



The Catcher in the Rye (1951) Use of Evidence – Unit Assessment

The debatable issue for this unit assessment is:

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

These are the three interpretive positions that will be “in play” in this assessment.

Hyper-Individualism

Holden’s own hyper-individualism – his concern only with what he thinks he should do, regardless of what anyone else thinks – results in his alienation and unhappiness.

Insensitive and Insincere Society

The Catcher in the Rye actually suggests that Holden is justified in feeling so alienated and dissatisfied since he is surrounded by insensitive, insincere, and deceitful individuals and institutions.

Mental Illness

Holden Caulfield is made unhappy by many things, but the fundamental cause of his extreme condition is mental illness, probably bipolar disorder.

Answer each of the following questions as completely as you can. Remember that the criteria we have been emphasizing for effective use of evidence in academic argumentation are:

Alignment

Evidence directly and exclusively supports the argumentative claim and overall interpretive position.

Credibility

Evidence has both external authority (it is from a qualified source) and internal rationale and logic to make it strong backing for the argumentative claim. Textual evidence taken from the literary source being interpreted has external authority, by definition.

Sufficiency

Evidence is sufficient both qualitatively and quantitatively to make the argument convincing. When working with a literary source, sufficiency can require that evidence comes from multiple places in the text, rather than one instance.

Question 1

Assume for this question that your overall interpretive position is **mental illness**. And assume that the claim that you are arguing for is: “Holden has lost the capacity to enjoy almost everything in life, a symptom of clinical depression.” Find the piece of textual evidence from Chapter 17 that best supports this claim. Limit your passage to 3 – 9 lines.

Explain why this passage provides especially strong support for the argumentative claim.

Question 2

Assume for this question that your overall interpretive position is **hyper-individualism**. In the essay you are writing one of the arguments you are making uses the following two pieces of textual evidence.

“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” (Ch.7, p.59).

“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" (Ch.12, p.94).

Carefully and precisely formulate an argumentative claim that unifies and aligns with this evidence cluster, and that is fully directed by your overall argumentative position.

Explain in detail – referencing both pieces of evidence – how your argumentative claim accomplishes these purposes.

Question 3

Assume for this question that you are reading a literary interpretation of the novel that has taken the **insensitive and insincere society** position. The writer is making claim that Salinger is indicting the clamorous and frenzied pace and noise of American post-war society. She uses this evidence to support the claim.

“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 ‘F--- 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 ‘F--- you.’ I’m positive, in fact” (Ch.25, p.224).

Critique the writer’s use of evidence. What is flawed about it and why?

Question 4

Assume for this question that the overall interpretive position being argued about is **hyper-individualism**. But in this instance the question is, Does the passage below, spoken by Mr. Antolini, support this overall interpretive position or oppose this overall position?

“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” (Ch.24, p.207).

Explain why you think it either supports or opposes this overall interpretive position, and then explain how, even though the other side might try to use this passage, it actually more strongly supports your side than theirs.

Question 5

Explain in detail how the following passage be used as evidence for each of the three overall interpretive positions.

“Boy, I was shaking like a madman, I was sweating, too. When something pervery 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” (Ch.24, p.213).

Be sure to discuss each interpretive position individually. Also, identify which interpretive position you think the evidence provides **strongest**, most credible and sufficient, evidence for and why.

Question 6

Assume for this question that the overall interpretive position you are arguing for is **mental illness**. You are making a claim that Holden acts or threatens to act in certain impulsive ways that are characteristic of someone who doesn't have the executive control over his actions of a sane person. Which of the following two pieces of evidence provides stronger support, and which provides lesser support, for your claim. In your explanation (particularly of which piece of evidence is lesser), consider the competing interpretive positions.

“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” (Ch.5, p.44).

“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” (Ch.14, p.116-117).

Question 7

Read the following two passages and then categorize one as supporting the **hyper-individualism** position and the other as supporting the **insensitive and insincere society** position. Explain your matching of the evidence and position for each.

“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” (Ch.21, p.185).

“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” (Ch.17, p.144-145).

Hyper-Individualism:

Insensitive and Insincere Society:

Question 8

Now, referencing the above question, apply the following **second** piece of evidence to one of the two overall interpretive positions – the one for which it best fits. Formulate an argumentative claim that unifies and aligns the two pieces of evidence. And explain how both pieces of evidence support your claim.

“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” (Ch.22, p.191).

Overall Interpretive Position

Argumentative Claim Uniting This Evidence and the Evidence Above (Question 7)

Explain How Both Pieces of Evidence Support Your Claim