

SUMMARY

HILLBILLY ELEGY

J.D. VANCE



Summary of Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance

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The shocking story of a man who grew up in working-class America surrounded by poverty, violence, and addiction but managed to follow his dreams and climb the ladder to success.



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Introduction

Hillbilly. Redneck. White trash. You've heard these terms, but what do they mean? J.D. Vance grew up in this hillbilly culture, which refers to working-class white Americans who live in the South, Appalachia, and the Rust Belt. People living in these areas find themselves stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty, drugs, and violence. This demographic has been slowly disintegrating over the past forty years and has been reported on frequently; however, none have given a shocking analysis quite like Vance who experienced the hillbilly culture firsthand. In this classic American Dream story, Vance shares his experience living with a family riddled with violence, money problems, and both alcohol and drug addiction. Though the odds were against him, Vance escaped the throes of the struggling working-class American and managed to make it as a leader in a Silicon Valley investment firm.

Hillbilly Culture

Growing up surrounded by the Appalachian culture, Vance lived amongst the hillbillies of America. While the people of Appalachia were kind and magnanimous, they were also the type of people who avoided working hard and made excuses for the state of their lives. Because of Vance's upbringing, he identifies with the millions of working-class Americans who don't have college degrees and experience generational poverty. But to truly understand the life of Vance, we must go back to the lives of his grandparents, Mamaw and Papaw.

Born around 1930 in Jackson, Kentucky, Mamaw and Pawpaw grew up as hill people, or hillbillies, as they are so-called in Appalachian culture. Wanting to escape the poverty of Jackson, Vance's grandparents escaped to Middletown, Ohio where Papaw landed a job at Armco, a major steel company. Of course, Middletown saw a flood of people as others had the same idea and Armco had plenty of opportunities to spare.

Working in the factories of Ohio provided Vance's grandparents the money to live comfortably and provide for their families. However, cities like Jackson, Kentucky began to decline rapidly as people continued to escape and find opportunities elsewhere. Even worse, Jackson began experiencing more and more citizens developing alcohol and drug addictions. The education system began to plummet as well and the situation got so bad that the state was forced to step in and seize control. Poor parents had no choice but to send their children to schools that lead them nowhere and barely prepared them for college.

As Vance grew older, it quickly became apparent that the people of Jackson were suffering because they chose to do nothing about their situation. People are hesitant to speak about their problems and find the mere discussion of them offensive. For example, when ABC News filmed a documentary on Appalachian America highlighting the dental problems plaguing the youth because of their overconsumption of sugary soft drinks,

the locals responded by shaming ABC. They claimed the report was not only offensive but also an invasion of their privacy.

Additionally, a study conducted on local teens suggests that they avoid uncomfortable truths from an early age. This causes the teens to create an “alternate reality” where they avoid finding solutions to their problems and choose to pretend that a better truth exists. Such tendencies make it near impossible for them to understand that their problems are real and should be dealt with, instead, they simply ignore their situation.

Escaping a Working-Class Life Doesn't Guarantee Escaping a Working-Class Mindset

In 1951, Mamaw and Papaw had their first child, Jimmy. Jimmy, J.D.'s uncle, describes their upbringing as a typical middle-class household; however, their lives were much different than the average family. They led good lives, Papaw earned a reasonable wage and they were able to live more comfortably than the family they left in Kentucky. But, on the inside, their household was far from normal.

Papaw's alcohol addiction quickly spiraled out of control and his violence became even worse. On the other hand, Mamaw handled her husband's drinking by neglecting the house and soon, the rooms began filling to the brim with trash and things of no value. However, their hillbilly culture taught them to ignore their problems, so they believed that violence, drinking, and neglect were a part of everyday life and there was no reason to change. Soon, however, Mamaw became fed up with her husband's drinking and threatened to kill him if he ever came home drunk again. Just a week later, Papaw came home completely inebriated and Mamaw proved that her threat was anything but empty. She doused her husband in gasoline and lit him on fire. Miraculously, he escaped with only mild burns, but witnessing such violent behavior eventually took a toll on the children.

As the kids began to grow older, Mamaw and Papaw began to see the effects their lifestyle had on their vulnerable children. Vance's mother, Bev, wound up pregnant at eighteen so her parents dedicated their lives to helping their children and compensating for their horrible past. While they were working on bettering their lives, the city of Middletown where they lived, began to deteriorate in front of their eyes. As Vance grew up, the town was no longer the prosperous place it once was. Armco was rapidly winding down as they merged with Kawasaki, and the next generation of workers didn't want to work for a steel company anymore. Everyone was in the pursuit of the

American dream, the problem? They weren't willing to work hard to achieve it.

Most people didn't value the importance of higher education in Middletown, Vance even remembers rarely being reprimanded for his poor grades. Overall, the people had a negligent attitude towards schooling which continues today. Reports suggest that while working-class whites were working harder than their college-educated counterparts, in reality, they talked more about working hard than actually working hard.

Vance's Unstable Life Began at a Young Age

At the young age of six, Vance's mother had already divorced her father and remarried a man named Bob who ended up adopting Vance. During this period, his mother also got her nursing license and was determined to change her life around and give Vance the normal life he deserved. She celebrated each time Vance asked to read a book and she even helped him with his school projects. Everything was coming together for the family.

Soon, his mother and stepfather, Bob, packed up and moved the family to Preble County to escape Mamaw's constant interference; however, their relationship began to worsen. Vance's parents began arguing and the fighting escalated to the point that Vance had trouble sleeping at night. Because of his traumatic home life, Vance's grades started slipping and his health was declining. During this period, his mother had her first suicide attempt in which she intentionally crashed her brand new minivan. Her relationship with Bob was rocky, so she packed her belongings and took Vance back to Middletown where they could live with their grandparents.

Back in Middletown, the city was no longer what it once was. Now riddled with drugs and alcohol, Bev's drinking problem began to worsen. Once, she even tried to apologize for her constant drinking by taking Vance to the mall to buy him her love. On the way there, however, she had a psychotic breakdown and stepped on the gas threatening to kill them both. Fortunately, she pulled the car over before crashing, but she took the opportunity to turn to violence and brutally beat Vance. The situation got so out of control, the police took Bev away in handcuffs.

Now in the custody of his grandparents, Vance's life became more confusing than ever. He was devastated when he found out his sister Lindsay was only his half-sister. His mother also brought around a revolving door of men and Vance realized at a young age that he could only depend on himself. He craved a father figure in his life, so when his biological father, Don Bowman, came back into the picture, Vance was

skeptical but elated. He noticed his father wasn't as violent as he once was and that he had changed. That's because his father found the love of God and devoted his life to the Christian faith. Craving something to believe in, Vance latched onto the idea and spent his time teaching himself about religion.

Vance's Constant Movement

Despite the number of father figures that came in and out of Vance's life as a child, there was always one man that was there for him. His Papaw. That's why when Vance found his grandfather dead in his chair, he struggled to overcome his grief and cope with the loss of the best father figure he ever had. His mother, however, suffered the most as her violence became even worse and she was eventually admitted to a psychiatric clinic.

During this time, Bev picked up a narcotics addiction and she soon lost her job at the hospital for skating through the emergency room on rollerblades. Soon after, she attempted suicide once again by cutting her wrists. This failed attempt led Bev to another psychiatric clinic to help beat her drug addiction. Despite their mother's instability, Lindsay married a man who respected her and treated her well, she even got pregnant within their first year of marriage. Vance was only 14, but he was beginning to think that their lives were turning around. This feeling didn't last long, one day his mother announced that he had to move to Dayton, Ohio to stay with Matt, her latest boyfriend.

Within the next few years, Vance moved around from living with his biological father, his Mamaw, and finally back with his mother and her boyfriend Matt. His life lacked stability and it became even worse when his mother announced that she was getting married...to a man named Ken. Within two days, they packed their belongings and moved in with Ken and his two children. Vance's chaotic life began to take its toll, he was just about at his breaking point. His constant movement led to absences in school and his grades were suffering.

The Beginnings of a New Mindset

Living in Miamisburg with his “new family” Vance felt like a stranger, luckily, the relationship between Bev and Ken didn’t last long. He moved back in with Mamaw where she insisted that they stay for the next three years. Even though Vance was skeptical and felt like a burden, he would later realize those three years were the ones that saved his life.

Still, Vance’s grades were poor and he was on the brink of dropping out. He felt defeated and like he was drowning, he could hardly keep his head above water. But something changed when his grandmother dropped \$180 on a graphing calculator for his studies. She couldn’t afford that calculator but it showed Vance that education was important and he devoted his time to improving his grades. He also took a job at the local grocery store where he realized how people manipulated the welfare system by buying food and selling it at discounted prices.

During this time, Vance was beginning to make friends and he enjoyed playing rounds of golf, “the rich man’s game.” Of course, Vance didn’t have the money to buy golf clubs, but his Mamaw worked hard on finding him old clubs because she knew he would benefit from making rich friends. He also studied hard and received a high score on the SAT and, like his friends, he wondered which college he wanted to attend. However, the application process seemed daunting and confusing, so he took the suggestion of his cousin and joined the Marine Corps.

Despite his Mamaw’s hesitation, he received letters of love and support from her while he was at boot camp. His time at boot camp changed his perspective on life, he felt that he could achieve anything and learned important life lessons that would shape his future decisions. But most importantly, he learned that he could push himself beyond endurance and that he could achieve anything he set his mind to.

Vance Turns to Education

While Vance was in the Marines, his Mamaw struggled with her health, and at 71 years old, her lungs simply gave out and she passed away. For Vance, it was more than just losing his motherly figure, she was the only one who supported him and made him believe that he could do anything. Because of her support, Vance mustered the courage to attend Ohio State University in 2007.

During his time at university, Vance's confidence skyrocketed. He was making all A's, he was working several jobs, and he was making friends. In Vance's eyes, he was thriving and he began to realize that his life was full of endless possibilities. Of course, as he continued his education, his ideas of life drastically differed from those he left back in Middletown. Even after graduating, Vance realized that his life was changing while the lives of those back home were staying the same. He saw them complain but fail to take charge of their lives, but Vance was different, he was happy and optimistic about the future.

So in 2009, Vance did something he always dreamed of. He applied to law school and in 2010, he was accepted to one of the most prestigious schools in the country, Yale Law School. Yale opened his eyes and challenged him to reach new heights that he never thought possible. Vance found himself questioning, "How could a first-generation college graduate excel at an Ivy League school?" He was surrounded by affluent families where money was never an issue, and Vance was well aware that he was the poorest kid around. He was different, and he simply felt that he didn't belong.

As Vance tried to hide his past from his fellow classmates and professors, they found his life incredibly fascinating which made him question his childhood. Despite his feelings of being an outcast, he soon fell in love with a woman named Usha who helped him make it through the next few years. During this time he learned some important lessons about how the wealthy live and recognized the importance of who you know.

One night when Vance attended a dinner hosted by Gibson Dunn, he soon realized this was not a dinner but a job interview. Over dinner and cocktails, people networked and by the end of the dinner, Vance had a job offer. It quickly became apparent that successful people played the game far differently than the average person. He soon found himself in a world where instead of sending off a résumé, successful people asked for favors, emailed friends, and called a distant relative to find a job or set up an interview.

Yale taught him the important lesson of social capital, and if it weren't for attending such a prestigious school, Vance would have never learned how to use such a valuable resource. Everything was going well for him and Vance would never have to return to the pressures of living in a drug-fueled hillbilly town. However, while he was succeeding in his professional life, his personal life with Usha was struggling. Whenever they disagreed, Vance thought of only two options: withdraw or indulge in a screaming match. He had dealt with so much shouting and violence in his past life, he didn't want to bring that negativity into his new life. He soon recognized, however, that his biggest fear was coming true: he was behaving like his mother.

Vance Seeks to Understand His Past

Vance turned to books to learn how to cope with his childhood traumas, and he soon learned about what psychologists call ACEs, adverse childhood experiences. Vance also realized that while many people suffer from ACEs, the working-class had a higher rate. For instance, when he gave a quiz to Usha, Lindsay, and his Aunt Wee to evaluate their childhood trauma, Aunt Wee scored the highest with a 7. He and Lindsay each scored 6 and not surprisingly, Usha scored a zero since she didn't experience any childhood trauma.

As Vance began to study more about ACEs, he found that children who suffered from trauma had a higher risk of contracting cancer, were more likely to be obese, and they typically underperformed in any activities they took up. He saw this in many of the people around him as well, Lindsay and Aunt Wee were both struggling with their marriages while Vance, himself, struggled to control his emotions with Usha.

How could he overcome these struggles? How could he stop being on high alert at all times? Well, Vance knew that he wasn't helpless, he simply needed someone to talk to. He needed to talk to someone that understood him, someone that could help him understand his mother.

After graduating from Yale Law School, Vance and Usha married and bought a home in Cincinnati. He was living the American Dream. But something still wasn't right. While he promised never to help his mother, he couldn't just act like she didn't exist anymore. She had now taken up heroin, and Vance knew her life was spiraling even worse than before. He decided to take on the responsibility to get her help, and despite his new sense of optimism, he recognized his own limitations.

When it comes to solving the problems that exist in the hillbilly community, Vance realizes that there is no magic solution. But, one of the main reasons for Vance's success can be attributed to the role models who helped him

most. While he had many men come in and out of his life, he always had Pawpaw as a father-figure. Even though his mother was violent and an addict, she instilled a love of education in him. And most importantly, Mamaw gave him a safe place and was there for him no matter what. Others who escaped the hillbilly community have similar stories, they agree their upbringing was far from average but they always had a role model to help them during the bad times.

When it comes to poor kids in the South, Appalachia, and the Rust Belt, studies show that these kids struggled to rise in the levels of America's meritocracy. They also noted that income segregation and single parenting led to an uneven distribution of opportunities. For Vance, he didn't have just his mother, but he had Mamaw, Pawpaw, Aunt Wee, Uncle Dan, and his mother to help him. He believes that if these people were removed from his life, he never would have achieved so much today.

Vance was able to overcome his troubled childhood but he recognizes that others are not so lucky. By making changes from the top-down, Vance believes that those living in such communities can begin to recognize their disadvantages and become motivated to make a change. Lastly, he hopes his story can teach others the obstacles that he faced to get to where he is and inspire others to shoot for the stars, dream big, and go after goals.

Final Summary

Despite his poor upbringing, J.D. Vance was able to turn his life around and achieve success. With a violent, drug-addicted mother, Vance lacked stability in his life and was moved around from place to place, each time hoping for a better life. Unfortunately, that never happened until he returned to Middletown, Ohio to live at his Mawmaw's house. Mawmaw provided stability and support that Vance had never experienced before, she also emphasized the importance of education and became one of the most important role models of his life. Because of her, Vance mustered up the courage to go to college and eventually apply for Yale Law School. At Yale, Vance reaped the benefits of attending a prestigious school and he achieved the American Dream. Through his story, Vance proves that people living the hillbilly life aren't stuck and they can escape just like he did. The odds were against him, but he came out on the other side: successful, happy, and optimistic.



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