different societies and demonstrates the drawbacks of social mobility.

Despite his economic success, in what ways does J.D. still feel negatively impacted by his childhood? How does this relate to the constancy of cultural norms generally?

This encourages students to understand why J.D. struggles to control his emotions and communicate effectively with his wife as a result of the role models he observed as a child. It also relates to his general opinion that economic mobility and social mobility are not identical.