

## ANALYSIS

“Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut” (1948)



J. D. Salinger

(1919-2010)

“Uncle Wiggily” is a board game popular in the 1940s-50s, connoting wholesome family values. The old adage “The family that prays together stays together” was being replaced in a secular age with The family that plays “Uncle Wiggily” together stays together. However, the title is an oxymoron, as nobody plays that game anymore in Connecticut, a locale representing upper-middle-class America. As early as 1948 many affluent wives are becoming dissatisfied, mothers self-absorbed, children alienated, fathers absent. Postmodernism is setting in, prefiguring the Feminist movement.

Mary Jane the “career girl” is introduced as having turned off on the wrong street and lost her way. Eloise calls her “baby” and reminds her that she has already found her house twice before, making Mary Jane seem immature and lost in a general sense, wailing and running for a Kleenex tissue. Eloise by contrast takes the delay in stride, though her “whole damn lunch was burned.” Mary Jane reveals her naivete when, in reference to her disabled boss, she asks Eloise, “Just exactly what *is* a hernia, anyway?” Eloise drops her cigarette on the “soiled snow”—introducing a motif of corruption and lost innocence—and reveals her own limited knowledge of men: She “said she didn’t *actually* know but that Mary Jane didn’t have to worry much about getting one,” venting her disillusionment throughout the story in bitter wit. Eloise and Mary Jane were college roommates, both left college because of a man, both failed to graduate, and both are called “girls.” El got trapped in an elevator, a metaphor of her upwardly mobile marriage. Mary Jane married an aviation cadet who once stabbed a military policeman—an airhead wedded to an “air-minded boy from Dill, Mississippi.”

“‘That dopey maid,’ Eloise said without moving from the couch.” Her scornful condescension to her maid becomes increasingly ironic and her immobility increasingly pathetic. Throughout the story her maid, named Grace, is identified with spirituality and salvation—both psychological and theological (secularists can disregard the theology)—in contrast to Eloise, who is damned. Grace recalls Dilsey in ironic contrast to the decadent Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by Faulkner. As Eloise and Mary Jane talk trivia, they display their shallow preoccupation with appearances: “‘Unattractive! God! He looked like an unwashed Bela Lugosi.’ Mary Jane threw back her head and roared. ‘Marvelous,’ she said, coming back into drinking position.” Her stock response is like one of those little mechanical birds that tips its beak into a glass of water as if to drink and then rocks back. Her “roaring” is overacting. She and Eloise epitomize those Holden Caulfield calls “phonies” in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

Eloise is holding their empty glasses when she exclaims “God.” From the profane Eloise this is merely a stock exclamation like “Marvellous,” empty of its true meaning, like her marriage. Her profanity conveys how empty she is of spiritual values: “I don’t have one damn thing holy to wear. If Lew’s mother ever dies—ha, ha—she’ll probably leave me some old monogrammed icepick or something.” The oxymoron “damn thing holy” concentrates the conflict in Eloise between damnation and salvation, morally and psychologically. Eloise wishes her mother-in-law was dead. And the mother-in-law dislikes Eloise because she is cold--validated by Salinger’s motif of “soiled snow” and “filthy slush...visibly turning to ice.” Mary Jane says “It’s getting so icy out” while Eloise reveals that she is getting icy inside.

Mary Jane is typical of many people in the urban modern world in having “little or no wherewithal for being left alone in a room.” Alone, she is left with nothing. She has no conscious inner life, as implied when she passes book cases “without glancing at any of the titles.” She and Eloise fill their emptiness with alcohol. Eloise comes back with more drinks, reclines again and resumes berating her maid: “She’s sitting on her big, black butt reading *The Robe*. I dropped the icetrays taking them out.” She begrudges the maid a break and belittles her reading a religious book. Icy Eloise believes in booze. Mary Jane notices that she is changing for the worse: “Eloise, you’re getting hard as nails.”

Eloise yells at her daughter Ramona in the other room with “her eyes shut,” connoting blindness and separation. She has delegated motherhood to her maid. Eloise dislikes her daughter because she looks like her husband and her hated mother-in-law, letting appearances determine their relationship. Ironically, Mary Jane inquires whether *Ramona’s* eyesight has gotten any worse. Eloise replies “God! Not that I know of.” Victorian women fulfilled their maternal responsibilities as a duty to God, whereas the self-absorbed Eloise has “her eyes shut.” Ironically, though Ramona wears thick glasses, she sees through the phony familiarity of Mary Jane exclaiming “Marvellous” and asking for a kiss. “I don’t like to kiss people”—including her mother, who never kisses *her*. Eloise has alienated her child from everybody, leaving her to invent her imaginary beau Jimmy Jimmereeno. Mary Jane has difficulty grasping the invisible and makes another stock response: “Marvellous.” Jimmy is a projection of Ramona herself, a neglected child with “no mommy and no daddy,” idealized with “no freckles”—defensively carrying a “sword.”

Eloise identifies her joking with a cynical remark made famous by the Russian actor Akim Tamiroff, a villain in various movies: “You make beeg joke—hah?” Meaning it’s not funny at all. Her alienation is evident in identifying with a Russian during the Cold War. Her own acting, pointing her fingers like gun barrels and threatening, is a defense mechanism covering up her vulnerability by pretending to be tough. The image is ironic, evoking the stock line “I’ve got you covered.” Though she is affluent enough to have a maid and her life is soft, Eloise is so dissatisfied she cannot get comfortable in any position and blames her comforts: “There isn’t one damn pillow in this house that I can stand.” Maybe her life has been *too* soft. Feminists claim that she would be happier with a career, but Salinger is implying that she would be dissatisfied in the workplace too—in any position—because she cannot escape herself.

In the literary tradition of Realism, the little girl Ramona comes to life through details as she persists in scratching herself and picking her nose, ignoring the mother who ignores *her*. Eloise is more concerned with appearances than with why her little girl is acting so alienated. “‘Stand still,’ said Eloise.” As if she is trying to make Ramona freeze. Eloise has chosen to live in an upscale Connecticut neighborhood where there are “No children at all” for her child to play with. This is a Postmodern neighborhood of women liberated from the responsibilities of motherhood, a prefiguration of what politically correct society was to be like after abortion was legalized by Feminists. Parents are considered lower class in this neighborhood. The women here ridicule Eloise for having even just one child. Mothers are merely breeders in this neighborhood: “They call me Fertile Fanny behind my--”

Eloise is so frightened of being left alone she tries to force Mary Jane to stay and have still another drink, but her friend refuses at first: “No, honestly, El.” In common usage the “El” is the elevated railway, identifying Eloise with moving up and getting ahead in urban America. Paradoxically, getting ahead in the world with her husband Lew has frozen Eloise within herself. Now Mary Jane is worried about getting stuck: “I mean it’s getting so *terribly* icy. I have hardly any anti-freeze in the car...” Nor can she stop her self-destructive friend from freezing inside. “Let it freeze,” says Eloise. “Say you’re dead.”

They go on drinking through the afternoon and Eloise, still lying down as appropriate to the dead, tells Mary Jane about wonderful Walt, the only boy who ever made her laugh. With severe buyer's remorse, Eloise becomes nostalgic for her youth. Once when she twisted her ankle, joking to cheer her up Walt called her ankle "Poor Uncle Wiggily," identifying her with wholesome traditional values. "God, he was nice." God was nice when Eloise was nice like Walt. "Ah, God, he was nice." Once on a train Walt put his hand on her stomach and said her stomach was so beautiful he wished a military officer would order him to stick his other hand out the window into the cold wind. Walt is more than a romantic funny guy, as a soldier he has discipline, loyalty as implied by submission to a military officer, and a balanced view of life. Above all he is natural, spontaneous, and playful. Salinger could not know it, but Walt embodies the youthful values that would erupt in the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, whereas husband Lew is the "phony" conventional establishment. Eloise once started to tell Lew about Walt, "But the first thing he asked me was what his rank was." Ironically, Mary Jane has the same values as Lew: "What was his rank?" Walt would have taken Eloise to the Woodstock Festival.

In calling Mary Jane a "career girl" Eloise suggests that choosing to pursue a career is what caused Mary Jane's divorce: "If you ever get married again, don't tell your husband *anything*. Do you hear me?... They wanna think you spent your whole life vomiting every time a boy came near you. Oh, you can tell them stuff. But never honestly'." Apparently Eloise told her husband about Walt and his reaction persuaded her to become a total phony. Eloise is a prototype of the modern Feminist in her contempt for men and her dictatorial attitude: "You'll go though *hell* if you ever give 'em any credit for intelligence. Take my word." Irony spikes when she declares that she did not marry Lew because he said he loved her, but because "He told me he loved Jane Austen." After scorning Mary Jane for asking what Walt's rank was, for being a snob like Lew instead of appreciating Walt as a person, here Eloise admits she made a life-changing decision based entirely on Lew's claim to share her snobbish taste for Jane Austen, connoting high status, refinement, and female priorities of value. While she may once have *read* Jane Austen, by now Eloise the profane inelegant sloppy drunk is the opposite of Austen. Ironically also, she attained what the heroines in Austen seek, yet she is miserable. Eloise the phony lost respect for her husband not because he committed tax fraud or adultery or murder, but because he is a phony--because he had not really read Jane Austen! She belittles him for preferring to read adventure fiction like a man.

The reluctance of Eloise to talk about Walt parallels Ramona's reluctance to talk about Jimmy. She has idealized the real Walt somewhat as Ramona idealized her imaginary beau. By not telling Lew that Walt got killed, Eloise keeps him alive as her romantic secret love. She decides that if she ever did tell Lew that Walt got killed, "I'd tell him he was killed in action." That is, rather than tell the unheroic truth, that Walt got blown up when a package he was wrapping exploded, she would idealize him as a hero (thereby turning him into a phony). Eloise is holding this lie in reserve as a secret weapon she can use against Lew. But holding on to Walt makes her cry, melting her ice until she hardens herself again: "Who's crying?" Mary Jane the career girl encourages her denial of natural feeling and suppression of the heart: "I mean it isn't worth it or anything." Mary Jane has never had a Walt in her life.

Ramona comes in with galoshes clomping and reveals that Jimmy "got runned over and killed." His accidental death parallels the accidental death of Walt. More mature than her self-pitying mother, the little girl has adapted to reality and moved on, given comic emphasis as she "giant-stepped her way out of the room." While her daughter grows more independent—beyond needing a beau—Eloise becomes even more dependent on her maid and on Mary Jane. Her guilt and surrender to despair are evident when she sends Mary Jane to the kitchen for more drinks in order to avoid Grace. "I don't want to go out there. The whole damn place smells like orange juice." Orange juice has the same connotations of family values as Uncle Wiggily. Eloise is recoiling from all that is wholesome and healthy, including her child.

She answers a call from Lew asking her to come and pick him up, but she cannot do so because Mary Jane's car is in the way and they cannot find the key in the snow. Symbolically, the key to improving her marital relationship is lost under her "soiled snow." Significantly, the key belongs to Mary Jane. Though she is a shallow snob, Mary Jane is morally *clean*: At the window earlier, she "leaned her wrist on one of the crosspieces between the panes, but, feeling grit, she removed it, rubbed it clean with her other hand, and stood up more erectly." Mary Jane is not as phony as Eloise, who orders her to be dishonest with men. On

the phone with Lew, Eloise expresses no sympathy for him stranded in the snow and mocks him by suggesting that he and his friends march home like soldiers, like Walt.

After being cold to her husband Eloise drinks the last from a bottle and “shivered.” She jumps when Grace turns on the light in the dining room. Grace appears before her in the light, an archetypal image of potential redemption. Her husband is stranded by the snow and Grace wants to know if he can spend the night with her in the maid’s room. Eloise says no. Ironically, she is jealous of her maid, who has a true marriage. And she has a grudge against all men because of her own bad choice of one man for a husband. Grace finds her lack of charity hard to understand. “I say I’m afraid he can’t spend the night here,” says El. “I’m not running a hotel.”

Heading up the stairs, she picks up one of Ramona’s galoshes on the landing and throws it over the side “with as much force as possible.” Already angry at the little girl, she wakes her up and demands to know why she is sleeping on one side of her bed instead of in the center: “Because I don’t want to hurt Mickey.” Ramona has moved on to a new beau named Mickey Mickeranno and displays a sensitive warmth of heart that contrasts with her mother’s coldness to Lew and Grace. Eloise raised her voice “to a shriek” demanding that Ramona move to the center of her bed (and squash Mickey). Then she will be alone and take up all the space, like her lonely mother. Eloise is jealous of her own child. The little girl has reason to be “extremely frightened” and “let herself be moved without actually submitting to it.” Eloise orders her to close her eyes and turns off the light. What a time Eloise is going to have as Ramona grows older, and stronger, and more rebellious—“giant-stepping.”

Eloise turns back into Ramona’s room on an impulse, picks up Ramona’s glasses on the night table, presses them to her cheek and weeps for “Poor Uncle Wiggily.” She is remembering Walt but is weeping for herself, as it was *her* ankle he called Uncle Wiggily. That this is self-pity rather than redemptive enlightenment is implied when she puts the glasses back on the night table “lenses down.” Glasses are nearly always symbolic in literary fiction. Putting the lenses down is consistent with her own tendency to shut her eyes to Ramona and her commanding Ramona to close her eyes. She gets drunk and makes jokes to avoid looking at her life. Ramona is awake, crying. She knows her parents may divorce. She has seen her mother truly just as she saw Mary Jane when she refused to kiss her.

At the end, for the first time in the story Eloise kisses her child--with her boozy breath--wetly on the mouth like she kissed Walt. Ramona must have been grossed out. This exceptional attention from her mother is perfunctory, as Eloise kisses Ramona and leaves the room in the same sentence. Desperately seeking reassurance for herself, Eloise staggers downstairs and wakes up Mary Jane. No longer condescending to her friend, she is sobbing. She “shook Mary Jane’s arm. ‘I was a nice girl,’ she pleaded, ‘wasn’t I.’” In her freshman year she bought a dress that some girl said was out of fashion “and I cried all night.” She may have been nice then, but she already had the preoccupation with status and appearances that led to this neighborhood in Connecticut and her corruption by materialistic values. The themes, social criticism and geographical symbolism—innocence in the West, corruption in the East—give this story much in common with *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by Fitzgerald.

Michael Hollister (2013)