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Analyzing JD Salinger's "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut"

Nine Stories is a collection of short stories written by JD Salinger which take place around the 1950s in America. As such, each story carries with it the shadow of World War II and the chaos and instability such a war brings to all those who are touched by it. The first story tells a tale of the direct consequences of war upon those who take part, while the second (as well as many that follow) takes a look at the crippling ripples that extend beyond the soldiers of war. In this second story "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" J.D. Salinger carefully crafts his character's actions, dialogue and setting to show how the main character, Eloise, and to some extent her visiting friend Mary Jane, are affected by the destructive nature of war.

Eloise, looked upon from an outsiders view, may appear to be living an upstanding and respectable life. She's married and is a stay at home mom, just as a woman in the decade following the War were expected to be. As for Mary Jane, she is a working girl, a less reputable life style in that time. At the outset of the story Salinger shows that Eloise finds herself somewhat superior to Mary Jane. Eloise shows no regard for the responsibilities Mary Jane has as a part of the work force. Though at first Mary Jane strongly states that she really can't stay for too long- that she has to return to her duties, Eloise scoffs and waves away the issue. Additionally, throughout the story, Eloise condescends toward Mary Jane on the topic of love and marriage, because it is Mary Jane's failed marriage to a man who shot an M.P that has lead her to her current lifestyle. This dynamic between the two character's shows Eloise's supposed superiority to Mary Jane. Salinger uses this initial, superficial understanding of Eloise's character, to contrast against what the story is really about. Though Mary Jane's sufferings are more immediately apparent, the misery Eloise's has suffered at the hand of the war have been much more destructive in her life.

Without directly presenting the reader with the inner workings of Eloise, Salinger finds a way to show the reader the reality of her situation. In this piece Salinger has the two old friends get drunk together, at first a seemingly somewhat irresponsible but harmless past time. However for Salinger it is more than just that. As the characters become more and more inebriated, their true mental and emotional states become clear. Her regard for religion, her inner personal relationships and her moment to moment experiences are weighed upon by the loss of the life she intended to have- the loss of the man she loved , who was taken ungraciously by a terrible mistake while away at war.

Salinger focuses much of the story on conveying Eloise lingering attachment and grief over the loss of Walt. The first mention of Walt arrives in the medium of background narrative. Eloise is made to leave school because she is caught in an elevator with a soldier, presumably Walt. Little can be gleaned from this narrative, except that Eloise and Walt met when they were young, and that their relationship was passionate. The reader learns much more (as is often the way in much of Salinger's work) from dialogue. Eloise presents two stories of her time with Walt to Mary Jane. For the first, she intends to show how funny he was, and for the second how sweet. However, neither story exemplifies those qualities. From the reader's perspective Walt comes off as being a slightly odd young man, with a self-granted air of importance. On some level Eloise seems to recognize this as she says "It wasn't always what he said, but how he said it" (Salinger 30). Mostly Eloise seems blind to the idea of Walt being anything but perfect. She refuses to tell Lew about Walt, and laughs at and condescends to Mary Jane for suggesting otherwise. Salinger uses this dialogue to show how Eloise is caught up in the romance of her childhood, a romance intensified by Walt's going off to war. Salinger shows how in getting caught up in a past that will never unfold into a reality for Eloise, Eloise blocks herself off from creating a new and

meaningful life with Lew (Eloise's husband).

Lew is not a very active character in the story, but he plays an important role nonetheless. The lack of passionate or companionate love in Eloise' and Lew's marriage shows Elois'e inability to commit herself to a new life or love. Eloise says she marries Lew because while they were courting he claimed to like Jane Austen, a claim that does not turn out to be truthful. Salinger depicts the lost attachment Eloise and Lew once had to be grounded on little to nothing, which suggests Eloise's lack of engagement in creating a new future. Throughout the story Lew is mentioned by Eloise in a dismissive and uninterested manner. Eloise is not pleased when Mary Jane disrupts Eloise's wistful re-living of memories of Walt to inquire: "Doesn't Lew have a sense of humor?" Eloise brushes off Mary Jane's words saying, "Oh, God! Who knows?" Salinger shows the reader that Eloise is not interested in discussing Lew. She goes on to say "Yes. I guess so. He laughs at cartoons and stuff" (Salinger 29). It is made clear through dialogue that she and Lew do not have, and never have had a joyful or fulfilling relationship. This depiction of their love (or lack thereof) solidifies the suspicion that Eloise did not really look for love after she lost Walt. Through his death, the war managed to destroy Eloise's drive to live a life worth living.

Eloise's resistance to creating a new life for herself is again reflected in how Salinger presents her outlook on religion. In this short story religion comes up twice in Eloise's dialogue, both times without any sense of reverence. The first comes up when Eloise's notices a piece of Mary Jane's religious jewelery. Eloise exclaims: "God... I don't have a damn thing holy to wear" as though appearing religious is the only aspect of religion she has any interest in (Salinger 21). Secondly, later on, she suggests that "if you're not going to be a nun or something, you might as well laugh" (Salinger 29). These brief moments are more than just an occasion for humor.

Through these sentences Salinger conveys Eloise's disregard for religion; for something greater than herself. Though the reader does not know whether she has at some point turned from religion, or if she was raised with this attitude, Salinger makes it clear that god or prayer have no place in her future; that she is not engaged, and will not engage in any sort of guidance from the mystic. In times of hardship throughout history, it is not uncommon for people either to turn to religion or forcefully away from it. Perhaps for Eloise this turning away represents more than just a hardening to religion, but to any outside force that may offer her guidance or space to let go and create anew.

Eloise's detachment from life shows itself most clearly and most lamentably through her detachment from her daughter Ramona. From the first moment Ramona's character joins the story Eloise shows no patience toward her. Eloise is critical and pokes fun at Ramona for her childish attachment to her imaginary friend. She does not engage with Ramona as a mother; she wants nothing to do with helping her with her shoes or attending to her basic needs. The reader learns from Mary Jane that at some point something was wrong with Ramona's sight, but when Mary Jane inquires if anything has gotten worse, Eloise responds with "God! Not that I know of" (Salinger 25). Eloise is clearly not preoccupied with being a part of Ramona's life, Salinger makes this abundantly clear. Eloise does not pay attention when Ramona speaks, and does not listen or care when Ramona kills off her imaginary beau. The Narration of Eloise's and Ramona's final interaction is particularly sad and telling of their relationship. Eloise goes upstairs to say goodnight to Ramona, but on finding her asleep wakes her up, scolds her for sleeping on the side of the bed (to make room for a new imaginary friend) and yanks her into the middle of the bed. Ramona is described as being "extremely frightened" by her mother (Salinger 37). Eloise does not show any gentleness nor any remorse for her roughness with her daughter.

Rather than considering her daughter's feelings in the matter, Eloise is once again caught up in the past. J.D. Salinger directly shows Eloise's anguish over the loss of Walt and the instability that developed from such anguish in her final interaction with Ramona. Eloise crashes into a table, clutches Ramona's glasses and weeps: "Poor Uncle Wiggly" many times over (Salinger 37). Salinger describes Eloise as being too intent on getting to those glasses to feel pain—evidently the same goes for remorse. The reader can hardly be surprised when that narrator conveys that Ramona has been silently weeping through this experience.

Though Eloise shows no sorrow for how her actions may affect others (namely her family) the story comes to an end with Eloise pleading with Mary Jane, begging that she confirm that Eloise "was a nice girl" (Salinger 38). Salinger uses this final desperate plea to show how, when all Eloise's barriers have been broken down by alcohol, she begins to see that she is not engaged in the life she has absentmindedly created for herself; she has lost track of who she is in her life. She is stuck in her past, stuck as a child smitten with a soldier.

Through this story Salinger conveys how destructive war can be, not just for those who are in the thick of it, such as Seymour Glass from the previous story, but for any who are splashed by the out-stretching waves of pain. Eloise may not have taken such drastic action as Mr. Glass, but her pain and deterioration are made evident through her words and actions, and through her, Ramona also gets knocked by the waves. Mary Jane suffers as well, though less directly, from the chaos of war. Though the reader never learns why her ex-husband kills an M.P. It can be imagined that he was resistant to the war effort. This story tells the timeless tale of the terribly destructive nature of war. Though World War II undeniably sent out the greatest devastating splash, each war that has come before or will follow carries with it its own capacity for chaos and ruin. It may be a little far-fetched to say that this story is a cautionary tale, its

ability to stop any war is extremely minimal, but perhaps it can act in a smaller, but still important way. Perhaps it can act as a reminder to be gentle and kind with the people of this world, for you never know what they have lived through.

Work Cited

Salinger, J.D.. *Nine Stories*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991. Print.