

Discussion Questions - Hillbilly Elegy

1. In what way is the Appalachian culture described in *Hillbilly Elegy* a "culture in trouble"? Do you agree with the author's description of the book's premise?

The book is about 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.

2. *Follow-up to Question 1:* Vance suggests that unemployment and addiction are self-inflicted and that the Appalachian culture is one of "learned helplessness"—individuals feel they can do nothing to improve their circumstances. Do you agree with Vance's assessment? What could individuals do to improve their circumstances? Or are the problems so overwhelming they can't be surmounted?

3. What are the positive values of the culture Vance talks about in *Hillbilly Elegy*?

4. The author's mother is arguably the book's most powerful figure. Describe her and her struggle with addiction. How did the violence between her own parents, Mamaw and Papaw, affect her own adulthood?

5. To What—or to whom—does Vance attribute this escape from the cycle of addiction and poverty?

6. Talk about Vance's own resentment toward his neighbors who were on welfare but owned cellphones.

7. *Follow-up to Question 6:* Vance writes

Political scientists have spent millions of words trying to explain how Appalachia and the South went from staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation.... I could never understand why our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of government largess enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about.

Does his book address those two separate but related issues satisfactorily?

7. Critics of *Hillbilly Elegy* accuse Vance of "blaming the victim" rather than providing a sound analysis of the structural issues left unaddressed by government. What do you think?

8. What does this book bring to the national conversation about poverty—its roots and its persistence? Does Vance raise the tone of discourse or lower it?