Key Passages from the Text

Flashback I: The narrator’s ominous, proleptic knowledge of hopeless future for black children like himself (p.82)

There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the window panes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside. And my mother rocks a little from the waist, and my father's eyes are closed. Everyone is looking at something a child can't see. For a minute they've forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the lad's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop-will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk.

 But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending. In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light. Then the old folks will remember the children and they won't talk any more that day**.** And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he's moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk anymore because if he knows too much about what's happened to them, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to him.

* Symbolism of Light and Darkness showing the narrator’s pessimistic viewpoint on the future of the black community
* A parallel between the tragic fate of the father’s generation and the narrator’s own implying the permanence of a vicious circle
* A foreshadowing of the main conflict

Climax: the narrator’s second fight with Sonny(p.90)

Then we had a fight, a pretty awful fight, and I didn't see him for months. By and by I looked him up, where he was living, in a furnished room in the Village, and I tried to make it up. But there were lots of other people in the room and Sonny just lay on his bed, and he wouldn't come downstairs with me, and he treated these other people as though they were his family and I weren't. So I got mad and then he got mad, and then I told him that he might just as well be dead as live the way he *was* living. Then he stood up and he told me not to worry about him any more in life, that he was dead as far as I was concerned. Then he pushed me to the door and the other people looked on as though nothing were happening, and he slammed the door behind me. I stood in the hallway, staring at the door. I heard somebody laugh in the room and then the tears came to my eyes. I started down the steps, whistling to keep from crying, I kept whistling to myself. *You going to need me, baby, one of these cold, rainy days*.

* The Climax of the conflicts between the two brothers, a turning point from which the positions are reversed.
* An irony in “You going to need me, baby, one of these cold, rainy days”

What Music Meant to Them: An emotional bridge connecting the two people who are suffering (p.92)

The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last.

* A magic effect of music on the suffering people
* A foreshadowing the way the resolution is made in the following denouement.

What Heroin meant to the Musician taking drugs(pp. 93-94)

"When she was singing before," said Sonny, abruptly, "her voice reminded me for a minute of what heroin feels like sometimes-when it's in your veins. It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And- and sure." He sipped his beer, very deliberately not looking at me. I watched his face. "It makes you feel-in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling."

"Do you?" I sat down slowly in the easy chair.

"Sometimes." He went to the sofa and picked up his notebook again. "Some people do."

"In order," I asked, "to play?" And my voice was very ugly, full of contempt and anger.

"Well"-he looked at me with great, troubled eyes, as though, in fact, he hoped his eyes would tell me things he could never otherwise say-"they think so. And if they think so-!"

"And what do you think?" I asked.

He sat on the sofa and put his can of beer on the floor. "I don't know," he said, and I couldn't be sure if he were answering my question or pursuing his houghts. His face didn't tell me. "It's not so much to play. It's to stand it, to be able to make it at all. On any level." He frowned and smiled: "In order to keep from shaking to pieces."

* Sonny’s opening up his mind to his brother by explaining what the drug was to him.
* Music was a kind of positive equivalent of heroin, a relief from pain, suffering, helplessness, and loneliness.

An argument between the two on the way one should understand suffering(pp.94-95)

"And what about you?" I asked-I couldn't help it. "What about you? Do you want to?"

He stood up and walked to the window and I remained silent for a long time. Then he sighed. "Me," he said. Then: "While I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through-to sing like that. It's repulsive to think you have to suffer that much."

I said: "But there's no way not to suffer-is there. Sonny?"

"I believe not," he said and smiled, "but that's never stopped anyone from trying." He looked at me. "Has it?" I realized, with this mocking look, that there stood between us, forever, beyond the power of time or forgiveness, the fact that I had held silence-so long!-when he had needed human speech to help him. He turned back to the window. "No, there's no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it, to keep on top of it, and to make it seem-well, like you. Like you did something, all right, and now you're suffering for it. You know?" I said nothing. "Well you know," he said, impatiently, "why do people suffer? Maybe it's better to do something to give it a reason, any reason."

"But we just agreed," I said, "that there's no way not to suffer. Isn't it better, then, just to-take it?"

"But nobody just takes it," Sonny cried, "that's what I'm telling you! Everybody tries not to. You're just hung up on the way some people try-it's not your way!"

The hair on my face began to itch, my face felt wet. "That's not true," I said, "that's not true. I don't give a damn what other people do, I don't even care how they suffer. I just care how you suffer." And he looked at me. "Please believe me," I said, "I don't want to see you-die trying not to suffer."

"I won't," he said flatly, "die trying not to suffer. At least, not any faster than anybody else."

"But there's no need," I said, trying to laugh, "is there? in killing yourself."

* A kind of dramatic irony: the narrator is talking about Sonny’s “suffering” and his possible dependence on heroin while Sonny is talking about the narrator’s suffering from Grace’s death advising him to articulate and face the suffering itself with his own positive attempts not to be overwhelmed by it.
* Talking about what to do with inescapable suffering in human life.

The narrator’s first serious question into Sonny’s trouble and his answer(pp.95-96)

"What have you been, Sonny?" I asked.

He smiled-but sat sideways on the sofa, his elbow resting on the back, his fingers playing with his mouth and chin, not looking at me. "I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be. Didn't know anybody could be." He stopped, looking inward, looking helplessly young, looking old. "I'm not talking about it now because I feel guilty or anything like that-maybe it would be better if I did, I don't know. Anyway, I can't really talk about it. Not

to you, not to anybody," and now he turned and faced me. "Sometimes, you know, and it was actually when I was most out of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was with it, really, and I could play or I didn't really have to play, it just came out of me, it was there. And I don't know how I played, thinking about it now, but I know I did awful things, those times, sometimes, to people. Or it wasn't that I did anything to them-it was that they weren't real." He picked up

the beer can; it was empty; he rolled it between his palms: "And other times-well, I needed a fix, I needed to find a place to lean, I needed to clear a space to listen-and I couldn't find it, and I-went crazy, I did terrible things to me, I was terrible for me." He began pressing the beer can between his hands, I watched the metal begin to give. It glittered, as he played with it like a knife, and I was afraid he would cut himself, but I said nothing. "Oh well. I can never tell you. I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? my stink, and I thought I'd die if I couldn't get away from it and yet, all the same, I knew that everything I was doing was just locking me in with it. And I didn't know," he paused, still flattening the beer can, "I didn't know, I still don't know, something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink, but I didn't think that that was what I'd been trying to do- and-who can stand it?" and he abruptly dropped the ruined beer can, looking at me with a small, still smile, and then rose, walking to the window as though it were the lodestone rock. I watched his face, he watched the avenue. "I couldn't tell you when Mama died-but the reason I wanted to leave Harlem so bad was to get away from drugs. And then, when I ran away, that's what I was running from-really. When I came back, nothing had changed I hadn't changed I was just-older." And he stopped, drumming

with his fingers on the windowpane. The sun had vanished, soon darkness would fall. I watched his face. "It can come again," he said, almost as though speaking to himself. Then he turned to me. "It can come again," he repeated. "I just want you to know that."

* Sonny confessed that he was in fact struggling with the hopeless reality he was in sometimes resorting to the drugs and his enlistment in the Navy was in fact his desperate attempt to get away from the drugs. But he now realizes that the temporary escape like an enlistment could not be the solution. Later on, we come to find that Sonny’s success does come from Jazz music(and a real community in which he could be himself, he could communicate himself, he could share his suffering) not from simply running away from the problem. What matters in overcoming the hopeless reality of Harlem is to build a true sense of solidarity with the other members of the community with whom he could share the suffering from the inescapable “darkness” and its best recipe was their Jazz music.

What Creol did to Sonny(p.98.)

I just watched Sonny's face. His face was troubled, he was working hard, but he wasn't with it. And I had the feeling that, in a way, everyone on the bandstand was waiting for him, both waiting for him and pushing him along. But as I began to watch Creole, I realized that it was Creole who held them all back. He had them on a short rein. Up there, keeping the beat with his whole body, wailing on the fiddle, with his eyes half closed, he was listening to everything, but he was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was

Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing-he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know. He was waiting for Sonny to do the things on the keys which would let Creole know that Sonny was in the water.

-Creol shows the narrator what he could have done when Sonny went through his terrible suffering, another way to show his brotherly love to him.

The narrator’s epiphany about the meaning of suffering through the blues music(p.99)

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

-The narrator’s realization of the whole meaning of Sonny’s lonely struggle with the darkness and his own way of getting over it.

Resolution: the narrator’s reconciliation with Sonny, a kind of Jesus resurrected from death with the “Grace” of suffering(p.100).

Then it was over. Creole and Sonny let out their breath, both soaking wet, and grinning. There was a lot of applause and some of it was real. In the dark, the girl came by and I asked her to take drinks to the bandstand. There was a long pause, while they talked up there in the indigo light and after awhile I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like

the very cup of trembling.