

***The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger (1951)**

**Selected Passages**

The debatable issue for this unit is:

**What is most responsible for Holden Caulfield’s acute alienation, dissatisfaction, and**

**unhappiness?**

These are the three interpretive positions that we will start with.

**Hyper-Individualism**

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his famed 1841 essay “Self-Reliance” wrote, “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule . . . may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.” Holden seems concerned only with his own responses to the world, not at all with what others think. But Salinger may be warning us that this kind of hyper-individualism leads to madness.

**Insensitive and Insincere Society**

Many readings of *The Catcher in the Rye* judge Holden negatively, finding immature, unstable, erratic, and unreliable as an expression of the novel’s actual thematic intentions. But what if Holden is taken more at face value, as an artistic, sensitive, sincere young man who is easily wounded by a society of conformist, uncaring, and insincere people and institutions?

**Mental Illness**

Holden ends the novel in a hospital, having been committed apparently by his parents for what would have been called at the time a “mental breakdown.” Whether Holden is suffering from bipolar disorder that may be genetic, or suffering from depression precipitated by his brother Allie’s death or the remoteness and disengagement of his parents, the novel may focus on a character who has a serious mental illness throughout.

These selected passages will be used in the Argument Stations Activity and other argument-based activities during the unit. Page numbers refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of the novel, published in 1991.

**1**

“‘He just kept talking about Life being a game and all. You know.’ ‘Life *is* a game, boy. Life *is* a game that one plays according to the rules.’ ‘Yes, sir, I know it is. I know it.’ Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right – I’ll admit that. But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game” (11).

**2**

“I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It’s awful. If I’m on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I’m going. I’m liable to say I’m going to the opera. It’s terrible” (19).

**3**

“I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don’t blame them. I really don’t. I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it” (44).

**4**

“I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying. I don’t know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, ‘*Sleep tight, ya morons!*’ I’ll bet I woke up every bastard on the whole floor. Then I got the hell out” (59).

**5**

“That’s the thing about girls. Every time they do something pretty, even if they’re not much to look at, or even if they’re sort of stupid, you fall half in love with them, and then you never know *where* the hell you are. Girls. Jesus Christ. They can drive you crazy. They really can” (82).

**6**

“He was putting all these dumb, show-offy ripples in the high notes, and a lot of other very tricky stuff that gives me a pain in the ass. You should’ve heard the crowd, though, when he was finished. You would’ve puked. They went mad. They were exactly the same morons that laugh like hyenas in the movies at stuff that isn’t funny. I swear to God, if I were a piano player or an actor or something and all those dopes thought I was terrific, I’d hate it. I wouldn’t want them to clap for me. People always clap for the wrong things. If I were a piano player, I’d play it in the goddam closet” (94).

**7**

“What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would’ve done it, too, if I’d been sure somebody’d cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn’t want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory” (116-117).

**8**

“‘I mean do you hate it? I know it’s a terrific bore, but do you *hate* it, is what I mean.’ ‘Well, I don’t exactly *hate* it. You always have to –’ ‘Well *I* hate it. Boy, do I hate it,’ I said. ‘But it isn’t just that. It’s *everything*. I hate living in New York and all. Taxicabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door, and being introduced to phony guys that call the Lunts angels, and going up and down in elevators when you just want to go outside, and guys fitting your pants all the time at Brooks, and people always –' ‘Don’t shout, please,’ old Sally said. Which was very funny, because I wasn’t even shouting” (144-145).

**9**

“‘Now, *listen*’ old Sally said. ‘Lots of boys get more out of school than *that.*’ ‘I agree! I agree they do, some of them! But that’s all *I* get out of it. See? That’s my point. That’s exactly my goddam point,’ I said. ‘I don’t get hardly anything out of anything. I’m in bad shape. I’m in *lousy* shape.’ ‘You certainly are’” (146).

**10**

“When I finally got down off the radiator and went out to the hat-check room, I was crying and all. I don’t know why, but I was. I guess it was because I was feeling so damn depressed and lonesome” (169).

**11**

“She meant why did I get the ax again. It made me sort of sad, the way she said it. ‘Oh, God, Phoebe, don’t ask me. I’m sick of everybody asking me that,’ I said. ‘A million reasons why. It was one of the worst schools I ever went to. It was full of phonies. And mean guys. You never saw so many mean guys in your life. For instance, if you were having a bull session in somebody’s room, and somebody wanted to come in, nobody’d let them in if they were some dopey, pimply guy. Everybody was always locking their door when somebody wanted to come in” (185).

**12**

“‘You know that song, “If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye? . . . What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over a cliff – I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it’s crazy, but that’s the only thing I’d really like to be’” (191).

**13**

“‘This fall I think you’re riding for – it’s a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn’t permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement’s designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn’t supply them with. Or they thought their own environment couldn’t supply them with. So they gave up looking . . . . I don’t want to scare you,’ he said, ‘but I can very clearly see you dying nobly, one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause’” (207).

**14**

“Boy, I was shaking like a madman, I was sweating, too. When something perverty like that happens, I start sweating like a bastard. That kind of stuff’s happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid. I can’t stand it” (213).

**15**

“That’s the whole trouble. You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any. You may *think* there is, but once you get there, when you’re not looking, somebody’ll sneak up and write ‘Fuck you’ right under your nose. Try it sometime. I think, even, if I ever die, and they stick me in a cemetery, and I have a tombstone and all, it’ll say ‘Holden Caulfield’ on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died, and then right under that it’ll say ‘Fuck you.’ I’m positive, in fact” (224).