

## Sonny and Jane Amanda English

### *A Comparison / Contrast Essay*

We have all, at one time or another, had the blues or felt as though we were going insane, but perhaps not quite to the same extent as the main characters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Sonny's Blues." "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is about a woman named Jane struggling with a mental illness against society's standards. James Baldwin tells the story of a young black man trying to make his way as a musician in Harlem in "Sonny's Blues." Jane and Sonny (the main character from "Sonny's Blues") are similar in several ways. They both feel trapped by outside forces; they both want careers that society frowned upon; and they eventually find an escape from their mental prisons.

Jane feels trapped, or imprisoned, by her own husband, John, and Sonny is arrested and must serve time in jail. John does and says many things that make Jane feel as though she has no freedom. He has her prescriptions on a schedule and Jane says "he takes all care from me" (Gilman 302). He will not allow her to go visit anyone, including her relatives. He does not want her writing, and he will not renovate the nursery, which happens to be their bedroom, for her. John tells Jane when to eat, how much exercise she needs, and he decides whom she can and can't see. The external forces bearing down on Sonny are the law and his brother. Sonny "had been picked up, the evening before in a raid on an apartment downtown, for peddling and using heroin" (Baldwin 81). He had been arrested for drugs, and his brother didn't want to believe it. Sonny's brother didn't see Sonny as a grown man. When he thought of Sonny, he visualized a young teenage boy. Sonny's brother was, for a while, very distant and uninvolved in Sonny's life. He later becomes interested in Sonny again and wants to help him. However, the way he tries to help makes Sonny feel like his brother is trying to control his life.

More than anything, Jane wants to write, and Sonny wants to play jazz music. Jane lived in a time when the only respectable thing for a woman to be was a housewife. Jane says, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it or else meet with heavy opposition" (Gilman 301). She was passionate about her writing, but John considered it work and wouldn't allow her to do it. Playing jazz on the piano impassioned Sonny. He tells his brother that he wants to be a jazz musician, and during this conversation Sonny says, "But what I don't seem to be able to do is make you understand that it's the only thing I want to do" (Baldwin 92). Sonny's brother was concerned about Sonny's ability to make a living as a musician in Harlem.

After staring at the horrid yellow wallpaper for three months, Jane's insanity finally liberates her; Sonny finds a place to play his music where the audience really listens to him and encourages him to play more. Jane had become obsessed with her wallpaper. She began to see things, such as a woman struggling to get free, in the patterns on the paper. Jane decided to help "that poor thing" get free (Gilman 311). The process involved ripping the paper off the wall, and when John comes into the room, Jane responds, "I've got out at last . . . in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman 313). This indicates that her mental state has deteriorated to the extent that she doesn't even know who she is. Sonny has many problems in his life. He finds an inexplicable solace in playing the piano. When he has the opportunity to play at a nightclub, "Sonny hadn't been near a piano for over a year" (Baldwin 103). He struggled, at first, to make music with the band in the club, but as his fingers became familiar with the keys on the piano "he began to make it his" (Baldwin 104). His brother was at the club with Sonny, to hear him play. It occurs to Sonny's brother that "Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he [Sonny] could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" (Baldwin 104). And he realizes that, for the first time in his life, he is listening to Sonny.

Jane wrote when she could, despite her feelings of oppression, and although her reprieve was temporary and unfortunate, she did flee from her husband's constant monitoring. Sonny overcame drugs, connected with his brother, and found deliverance in his music. Although their problems seem very different on the surface, Jane and Sonny face parallel evils.