

Book Review

Everybody Lives Near Appalachia: Examining *Hillbilly Elegy*'s Impact on American Society

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Book Reviewed: *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, by J. D. Vance: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018. Paperback ISBN: 9780008220563. 272 pages.

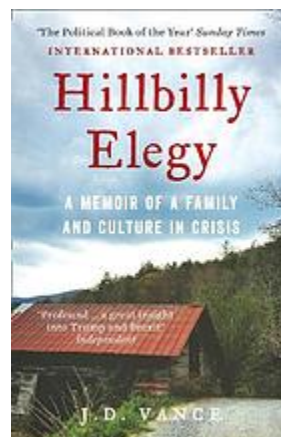
Hillbilly Elegy has had a profound impact on contemporary views and opinions of Appalachia. In this review, the authors discuss this impact and provide key critiques that help readers make sense of the generalizations made in the book by placing *Hillbilly Elegy* in conversation with other contemporary Appalachian scholarship. The authors conclude that J. D. Vance has a right to tell his story but telling the story of the Appalachian people is more complex and nuanced than Vance acknowledges, and the authors caution readers to consider this when reading *Hillbilly Elegy*.

Keywords: Appalachia, poverty, culture, rural education

We know Appalachia exists because we need it to exist in order to define what we are not. It is the "other America" because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives. The notion of Appalachia as a separate place, a region set off from mainstream culture and history, has allowed us to distance ourselves from the uncomfortable dilemmas that the story of Appalachia raises about our own lives and about larger society.

—Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*

In J. D. Vance's book *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, Vance does exactly what historian Ronald Eller says America needs; he provides us with the "other America" through his story of life growing up within the Appalachian region. Through his narrative, he explicitly and specifically ostracizes, belittles, and attacks the people of the Appalachian region. In his own words, he "got out" of Appalachia, and because of that, he has a certain privileged stance in which



he can now stand back and point out the problems of the area and the Appalachian culture at large. However, your culture has you long before you have it; it is a work of a lifetime to understand your own culture (Garrison, 2010). Yet, in his elegy, Vance presents the façade that he completely understands Appalachia, and he tries to convince his audience that with a reading of his work, they can understand it too. Catte (2018) provides a critical warning against such elegies, "While reading Greek poetry, my professor warned us to be careful of the double meaning of elegies; they were, it seems, often written as political propaganda" (p. 53). Therefore, it is imperative, that while reading texts such as *Hillbilly Elegy*, to keep in mind the

hidden agenda and to beware of such broad generalizations.

***Hillbilly Elegy* Briefly Reviewed**

Though I will use data, and though I do sometimes rely on academic studies to make a point, my primary aim is not to convince you of a documented problem. My primary aim is to tell a true story about what that problem feels like when you were born with it hanging around your neck.

— J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*

J. D. Vance wrote *Hillbilly Elegy* to tell his story of growing up in poor, white Appalachian America. Vance witnessed issues that his family and people in his area struggled with, ranging from drug addiction to physical and emotional abuse. Luckily, Vance was able to “work hard” and get out of this situation. However, Vance downplays the role of the military and how that possibly served as his “way out” of Appalachia. Instead, he employs bootstrap economics and hard work to describe what set him apart from his Appalachian counterparts, thus upholding the concept of a meritocracy, where one’s abilities are what sets them apart from others. This concept posits that if someone does not succeed, they simply do not have enough talent or they are not working hard enough, placing all of the blame on the individual instead of recognizing the complexities of societal barriers. It is important that this master narrative is examined and dissected, especially for marginalized people, because if not, societal barriers stay in place and problems are not solved. This latter narrative is the narrative Vance propagates, in that he essentially argues that the people are broken, not the system.

This story is arguably well told at times throughout, and a critique of the book should in no way pedantically delve into the mechanics, grammar, and the flow of the story that Vance tells as that is not particularly problematic. Vance is entitled to tell his own story and a critique of the book is not a critique of his ability to tell his story. As Garrison (2010) notes, “Ignoring cultural traditions or the personal history of the practical inquirer, including the folk and scientific theories they contain, is in itself some kind of fallacy” (p. 115).

Therefore, Vance’s story cannot be simply ignored and arguably cannot be accurately dissected, but the broad sweeping generalizations he makes about the Appalachian area can be. Vance directly tells the reader upfront that he plans to make such generalizations, with statements like “I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children” (p. 2). Vance then attempts to do just this, explain the lives of “the poor” by explaining one person’s experience growing up in poverty. This is in direct opposition of what Appalachian scholars warn against. For example, Obermiller and Maloney (2016) note:

One strength of Appalachian studies is presenting and encouraging the arts, but the artistic celebration of Appalachians does not require the generalizations and hackneyed images often associated with presentations on Appalachian culture.... It is possible to celebrate the richness of Appalachia without fixing it in the amber of culture. (p. 110)

While Vance’s story is true for him and his family, the broad generalizations do not and cannot represent the entire Appalachian culture. In fact, House (2016) states:

I think it’s important to point out that while Appalachia still may not be as racially diverse as other parts of the country, it is in fact diverse in many ways. There are not only many different races within our region, but also many different Appalachians. (p. 65)

If you have met one Appalachian, you have met one Appalachian. We are all different, and no one experience can define who we are.

To revisit the quote that started this section, Vance claims he is not attempting to convince you of a “documented problem,” but actually he is, and he has convinced a large portion of America of this problem. He starts this conversation by discussing the Scots-Irish in America and his connection to them in Appalachia, a concept that has been largely critiqued in Appalachian literature (Catte, 2018; Obermiller & Maloney, 2016; Pearson, 2013). Although Scots-Irish did play a part in Appalachian culture, it is noted that “Appalachian scholars and

activists should emphasize the variety in the Appalachian heritages of the diverse people in Appalachia whether Anglo-Saxon, Scots-Irish, African, European immigrant, or Native American” (Obermiller & Maloney, 2016, p. 110). Then, Vance proceeds at moments throughout the narrative to say things like, “we’re a pessimistic bunch” (p. 4), referring to all Appalachian hillbillies. He oversimplifies structural inequities such as the fact that there is a lack of access to jobs in Appalachia that pay a living wage and confesses he once believed this lie too. However, he claims that he later discovered that Appalachians “just will not work” and then they will blame everyone but themselves, once again belittling the Appalachian people. The worst is yet to come, when Vance goes off on tirades, vomiting on Appalachian people by trying to generalize his experience to everyone else. We should warn the reader now, that what we are about to share may be considered disturbing, upsetting, and downright disgusting to some. Vance (2016) writes:

We buy giant TVs and iPads. Our children wear nice clothes thanks to high-interest credit cards and payday loans. We purchase homes we don’t need, refinance them for more spending money, and declare bankruptcy, often leaving them full of garbage in our wake. Thrift is inimical to our being. We spend to pretend that we’re upper-class. And when the dust clears—when bankruptcy hits or a family member bails us out of our stupidity—there’s nothing left over. Nothing for the kid’s college tuition, no investment to grow our wealth, no rainy-day fund if someone loses her job. We know we shouldn’t spend like this. Sometimes we beat ourselves up over it, but we do it anyway. (p. 146)

Vance continues writing vile statements in paragraphs that follow. It is painfully clear that Vance did not write a memoir; he wrote an indictment, an accusation, and a scathing critique of the Appalachian people based on his limited experience. Again, once you have met one Appalachian, you have met one Appalachian . . . yet Vance has convinced liberals and conservatives alike that they have met them all through his

narrative, which we will discuss in this next section of this analysis.

Why the Popularity of *Hillbilly Elegy*?

In this section, we are going to use two terms broadly: conservative and liberal. We are not attempting to do as Vance did; we are not going to overgeneralize and accuse any one group of holding one specific viewpoint as there are people within each side that may have different viewpoints than we discuss. Therefore, when we say conservative and liberal, we are more so referring to ideology than specific people.

To begin understanding the popularity of Vance’s work, we are going to first start with conservatives and why the text is appealing to them. *Hillbilly Elegy* allows those that “got out” of Appalachia and similar places to distance themselves from people in poverty. Vance reinforces the idea of “Well if I did it, then so can you.” This philosophy allows people to be apathetic because Vance tells them that there is nothing they can do because that is just how people in poverty are, thus reinforcing more conservative notions of capitalist thinking. Vance blames the Appalachian people and culture for their issues of poverty, reinforcing the culture of poverty that has been highly critiqued throughout not only Appalachian scholarship but also scholarship worldwide (Billings, 1974; Billings & Blee, 2000; Gorski, 2008). Gorski (2018) argues against such actions in that we cannot understand or “assume anything about people’s values, dispositions, or behaviors based on knowing a single dimension of their identities” (p. 67). He goes on to argue that people have similar experiences such as “a lack of access to health care . . . a lack of access to living-wage work” but claims that “these similarities are not cultural. Rather they are social conditions. They are barriers and inequities in spite of which people experiencing poverty must attempt, against considerable odds, to thrive” (p. 67, emphasis in original). Hutton (2019) specifically criticizes Vance’s work and argues that Vance’s book was written for:

a middle- and upper-class readership more than happy to learn that white American poverty has nothing to do with them or with any structural problems in American economy and society and

everything to do with poor white folks' inherent vices. (p. 23)

In essence, Vance argues that living in poverty is inherent in Appalachian people's culture; he claims there are lots of opportunities to "get out" of poverty if only they would simply work hard, which is problematic.

Now, we are going to turn our attention to those of a more liberal mindset. People in this group may read Vance's work and feel as if they are learning about another culture, a people very much unlike them, thus opening their mind and allowing them to consider another perspective. This is another critique offered by Appalachian scholars, that many works and text try to "other" the Appalachian region. They focus on treating Appalachia "as the Other in a culture that increasingly places value on Sameness" (House, 2016, p. 65). As mentioned above, Appalachia is diverse and no one experience can capture the entire culture; we are not all the same. Reading Vance's work in isolation without considering the work of critical Appalachian scholars, still further promotes the stereotype around Appalachia, thus infiltrating and contaminating both conservative and liberal thought regarding the Appalachian region. Therefore, any reading of Vance's work, especially if assigned, in an academic setting, would be better if it were paired with some of the more critical scholars cited in this paper, along with probing questions that allow students to explore multiple perspectives together through democratic discourse.

Concluding Thoughts

The average Appalachian is not, then, a white, hypermasculine coal miner facing the inevitable loss of economic strength and social status, but the average Appalachian's worldview may be impacted by individuals with cultural capital who are constantly assuming we are all made in that image.

—Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*

As the title of this paper suggests, everybody lives near Appalachia. While some reading this may live far on the other side of America or even in another country, there is an Appalachia in your neighborhood. This is the place that nobody talks

about, yet everybody knows about; this is the place where people are in need of support, love, and encouragement, yet few seek to provide those needs. So, before thinking that Appalachian folks need saved, look inwardly, and realize, that Appalachia shares many characteristics with other marginalized groups in America. While the "other America" is Appalachia, as Eller (2008) reminds us, be careful, because attributes of the "other America" (p. 3) reside in your neighborhood, too.

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