

Summer Community Read

“The idea is that the city that opens the same book closes it in greater harmony.”
— Mary McGrory, *The Washington Post*

Engaging in a community-wide read will provide us with opportunities to connect with one another in sharing a powerful story. We plan to discuss the work(s) in our English classes in the Fall, and hope that with all of our noses in the same work, those classroom conversations will spill into our hallways and offices, across grade levels and disciplines, creating a strong sense of unity and kinship.

To that end, we are excited to announce this year’s summer reading for
high school grades 9-12:

“America’s Forgotten Working Class” Ted Talk by J.D. Vance*
and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

***AP English Language and Composition** will read both
The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald and
Hillbilly Elegy by J. D. Vance.

We believe these texts will help us begin a school-wide conversation about the importance of considering social class to understand what is happening in the United States.

Students are encouraged to think for themselves, to look critically at rhetoric, and to develop their own ideas about the subject. Students should be thoughtful and attentive readers, keeping in mind that they will use both works to enrich the discussion about class.

“America’s Forgotten Working Class” by J. D. Vance*

https://www.ted.com/talks/j_d_vance_america_s_forgotten_working_class

*Students may also watch the Ted Talk video of this essay.

Link: How to do a Close Reading

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Close_Reading_Passage.pdf

Additionally, if you find yourself struggling, it’s okay. Struggle is good. Work through it. There are a plethora of resources available to help you understand the text. Be sure, however, **they are not a replacement for the text.**

Directions: As you read, consider these questions and carefully compose reflective responses. **Write thoughtful and well-developed responses in paragraph form using a minimum of one to two quotes per question.**

Responses should be typed and **be your own**. It is required that they be submitted to Turnitin.com. (If you do not yet have an account, you will create one at the beginning of school.) Be prepared to discuss your responses during Socratic Seminars, **with supporting text evidence**. More formalized assessments will be conducted during the course of this unit on **BOTH** the essay and your book choice. Your submission to Turnitin.com will be due September 14th – **no exceptions**.

Questions for *The Great Gatsby* and “America’s Forgotten Working Class”

1) Topic: Money/Class. It’s not too difficult to realize that *The Great Gatsby* is, in a basic sense, a novel about money. But “class” isn’t just about wealth. How is social class determined and how is it signified in the novel? (Consider: How is money earned in this novel? Is there a “classy” way to make money, and a “less-classy” way? What does wealth buy? What can’t it buy?) Find a quote/passage or two that is particularly revealing in terms of economic/class issues, and explore the thematic importance of money in the novel.

2) Topic: Landscape.

- a. How is New York City portrayed and what are some specific scenes or quotes/passages that show the importance of NYC? What is the symbolism of the section of Queens described as the “valley of ashes”?
- b. While Nick, Tom, and even Gatsby do their business in the city, they reside in the “Gold Coast” Long Island towns of East Egg and West Egg. At one point, Nick describes the “bizarre and not a little sinister” contrast between East and West Egg; what does he mean by this? How are the two towns different, and what is “sinister” about the contrast?

3) Topic: The American Dream. Scholars describe *The Great Gatsby* as an examination of the “American Dream.” If this is so, what form does the American dream take in the novel? Who achieves the dream, and who fails? Does the novel endorse the American dream or condemn it? Focus your discussion on specific passage(s) that will help illustrate your point.

4) Topic: Rising in Class. Vance’s TEDTalk discusses the inner conflict he feels having moved from poverty into a higher social class. While Vance’s income bracket has shifted, he feels his identity remains tied to his working-class roots.

- a. Is Vance now one of the elite, or do his childhood experiences excuse him from acknowledging his current privilege? Do you think it’s possible to completely shift one’s identity from one class to another? Explain.
- b. According to the TEDTalk, what factors define social class, and how is class membership determined? How do these ideas reflect the themes of *The Great Gatsby*?

*****If taking AP English Language and Composition,
continue to the next page.*****

Questions for *Hillbilly Elegy*

(Note: AP Lang students do all of the above questions as well as those below.)

1. In his introduction to *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance writes, “I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children” (2) and states that for the people of Appalachia—the people with whom he identifies—“poverty is a family tradition” (3). Certainly poverty is a nationwide epidemic, but why does Vance feel the cycle of generational poverty is persistent in the Appalachian region and the cities nearby? Why is the American Dream particularly elusive for the residents of Jackson and Middletown?
2. In Vance’s view, race and class seem to be two separate issues. In the book’s introduction, he writes, “This is not a story about why white people have more to complain about than black people or any other group. That said, I do hope that readers of this book will be able to take from it an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without filtering their views through a racial prism” (7-8). At the same time, Vance discusses how people of different racial backgrounds experience the world. What does this comparison say about Vance’s view of race and class? Is it possible to look at how class and family affect the poor without considering race? What does Vance mean when he says, “filtering their views through a racial prism”?
3. Throughout his memoir, Vance talks about government policy and programs. At one point in the story, he describes his experience working at a grocery store and his encounters with customers using food stamps. How does Vance portray people receiving government assistance? How does this compare with his portrayal of his own family’s poverty? What other factors might impact the way people prioritize their spending? Are there other issues and complexities that contribute to the poverty he witnesses?
4. Poverty drives many residents of Jackson and other Appalachian communities to migrate to industrialized towns with better employment opportunities, but those opportunities gradually erode. What role does globalization play in industrialized communities like Middletown? What factors cause some residents to stay, despite the economic warning signs?
5. According to Vance, Mamaw “loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal” (15). Later in the book, Vance relates a story in which he cannot bring himself to tell a stranger at a gas station that he is a student at Yale, acknowledging that this incident: “highlights the inner conflict inspired by rapid upward mobility: I had lied to a stranger to avoid feeling like a traitor” (205). Vance has achieved everything Mamaw wished for him, so why does his success feel like a betrayal? In what way does Vance’s success echo or conflict with the role models he encountered throughout his life (e.g., the Blanton men, Mamaw and Papaw, his biological father)?
6. Reflecting upon his service in the Marine Corps and his childhood, Vance states, “Psychologists call it ‘learned helplessness’ when a person believes, as I did during my youth, that the choices I made had no effect on the outcomes in my life... If I had learned helplessness at home, the Marines were teaching learned willfulness” (163). What do you think Vance means by this statement? How did the Marine Corps change Vance? What life skills did he find especially valuable, and how did his service, particularly his time in Iraq, affect his college experience and his perception of fellow students at Ohio State?
7. Vance discusses education in a multitude of ways. Though Vance struggled in school through much of his childhood, when he stayed with his grandmother his senior year, he was able to focus on school and found teachers who inspired his love of learning. In the end, Vance goes on to earn a law

degree from Yale. How does Vance view the role of education in society and its impact on his own life? What are the factors that allow someone to excel in school? And what is society's role in ensuring external factors don't impede educational opportunities?

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

9. In chapter 11, Vance talks about conspiracy theories that he hears in his community. For example, he describes how people believe that President Barack Obama was neither born in the U.S. nor a Christian. Vance asserts that Obama "feels like an alien to many Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color. Recall that not a single one of my high school classmates attended an Ivy League school. Barack Obama attended two of them and excelled at both" (191). Why did Obama's success "strike at the heart of [this community's] deepest insecurities" (191) in a way that other government officials' success did not? Does this narrative of "elitism" serve to mask other forms of exclusion, including racism?