

If Beale Street Could Talk



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, the grandson of a slave and the eldest of nine children. Though his biological father was absent, a Baptist minister named David Baldwin soon became the young author's stepfather. Over the years, Baldwin's relationship with David would prove tenuous yet formative, since his eventual experience as a Youth Minister in an opposing church was both a result and defiance of his stepfather's example as a Baptist preacher. In retrospect, Baldwin identified his time in the church—preparing and delivering several sermons per week—as an important step in his development as a writer, since in this role he was forced to closely consider a wide range of human emotions. He calls upon this experience in his most celebrated novel, [Go Tell It on the Mountain](#), as well as in the play *The Amen Corner*. Upon graduating high school, Baldwin spent the majority of his time in Greenwich Village—at that time a hotbed of creativity and progressive thinking—working as a book reviewer. Around this time, the famous novelist Richard Wright identified Baldwin's talent and helped him earn a grant in order to work on a novel and sustain himself while doing so. Baldwin moved to Paris in 1948 with the hopes of both physically and psychologically distancing himself from America so that he could write about his country more clearly. The result came in 1953, when he published [Go Tell It on the Mountain](#). Baldwin returned to America in 1957, at which point he became involved with the Civil Rights Movement. This was the beginning of his celebrated career as an outspoken activist and socially-conscious public thinker, advocating for peaceful resolutions of America's racial tensions. Baldwin worked for the last ten years of his life in France, penning a number of essential works about American identity in the wake of the assassinations of Medgar Evers—a civil rights activist—and Martin Luther King, Jr. He died of stomach cancer in 1987 in Saint Paul de Vence, France.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The racism Fonny and his friend Daniel experience in *If Beale Street Could Talk* has unfortunately been institutionalized and normalized, thanks in part to the practice of profiling, which emerged as an official custom during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a way for law enforcement officers to identify supposedly dangerous criminals. Until 1968, it was only legal for a police officer to search a suspect *after* that person had been arrested, unless the officer had obtained a search warrant. However, the Supreme Court ruled in 1968 that officers could frisk anyone who might appear dangerous.

Because this policy—now known as “stop and frisk”—allowed officers to decide for themselves who might be dangerous, it quickly led to the practice of *racial* profiling, in which racist officers often stopped people of color without having any real reason to suspect they were dangerous. This is quite relevant to *If Beale Street Could Talk*, considering that Daniel goes to jail because an officer stops him and searches him without a warrant, ultimately finding a bag of marijuana and using it to manipulate him into pleading guilty for a (completely unrelated) crime that he didn't commit. This kind of racist policing has continued for decades and is still in practice today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because *If Beale Street Could Talk* is largely about the injustices that black people face in America, it's worth considering [The Fire Next Time](#) in tandem with the novel, since it is Baldwin's nonfiction exploration of race relations in the United States. Like *If Beale Street Could Talk* and many of Baldwin's other texts, [The Fire Next Time](#) champions the power of love to sustain people through racism and hatred. What's more, Baldwin's most famous novel, [Go Tell It on the Mountain](#), also has certain thematic overlaps with *Beale Street*, as both works investigate the ins and outs of coming of age in Harlem during the twentieth century. Lastly, it's worth mentioning that *Beale Street*—although not about drugs—serves as a good artistic representation of the ideas driving Michelle Alexander's study of mass incarceration, [The New Jim Crow](#). This book scrutinizes the “War on Drugs” and demonstrates the ways in which law enforcement in contemporary America looks for seemingly any excuse to imprison people of color in an oppressive, wide-sweeping manner.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** If Beale Street Could Talk
- **When Written:** 1973
- **Where Written:** St. Paul de Vence, France
- **When Published:** 1974
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** New York City—specifically Harlem and Greenwich Village—in the 1970s
- **Climax:** Immediately after finding out that Fonny's father, Frank, has committed suicide, Tish goes into labor.
- **Antagonist:** Officer Bell (and, more generally, racism)
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. *If Beale Street Could Talk* was adapted as a film in 2018, directed by Barry Jenkins and starring KiKi Layne, Stephan James, and Regina King, among other well-respected actors. Regina King won an Oscar for her role as Tish's mother, Sharon.

Female Narrator. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin writes a novel from a woman's perspective for the first time, making Tish his first female narrator.



PLOT SUMMARY

Nineteen-year-old Tish visits Fonny, who's imprisoned in "the Tombs" in Lower Manhattan. Through a glass divider, she tells Fonny she's pregnant with his child. "Did you tell Frank?" he asks, referring to his father, and Tish tells him she hasn't told anyone but him. Although he's overjoyed, he suddenly becomes serious and asks what she's "going to do" about this, and she assures him everything will work out, insisting that he'll be out of prison by the time she gives birth. "You sure about that?" he asks.

Tish goes home and tells her mother, Sharon, that she's pregnant, and it goes quite well. In fact, Sharon isn't even surprised, and she urges Tish to refrain from feeling like a "bad girl." Later, Joseph, her father, echoes this sentiment, and Tish's sister, Ernestine, tells her to "unbow [her] head." After Tish's family toasts to her pregnancy, Joseph calls Frank and tells him to come over, saying he should bring Fonny's mother, Mrs. Hunt, and his two sisters, Adrienne and Sheila.

When Fonny's family arrives, a palpable tension arises. Part of this is due to the fact that Frank and his wife are constantly at odds, since Mrs. Hunt is a judgmental and very strict religious woman, whereas he's a heavy-drinking man who resents her. When Tish finally tells the Hunts that she's pregnant, Frank is overcome with happiness and tells Joseph they should celebrate in the bars. Mrs. Hunt, on the other hand, condescendingly asks Tish who will be "responsible" for the child, and when Tish says she and Fonny will take care of the **baby**, she says, "I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son. You have a demon in you—I always knew it. [...] The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb." As she says this, she advances upon Tish, but Frank stands and slaps her to the floor. Standing above her, he laughs as everyone worries about her feeble heart. "I think you'll find it's still pumping," he says. "But I wouldn't call it a heart." He and Joseph then leave (though Joseph is hesitant), and Tish, Ernestine, and Sharon argue with Fonny's mother and two sisters, all of whom resent him for getting arrested even though everyone knows he's innocent. At one point, Sharon reminds Mrs. Hunt that Tish is pregnant with her grandchild, saying that

it doesn't make any "difference" "how it gets here." After a venomous exchange of words, Mrs. Hunt and her daughters leave.

Baldwin weaves Tish and Fonny's backstory throughout the narrative, explaining that they've known each other since they were children. At first, they disliked one another, since they once got into a fight. While trying to pull Fonny's friend Daniel off her own friend Geneva, Tish found herself getting pulled away. She grabbed a board and swung it, catching Fonny in the face with a rusty nail, which she didn't know was embedded in the wood. As Fonny bled, Tish ran away, and he chased her. When he eventually caught up, he spit in her mouth. After this incident, Tish didn't see him for several days, and she worried that she'd given him lockjaw by scraping him with a rusty nail. When she couldn't take the suspense anymore, she went to Frank's tailoring shop and discovered that Mrs. Hunt sent Fonny to some relatives and that he'd be returning soon. "I'll tell him you come by," Frank said with a knowing smile. A few days later, Fonny came back and apologized for spitting in Tish's face, and she apologized for hitting him. From that point on, they were inseparable.

Tish also narrates the story of the first time she and Fonny had sex, explaining how they spent the night in the Village. After going to a Spanish restaurant where Fonny was a regular, they went to his dingy apartment—also in the Village—and Fonny asked her to marry him. Because he is a sculptor, though, he explained he wouldn't be able to provide her with much, except for unequivocal love. When she agreed to spend the rest of her life with him, they lay down on a pallet, and Tish lost her virginity. Early the next morning, they went to Tish's apartment in Harlem and told her parents that they wanted to get married, and though Joseph was skeptical at first, he soon gave his consent.

The Monday after she tells the Hunts about her pregnancy, Tish goes with her mother to see Fonny's lawyer, Mr. Hayward. Hayward is a young white man whom Ernestine convinced to take the case, since she works frequently with attorneys in her job as an advocate for neglected children. Sitting in his office, Hayward explains that Mrs. Rogers, the Puerto Rican woman who accused Fonny of raping her, has fled the United States, most likely returning to Puerto Rico. This, he says, makes their case even more difficult. After all, it's obvious that her accusation is weak, since Fonny was with Tish and Daniel at the time of the alleged rape—something Hayward might be able to get Rogers to admit if he were able to talk to her. However, the District Attorney's office seems to know this, and so it has sent her into hiding. Worse, Daniel has been arrested. "Daniel has a record, as you know," Hayward says. "They, obviously, intend to make him change his testimony." Because of this, Hayward says, his job is going to be very difficult, but he's going to do everything he can to prove Fonny's innocence. For now, what he needs is more money, since he needs to hire private

investigators to track down Mrs. Rogers. Unfortunately, coming up with this money will take time, and Tish knows that each day that passes weighs heavily on Fonny.

Tish explains that Fonny and Daniel reconnected shortly before Fonny's arrest. After many years of not seeing one another, they crossed paths on the street and went back to Fonny's apartment, where they talked about Daniel's recent two-year stint in prison while Tish cooked dinner. Daniel told Fonny that he was arrested for stealing a car even though he doesn't know how to drive. Because he had marijuana when he was picked up, though, he felt trapped. Knowing this, the courts offered him a deal: he could either plead guilty and receive a reduced sentence, or he could stick to his story and risk an even harsher verdict. Feeling utterly alone and powerless, Daniel took the guilty plea and spent two harrowing years in prison—years that have changed his life forever.

After going to Hayward's, Tish visits Fonny in the Tombs and tells him the bad news about Mrs. Rogers's disappearance. She tries to stay optimistic, but that night she has a terrible nightmare about Fonny driving full-speed off a cliff, and when she wakes up, her mother is sitting on her bed and looking at her. "I know I can't help you very much right now," Sharon says. "But I know about suffering; if that helps. I know that it ends. I ain't going to tell you no lies, like it always ends for the better." Going on, she urges Tish to focus on her baby, and to remember that "love brought you here." The next morning, Tish wakes up and goes to her job as a perfume-counter salesperson.

That day, Ernestine takes Tish for a drink and tells her that Sharon should be the one to go to Puerto Rico to find Mrs. Rogers. She points out that Hayward can't go because he has to "deal with Bell," the racist officer who claims to have seen Fonny "running away from the scene of the crime," even though he arrested Fonny on the other side of town, which is so far that it's impossible to think Fonny actually ran there. Ernestine also explains to Tish that it doesn't matter whether or not Mrs. Rogers is lying, since the woman believes herself—she *has* to, because identifying her rapist (even inaccurately) helps her feel like she has processed the traumatic event. "It's over. For her. If she changes her testimony, she'll go mad," she says. She then tells Tish she has a plan to get Officer Bell to change his testimony. Since she knows Bell murdered a young black boy several years ago in Brooklyn, she intends to have that boy's mother and Bell's wife—who hates him—attend the trial, hopefully frazzling Bell and ruining his "credibility." Joseph and Frank also devise their own plot to help with this difficult situation: they start stealing goods from their employers and selling them in Harlem in order to raise money for Fonny's legal fees.

Sharon agrees to go to Puerto Rico, and when she finally manages to find Mrs. Rogers, she tries to appeal to the woman's motherly love, since Rogers is a mother herself. To do this, she shows Mrs. Rogers a picture of Fonny and Tish, explaining that

Tish is her daughter and that she's going to have Fonny's baby. Unfortunately, though, talking about this only dredges up Mrs. Rogers's trauma, and she starts screaming. Shortly thereafter, she disappears once again—this time for good—and Sharon is forced to return to the United States in defeat.

Tish narrates another important part of Fonny's case, telling the story of how they first met Officer Bell. After having found a loft to rent as a couple, they were walking in the evening when they stopped at a small grocery store. As Tish picked out tomatoes, Fonny went around the block to buy cigarettes, at which point a shady white man started harassing Tish, touching her behind and saying crude things. When she tried to leave, he gripped her arm, so she slapped him and spit in his face. Just then, Fonny appeared and beat the man up, attracting the attention of Officer Bell, who was standing on the other side of the street. Ignoring the white man, Bell tries to tell Fonny that he's going to take him to the police station, but the grocer steps in and says that Fonny wasn't doing anything wrong, going on to insult Bell in front of a group of people. In response, Bell vindictively tells Fonny that he'll "be seeing [him] around." That night, when they return to Fonny's apartment, a police car is parked across the street.

After Sharon returns from Puerto Rico, Joseph sits down with Tish and insists that she quit her job, telling her that she needs to focus on her health. Understanding that "the baby is connected with [Fonny's] determination to be free," Tish follows this advice and begins visiting Fonny every day—something that significantly improves his mood. Though this helps, it doesn't improve the details of the case, and the trial keeps getting put off. Worse, when Hayward finally manages to have a bail set for Fonny's release (until the trial), it is astronomically high. Frank, for his part, is deeply discouraged by this, and when his boss discovers that he's been stealing and fires him, he drives out of the city and kills himself. When Tish receives this news, she sits there and can't respond. Staring at her mother, everything goes dark for her except Sharon's eyes, and "an incredible intelligence charge[s] the air." At this moment, Tish realizes she's about to give birth, suddenly understanding that her "time [has] come."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tish (Clementine) – A nineteen-year-old black woman living in Harlem, and the narrator of *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Despite her age, Tish is quite mature, partially because her trying circumstances have forced her to adopt an attitude of resilience. Her fiancé, Fonny, is in prison awaiting trial, having been wrongfully accused of raping a woman named Mrs. Rogers. What's more, Tish is pregnant with Fonny's **child**. She tries to maintain a sense of hope, one she can pass to Fonny

when she visits, since she knows he desperately needs support. Luckily, she has her own support network, too, as her family rallies around her and encourages her to focus on the fact that she's about to bring life into the world. Nevertheless, she often can't help but succumb to despair, thinking frequently about the injustice of Fonny's accusation and the racism that has put them both in such a difficult situation. This racism is something she's dealt with before, most notably when Officer Bell—the bigoted policeman responsible for Fonny's arrest—first encountered her and Fonny. During this initial incident, Officer Bell saw Fonny defending Tish from a junkie who had been harassing her, and even though it was clear Fonny hadn't done anything wrong, Bell tried to arrest him. When the white grocer stepped in and prevented Bell from doing this, Bell told Fonny he'd be "seeing [him] around." From that point on, Bell stalked Fonny and Tish, waiting to take revenge. As Tish deals with Fonny's legal battles, her family urges her to concentrate on her pregnancy, which is the only narrative thread in the entire novel that reaches a definitive conclusion—Tish finally goes into labor in the final scene, and since the book ends before Fonny goes to trial, this becomes the text's only moment of resolution.

Fonny (Alonzo Hunt) – A twenty-two-year-old black man in prison because he has been wrongfully accused of raping Mrs. Rogers. Shortly before his arrest, Fonny asks Tish—whom he has known since he was a child—to marry him, and the young couple make plans to start their life together. A sculptor who likes to work with wood and stone, Fonny tells Tish upfront that he won't be able to provide her with much, though he'll always remain faithful. Unfortunately, a feud with a racist cop named Officer Bell leads to his imprisonment not long after he and Tish tell their parents their intentions to get married. Officer Bell is eager to take revenge on Fonny because of an altercation that took place between them one evening—an altercation that humiliated Bell in front of a crowd of white people. As such, when Bell hears about Mrs. Rogers's rape, he claims to have seen Fonny running from the crime scene. Later, when Fonny is in jail, it takes all his effort to remain optimistic, though his spirits are thankfully buoyed by the fact that Tish is pregnant with his **child**. Knowing he will be a father ultimately helps him maintain a sense of hope, which is good, considering that his own family fails to provide him the support he needs. This is because his mother, Mrs. Hunt, resents him for taking after his father, Frank. As a result, Tish's family—along with Frank—are the ones who work hard to get him out of jail, even hiring his lawyer, Mr. Hayward. Despite their efforts, though, there's no changing the fact that the District Attorney's office does everything it can to rig the trial, even arresting Fonny's friend Daniel and scaring him into changing his original testimony that he was with Fonny at the time of Mrs. Rogers's rape. By the end of the novel, Fonny slowly begins to unravel under the pressures of living in prison.

Sharon – Tish's mother. Sharon is a kind and accepting woman

who doesn't judge Tish for getting pregnant with Fonny's **baby**. Instead, she tells Tish not to think of herself as a "bad girl," later urging her to "trust" love to help her cope with Fonny's imprisonment. She also helps Tish stand up to Mrs. Hunt, who is condescending and venomous when she learns about Tish's pregnancy. In this manner, Sharon demonstrates her fierce loyalty to her children, her protective nature, and her willingness to stand strong when somebody tries to put down her or her family members. Later, when Mrs. Rogers flees the United States—making it impossible for Hayward to convince her to change her testimony—Sharon travels to Puerto Rico and tries to talk the woman into recognizing that Fonny isn't the man who raped her. To do this, she tries to appeal to Mrs. Rogers's sense of motherly loyalty, since Mrs. Rogers has children of her own. Showing her a picture of Fonny and Tish, she explains that Tish is her daughter and that she's pregnant with Fonny's child, saying that Fonny is a good man. However, this conversation only upsets Mrs. Rogers, driving her into hiding once more. Not long after Sharon returns to Harlem, she sits one evening in her apartment with Tish, at which point Joseph—her husband—enters and tells them Frank has committed suicide. As Tish processes this information, she goes into labor, and while the baby makes its way into the world, she stares ahead and sees only her mother's eyes.

Joseph – Tish's father, and Sharon's husband. Like Sharon, Joseph is an unjudgmental person who readily accepts people and their problems. In keeping with this, he insists that he doesn't think Tish is a "bad girl" for getting pregnant with Fonny's **child**, though he does show concern at first about the fact that she's going to have a child at such a young age and without the father present. However, this is nothing more than a form of parental worry, not a negative judgment of Tish herself. In fact, he soon gets over his worries and is elated that he's going to be a grandfather, calling Frank and telling him to come over with his wife and daughters. Then, as Mrs. Hunt argues with Tish, Sharon, and Ernestine, Joseph takes Frank out for drinks, wanting to celebrate the good news and also wanting to remove his friend from the tense situation, since Frank can't stand his wife's harsh reaction to the news of Tish's pregnancy and ends up slapping her in the face. Later on, when it becomes clear that they'll need extra money to pay Fonny's legal fees, Joseph insists that he and Frank start earning supplemental incomes by stealing from their employers and selling the goods in Harlem and Brooklyn, so he starts filching materials from his job as a merchant on the waterfront. Shortly thereafter, Joseph urges Tish to quit her own job, knowing that she's working too hard. Saying that she needs to focus on her baby, he tells her that she needs to visit Fonny every day because her pregnancy is the only thing giving him hope. He then reassures her that he and Frank are making enough money to cover the legal fees that Tish is so worried will go unpaid if she quits her job.

Ernestine (Sis) – Tish’s older sister. Ernestine is a confident and persuasive young woman who works as an advocate for sick and neglected children. Because of this job, she has many connections with lawyers, which is how she convinces Mr. Hayward to take on Fonny’s case. Like her parents, Ernestine is supportive of Tish, doing whatever she can to make her younger sister maintain a sense of hope while she’s pregnant and while Fonny’s in jail. This often means reminding Tish to meet life’s challenges with pride, which she does by telling her to “unbow” her head after informing their parents of her pregnancy.

Frank Hunt – Fonny’s father. Frank is quite unlike his wife, Mrs. Hunt, especially since he isn’t religious. Whereas Mrs. Hunt is a “sanctified woman,” he spends his time getting drunk, though things haven’t always been this way. In fact, Frank used to own a tailoring shop, but that eventually went out of business. In the years since this happened, there has been a stark divide in the Hunt family, as Frank’s daughters Adrienne and Sheila have taken after their mother and Fonny has taken after Frank. Mrs. Hunt and her daughters judge Frank and Fonny for their unreligious lifestyles, and so Frank is the only member of the family who truly comes to Fonny’s aid after he’s arrested. However, Frank has a quick temper and isn’t the most reliable person, which becomes all too clear when he slaps Mrs. Hunt across the face as she berates Tish after learning about her pregnancy. Luckily, Frank and Joseph are good friends, so Joseph takes him away from the apartment, promising they’ll get drunk to celebrate the fact that they’re both going to become grandfathers. Later, Frank agrees with Joseph’s idea to start stealing from work to make extra money for Fonny’s legal fees. Going about this plan, he filches goods from where he works in the garment district, successful selling them in Harlem and Brooklyn until he’s eventually caught by his employer and promptly fired. Feeling distraught about Fonny’s situation and unsupported by his own family, Frank drives out of the city and commits suicide.

Victoria Rogers – A Puerto Rican woman who has accused Fonny of raping her. Mrs. Rogers moved to New York City six years before she was raped, coming to the city with an American engineer she met in Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, this man left her after they had three children, but Mrs. Rogers remained in the city. As Ernestine points out to Tish at one point, Mrs. Rogers doesn’t think she’s lying when she says that Fonny raped her. Even though Fonny is innocent, Ernestine explains, Mrs. Rogers can’t change her testimony because doing so would force her to reexamine this traumatic experience. Unfortunately, she was tricked into singling out Fonny, since Officer Bell arrested Fonny and made him the only black man in a lineup of other possible suspects, knowing that Mrs. Rogers already indicated that the rapist was a black man. As such, it was easy for her to assume Fonny was the perpetrator. When Sharon travels to Puerto Rico—where Mrs.

Rogers eventually flees—to convince her to reconsider her testimony, the conversation is too much for Mrs. Rogers to bear, and she starts screaming. Shortly thereafter, she flees once again, evading Sharon and making it impossible for anyone to get her to alter her testimony.

Daniel Carty – Fonny’s friend. After many years apart, Daniel and Fonny run into one another on the street not long before Fonny is arrested. Going back to Fonny’s apartment, they drink beer and talk about Daniel’s experience in prison, where he has spent the last two years on an unjust charge. As Tish makes them dinner, Daniel explains that he was accused of stealing a car even though he can’t even drive. Because he was carrying marijuana at the time of his arrest, though, it was easy for the prosecutors to convince him to take a bargain, saying that if he agreed to plead guilty for the theft, they’d give him a reduced sentence and drop the drug charge. This is what he did, he tells Fonny and Tish, and though he *did* regain his freedom after two years, his time in jail has changed him forever, as he was raped and beaten as a prisoner. Furthermore, Daniel is with Fonny when he’s arrested shortly after this evening, making him an important person in Fonny’s case, since he can testify that Fonny was at home when Mrs. Rogers was raped. However, the District Attorney has Daniel arrested and tries to use his previous record against him, beating him and possibly even drugging him so that he’ll agree to change his testimony.

Officer Bell – The racist police officer who claims to have seen Fonny running from the scene of the crime after Mrs. Rogers was raped. This is untrue, but Officer Bell wants to take revenge on Fonny because of a previous encounter in which he found himself humiliated in front of a large group of bystanders. This incident took place when Fonny and Tish went to a grocery store and Fonny ended up having to defend her against a creepy white man who sexually harassed her. Seeing commotion, Officer Bell came over to address the situation, but instead of questioning the white man, he started speaking confrontationally to Fonny, eventually saying that he was going to take him to the police station. At this moment, though, the white grocer intervened and told Officer Bell that Tish and Fonny were telling the truth about what happened. Refusing to let Bell take Fonny away, the grocer disparaged him in front of a crowd of onlookers. Ever since then, Bell has wanted to get even with Fonny, so when he heard about Mrs. Rogers’s rape, he arrested him and put him in a lineup of men for her to identify. Since she’d already indicated that the rapist was black, Bell made sure that Fonny was the only black man in the lineup, all but guaranteeing that Mrs. Rogers would single him out. This kind of blatant racism is characteristic of Bell, as made clear by the fact that he killed a young black boy in Brooklyn several years ago and was never brought to justice.

Mrs. Hunt – Fonny’s mother and Frank’s resentful wife. Mrs. Hunt is a highly religious woman who disapproves of Tish and her family’s lifestyle, believing that Tish has ruined her son’s life

because she has a “demon” in her. In keeping with this, she tells Tish that her and Fonny’s **child** is going “shrivel in [her] womb.” When she says this, Frank stands up and slaps her to the floor, not caring that she has a “weak heart.” As Adrienne and Sheila—Mrs. Hunt’s loyal daughters—crowd around her, Joseph takes Frank to a bar to remove him from the situation, leaving the women alone as they continue to argue about Tish’s pregnancy. By the end of this conversation, it becomes clear that Mrs. Hunt and her daughters will have nothing to do with Tish and Fonny’s child. What’s more, readers get the sense that Mrs. Hunt doesn’t care what happens to Fonny, since he has taken after his father and thus leads a lifestyle of which she disapproves.

Adrienne Hunt – One of Fonny’s sisters. Like her mother, Mrs. Hunt, Adrienne is a prim and proper woman who dislikes Tish and her family because they aren’t religious. Unsurprisingly, she disapproves of Tish’s pregnancy and wants little to do with the collective effort to get her brother out of prison. However, despite the fact that she resents her father in the same way that her mother and sister do, Joseph notices that Adrienne still loves Frank. Indeed, Joseph sees this one night when he goes to Frank’s house to talk about Fonny’s situation. When Adrienne and Sheila come into the kitchen and ask what’s going on, Frank is so overwhelmed that he throws a glass on the floor. In this moment, Frank sees that Adrienne genuinely wants to love and support her father but doesn’t know how, since there’s too much tension and resentment in their relationship. Later, just before everyone discovers that Frank has killed himself, Adrienne calls Tish and is distraught because she can’t find her father, making Tish promise to call her if she finds out where he is.

Sheila Hunt – One of Fonny’s sisters, who is very religious like her mother and sister Adrienne. Also like Adrienne and Mrs. Hunt, Sheila disapproves of Tish and her family because they aren’t religious, and thinks that it’s Fonny’s own fault that he’s in prison, since—according to her perspective—he has led a life of sin.

Arnold Hayward – The white lawyer who takes on Fonny’s case. Although at first Tish is skeptical about whether or not Hayward actually cares about Fonny’s trial, she soon sees he is genuinely concerned about doing the best job he can. Indeed, Hayward is sick of the bigotry that rules the courts, and he’s willing to speak openly about the fact that he thinks both Officer Bell and the District Attorney are racist. However, he’s frequently put in the uncomfortable position of having to deliver bad news to Tish and her family, as the case against Fonny only gets worse and worse. Nevertheless, Hayward doesn’t stop doing whatever he can to get Fonny out of jail.

Pedrocito – A waiter at the Spanish restaurant in Greenwich Village, where Fonny is a regular. Pedrocito is a kind man who allows Fonny and Tish to eat without paying for their meal after Officer Bell harasses them for the first time. Later, when Fonny

goes to prison, Pedrocito frequently drives to Harlem, picks Tish up, takes her to the restaurant, feeds her, and then drives her back, doing whatever he can to support her through this difficult time.

Levy – A landlord who agrees to rent his loft space to Fonny and Tish. In contrast to the many landlords who refuse to rent property to them because they’re black, Levy is happy to have them as tenants because he recognizes that they’re in love and thinks this is a beautiful and important thing to encourage.

Geneva – One of Tish’s childhood friends. An opinionated girl, Geneva gets in a fight with Daniel, ultimately dragging Tish into the altercation. During this fight, Tish ends up hitting Fonny with a board that has a rusty nail embedded in it. Although Tish fears that this nail might have given Fonny lockjaw, it’s also this incident that eventually leads to their close friendship as children.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jaime – The young man who drives Sharon around when she goes to Puerto Rico to find Mrs. Rogers. Although he hardly knows her, Jaime quickly comes to respect Sharon, which is why he devotes himself to helping her in any way he can.

Pietro – Mrs. Rogers’s “common-law husband,” who works at a night club in Puerto Rico.



THEMES

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LOVE, SUPPORT, AND HOPE

In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a novel about the cruelty and injustice that black people face in America, James Baldwin shines a light on the fortifying effects of love. Although the details of her lover’s unfair imprisonment are dispiriting, Tish maintains a sense of hope, thanks to her supportive family members. In turn, she is able to visit Fonny—her fiancé—and give him the same kind of loving encouragement. Following her mother’s advice to “trust love,” Tish eventually quits her job so she can visit Fonny every day, a decision that has a profound effect on his ability to embody resilience despite the psychologically taxing conditions of prison. Even as his situation gets gradually worse, these visits are like sustenance to him, constantly reminding him that Tish and her love—in addition to their unborn **child**—are reasons to persevere through the injustice and racism that landed him in prison and keeps him there. In showing how

Tish's visits buoy Fonny, Baldwin conveys the restorative and enduring powers of meaningful human connection, suggesting that love can give people hope even when seemingly nothing else will.

Tish has every reason to be pessimistic about the future. After all, the man she loves has been wrongfully accused of rape, and she's pregnant with his child. Worse, Mrs. Rogers—the rape victim who was manipulated into identifying Fonny as her rapist—has disappeared, meaning there's almost nothing Fonny's lawyer can do to dispute her accusation. Luckily, though, Tish has a strong support network at home, as her parents and her sister work hard to do whatever they can to make her situation easier. One night, when she's feeling particularly dispirited, her mother sits her down and says, "I don't want to sound foolish. But, just remember, love brought you here. If you trusted love this far, don't panic now." By saying this, she acknowledges the difficulties of Tish's situation while also celebrating the beauty that comes along with being in love. Of course, Tish is distraught because Fonny is in prison, but the reason this situation is so emotionally difficult in the first place is that she loves Fonny, and this should remind her that she has something special—after all, she wouldn't be so upset if her and Fonny's love wasn't genuine. Tish has "trusted love" to guide her through life thus far, so it would be foolish to suddenly stop paying attention to its powers in this time of sorrow.

Because of her mother's wise words, Tish finds herself capable of giving Fonny a sense of assurance, reminding him that he is part of a community that loves him dearly. This is critical to his survival, since he might otherwise crack under the pressures of living in prison without any indication that his life will improve. When she nears her due date, Tish even decides—at the urging of her father—to quit her job so she can visit Fonny every day, and though at first she feels guilty for not earning money to help with Fonny's legal fees, she soon sees that simply being there for him is the best thing she can do. "My presence," she notes, "which is of no practical value whatever, [...] is vastly more important than any practical thing I might be doing. Every day, when he sees my face, he knows, again, that I love him [...]" In this passage, Tish recognizes that it's more important for Fonny to feel loved and supported than it is for her to make extra money to put toward his defense. Since her family members are all contributing their own cash to the cause, Tish is able to throw all her energy into making sure Fonny feels like he has a strong and loving network backing him through this difficult time. To that end, Tish also observes that her frequent visits reassure Fonny "that others love him, too, love him so much that they have" urged her to quit her job to be with him. "He is not alone; we are not alone," she writes, showing that gestures of love create a sense of security and community.

Because Tish's parents give her love and support, she's able to do the same for Fonny. As a result, readers see that kindness and genuine connection perpetuate themselves. Unfortunately,

though, so do resentment and animosity. This is the case for Fonny's family. For instance, Fonny's father, Frank, loves him dearly and will do anything to help him, but he's at odds with his wife, Mrs. Hunt, who's hesitant to help Fonny because she resents him for getting arrested. What's more, Frank's daughters, Adrienne and Sheila, take after their mother, so he has strained relationships with them, too. In turn, nobody in this family is capable of supporting one another, as made clear when Joseph (Tish's father) visits Frank one night to talk about Fonny. When Frank's daughters come into the kitchen and ask what's going on, Frank throws a glass and yells at them. "[Joseph] sees that Adrienne loves her father with a really desperate love," Tish narrates. "She knows he is in pain. She would soothe it if she could, she does not know how. She would give anything to know how." Tragically, Adrienne can't give Frank the support he needs because their love is strained. As a result, Frank finds himself unable to stay strong for Fonny; feeling unsupported, hopeless, and alone, he commits suicide.

In this way, readers see how life-changing it can be to uplift a person with love. Unlike his father, Fonny has a group of people who *do* understand how to "soothe" him, which is exactly what Tish does in her visits. "Something travels from him to me," she writes, "it is love and courage. Yes. Yes. We are going to make it, somehow." Using only "love and courage," then, Tish embodies a kind of optimism, which she then conveys to Fonny, helping him believe that together they'll survive these hard times—a notion that communicates Baldwin's faith in the unmatched power of love.



RACISM, FEAR, AND ISOLATION

In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin draws a connection between racism and fear, suggesting that bigots use intimidation tactics to suppress

black people. Throughout the novel, he portrays fear as something that keeps young African Americans like Fonny and his friend Daniel from addressing their own oppression. What's more, it becomes clear that this kind of racism is institutionalized, meaning that the structures of power surrounding Fonny and his loved ones actively work to disenfranchise them. Daniel, for his part, understands this well because he has already spent time in jail for a crime he didn't commit, and now that he's finally out of prison, he's even more frightened than he was before, too scared to strive for true freedom because he simply can't fathom a life unbridled by hatred and persecution. In this way, readers see that white America oppresses people like Daniel and Fonny by putting them in positions of powerlessness and then scaring them out of standing up for themselves. Baldwin also shows readers how racist power structures turn young black men against one another, which is what happens when the District Attorney tries to scare Daniel out of serving as a witness in Fonny's case. As such, Baldwin highlights how America's unjust and coercive

systems of power put black people at a severe disadvantage, ultimately using fear to isolate people like Daniel and Fonny from their peers, which makes it even harder for them to advocate for themselves.

Fonny's friend Daniel is no stranger to the constant fear that comes along with living in a racist system. Telling Fonny and Tish about why he went to prison, Daniel says he was too afraid to stand up for his own innocence, outlining how his trial was rigged against him. "They said—they still say—[I] stole a car," he says. "Man, I can't even *drive* a car, and I tried to make my lawyer—but he was really *their* lawyer, dig, he worked for the city—prove that, but he didn't." Going on, Daniel says that when the officers came to arrest him, they found a small amount of marijuana on him, a fact that made it even harder to stand up for himself. "Since I had that weed on me, they had me anyhow and so they said if I would plead guilty they'd give me a lighter sentence. If I *didn't* plead guilty, they'd throw me the book. Well, I was alone, baby, wasn't nobody, and so I entered the guilty plea." It's important to note that Daniel emphasizes the fact that he "was alone" throughout this entire process. Not only do the prosecutors try to scare him into saying he's guilty, but they ensure that he feels isolated from anyone who might help him. Knowing that it's too risky to stand up for his own innocence, then, Daniel pleads guilty to a crime he didn't commit, thereby proving that fear is often what prevents disempowered people from trying to rectify their own disenfranchisement.

What's even more depressing about Daniel's situation is that the fear he feels after having been unjustly targeted because of his race doesn't simply disappear once he gets out of prison. This is made obvious by how frequently he comes to Tish and Fonny's house to talk about the traumatic experiences he faced in prison, experiences that make him feel like he'll "never again be the Daniel he had been." In fact, Daniel is even afraid to walk from Fonny's apartment to the subway by himself. Even though he's out of prison, he can't escape the constant terror he feels as a result of seeing firsthand how easily racists can subjugate him. "Daniel [...] longs to be free to confront his life; is terrified at the same time of what that life may bring, is terrified of freedom; and is struggling in a trap," Tish realizes, articulating that even the notion of "freedom" is unfathomable to Daniel because fear now runs his life. Unfortunately, this constant state of fear is likely what Fonny will also feel if he ever gets out of prison. In turn, Baldwin unveils the fact that systemic racism not only dictates whether or not a black person is wrongfully convicted, but also penetrates the emotional and existential elements of that person's life, since this kind of manipulation can make a person afraid of life itself.

The District Attorney's office and other racists in power know that people will act against their own best interests when they're genuinely afraid. Furthermore, these bigots also understand that it's even easier to inspire this kind of fear in a person if they isolate him from the people and resources that

might otherwise help him advocate for himself. This is why they also arrest Daniel in connection with Fonny's case, anticipating that Fonny's lawyer, Hayward, will want to call on him as a witness, since Daniel was with Fonny during the time of the alleged rape. As such, the D.A. makes Daniel fear for his life, beating him in jail and making him afraid of coming to Fonny's aid. "Without becoming Daniel's lawyer, [Hayward] cannot visit him," Tish notes at one point. "He suggests this to Daniel, but Daniel is evasive and afraid. Hayward suspects that Daniel has also been drugged and he does not know if he dares bring Daniel to the witness stand, or not." Alone and "afraid," Daniel is unlikely to help Fonny, a tragedy that illustrates the overwhelming power of fear and isolation.

Tish herself recognizes early in the novel that there are very few things a black person can do when he or she is in "trouble" in America. "Trouble means you're alone," she notes, thinking about the fact that she can't simply stand up in public and ask for help. After all, even if strangers *wanted* to help her, "what could they do?" By spotlighting the combined effect of fear and isolation, then, Baldwin shows readers why it's so hard to defeat racism, which is unfortunately deeply ingrained in America's legal and social systems.



SHAME, JUDGMENT, AND MORALITY

A significant part of Tish's emotional journey in *If Beale Street Could Talk* has to do with her struggle to reject shame. Unfortunately, she often feels a sense of dishonor, since she's aware that society might judge her for being a pregnant nineteen-year-old with an imprisoned lover. This kind of unfair judgment is exactly what Mrs. Hunt—Fonny's mother—sets forth when she first hears about the pregnancy, ultimately shaming Tish and trying to make her feel like she's done something disgraceful. Thankfully, though, Tish's parents and sister have already gone out of their way to make sure Tish knows she hasn't done anything wrong by getting pregnant, stressing how important it is that she maintain a sense of pride and dignity even when people like Mrs. Hunt try to cut her down. Because of this, Tish maintains her self-respect, knowing that the only thing she's guilty of is loving Fonny. Her difficult situation also encourages her to reevaluate the way *she* judges other women, as she briefly considers what it would take for her to become a prostitute, since she knows that she and her family will need extra money if they're ever going to get Fonny out of jail. As she thinks in these terms, she realizes she has been casting unfair judgment on prostitutes for her entire life, finally understanding that the gravity of certain situations can change a person's moral inhibitions. In this regard, Tish comes to value the significance of developing an internal pride, one that helps her ignore arbitrary notions of shame and dishonor that others mercilessly cast upon her. This, Baldwin insinuates, is how to cultivate self-assurance in the face of unfair judgment.

When Tish tells Fonny's family that she's pregnant, Mrs. Hunt doesn't try to hide her scorn, making it clear that she doesn't think Tish is reliable enough to care for a **child**. "And who is going to be responsible for this baby?" she asks. This might seem like a practical question, but it's much more than that, since Mrs. Hunt condescendingly insinuates that Tish isn't "responsible," shaming her for thinking she can raise a child. Going on, Mrs. Hunt shows her disdain in an even more blatant manner, saying, "I guess you call your lustful action love. I don't. I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son. You have a demon in you." Mrs. Hunt tries to make Tish feel guilty about having gotten pregnant, even suggesting that she has destroyed Fonny's life, though it's quite clear that the true "destruction" of his life has to do with the fact that he's been unfairly imprisoned. Nevertheless, Mrs. Hunt pounces on this opportunity to frame Tish as disgraceful and immoral, perhaps hoping to avoid her own feelings of inadequacy as a mother by focusing on what she thinks are Tish's shortcomings.

Fortunately, Tish doesn't let Mrs. Hunt's hurtful words get to her, because her own family has made sure to tell her she shouldn't cower in shame. When Tish tells her mother about the pregnancy, Sharon responds by saying, "What you crying about? Now, listen, you got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl and all that jive-ass shit." Similarly, when Tish's father, Joseph, finds out, he eventually says, "Don't you go thinking I think you a bad girl, or any foolishness like that." It's quite clear, then, that Tish's parents want her to cast any notions of shame out of her head, insisting that getting pregnant doesn't mean she's a "bad girl" who should feel guilty about her situation. This sentiment becomes even more pronounced when Tish's sister, Ernestine, sees her hanging her head after telling their parents about her pregnancy. "Unbow your head, sister," she says. Ernestine encourages Tish not only to banish her feelings of guilt, but to adopt a sense of pride, subtly reminding her that she's about to bring life into the world—a fact worth celebrating.

Tish's relationship to the ideas of shame and morality changes as Fonny's case becomes less and less hopeful. At one point, she lies awake at night and thinks about whether or not she'd be willing to cross certain boundaries to raise money to get Fonny out of jail. Thinking about the prostitutes she has known throughout her life, she reassesses the way she has judged them. "I remembered women I had known, but scarcely looked at, who had frightened me; because they knew how to use their bodies in order to get something that they wanted," she reflects. It's worth noting that Tish has thought for her entire life that she has "known" these prostitutes when, in reality, she has "scarcely looked at" them. This illustrates how quickly people cast judgment, foolishly assuming they know a person without actually taking the time to understand their life. "I now began to realize that my judgment of these women had had very little to do with morals," Tish continues. "[...] My judgment

had been due to my sense of how little they appeared to want. I could not conceive of peddling myself for so low a price. But, for a higher price? For Fonny?" When she thinks this, Tish realizes that no woman sells her body without having a good reason. What she previously failed to understand but is now attuned to is that it's difficult to determine the morality of a situation—such as prostitution—without fully examining its complexities.

Although Tish herself doesn't end up resorting to prostitution, she learns through her own desperation that it's all too easy to cast shame on people who are only doing what they can to survive. As she strives to uphold her own pride during this turbulent period, Tish's ideas about shame change, allowing Baldwin to intimate that conventional notions of disgrace often have "very little to do with morals." By establishing this, the author suggests that people ought to learn to confidently reject the arbitrary kinds of shame that others might force upon them.



TIME AND ANTICIPATION

In many ways, Tish and Fonny's story in *If Beale Street Could Talk* is about their fight against time.

Throughout the novel, they do what they can to cope with a tense feeling of anticipation, waiting all the while to discover what will happen during Fonny's trial. This means finding ways to "get from one day to the next" without succumbing to despair. Although they both want Fonny's trial to happen as soon as possible, they don't want it to take place before they've built a strong defense. Because of this, they want Hayward—Fonny's lawyer—to carefully put together a case, but every passing day is yet another day that Fonny suffers in prison, and Tish begins to worry about the dire psychological toll this time will exact on him. Fortunately, Tish's pregnancy gives both her and Fonny something to hold onto and look forward to—but at the same time, Tish's pregnancy makes it even harder to "get from one day to the next" without focusing too much on when—or if—Fonny will get out of prison. This struggle against the unyielding nature of time accentuates the profound effect that unjust incarceration has on a person's life, since even if Fonny is released from prison, he'll never get back the many precious moments he lost while waiting for the courts to make a decision. As each day brings out Tish and Fonny's insecurities, fears, and impatience, Baldwin suggests that there's nothing to do but simply let life unfold, grasping at whatever might give one a sense of agency in the otherwise inevitable, merciless march of time.

Early in the novel, Tish decides it's best not to think about time, since the anticipation surrounding Fonny's trial is too much to bear. After visiting Fonny in prison, she walks through the "corridors" of the building and thinks about how soul-crushing it must be for him to live in jail without knowing when—or even *if*—he'll be set free. "Sometimes, I admit, I'm scared," she notes,

“because nobody can take the shit they throw on us forever. But, then, you just have to somehow fix your mind to get from one day to the next. If you think too far ahead, if you even try to think too far ahead, you’ll never make it.” In this moment, she recognizes that it’s impossible to know what will happen in the future. Given that her lover’s life is hanging in the balance, it’s unsurprising that confronting this unknowability only brings anxiety and despair. As such, she resolves to “fix [her] mind to get from one day to the next,” deciding that projecting herself into an uncertain future will do nothing but exacerbate her worries and make it even harder for her and Fonny to get through this difficult period.

At the same time, though, Tish can’t simply ignore the passage of time, since she’s pregnant. With each day, week, and month, her body changes, making it hard to focus on simply getting “from one day to the next.” In this sense, Baldwin uses Tish’s pregnancy as an internal clock, one that marks time and keeps her from ever forgetting that Fonny is in jail. Interestingly enough, though, her pregnancy also gives her a sense of agency in a situation in which she’s otherwise powerless. Although she can’t do much to influence Fonny’s trial and certainly can’t take her mind off the fact that he’s in prison, she *can* bring his **child** into the world, giving both of them something to latch onto. “You got that child beneath your heart and we’re all counting on you,” Tish’s mother tells her at one point, “Fonny’s counting on you, to bring that child here safe and well. You’re the only one who can do it. But you’re strong. Lean on your strength.” The idea that Tish is “the only one who can” give birth to her and Fonny’s child reminds her of her own tenacity, encouraging her to stop seeing herself as helpless against the passage of time. Instead of bearing this period passively by refusing to “think too far ahead,” she can concentrate on her pregnancy, thereby gaining a sense of control and agency, since the birth of her and Fonny’s child depends upon her and is the only thing they know for sure will make them happy.

Of course, Tish’s pregnancy doesn’t negate the fact that Fonny is missing out on his own life. As his unborn child develops, he’s forced to languish in prison, so it’s especially painful when Hayward talks about needing to “buy time” before Fonny’s trial. “*Time*: the word tolled like the bells of a church,” Tish observes. “Fonny was doing: *time*. In six months *time*, our baby would be here. Somewhere, in time, Fonny and I had met: somewhere, in time, we had loved [...]. Somewhere in time, Fonny paced a prison cell, his hair growing—nappier and nappier. [...] Time could not be bought. The only coin time accepted was life.” In this moment, it’s impossible for Tish to ignore the fact that Fonny’s life only gets harder as the days go by. Whereas she and her loved ones can distract themselves by working to get him out, he’s forced to “pace a prison cell” and think about his own helplessness. Joseph seems to recognize this, too, which is why he urges his daughter to quit her job so she can visit Fonny every single day. “You keep on like you going, you going to lose

that baby,” he says. “You lose that baby, and Fonny won’t want to live no more, and you’ll be lost and then I’ll be lost, everything is lost.” Joseph reminds Tish once again that her pregnancy gives her and Fonny something to look forward to, and sure enough, when she starts seeing him every day, she recognizes how much her pregnancy uplifts him. “I understand [now] that the growth of the baby is connected with his determination to be free,” she writes, adding, “The baby wants out. Fonny wants out. And we are going to make it: in time.” As such, readers see that even though Fonny is losing out on precious moments of his life, he can still invest himself in Tish’s pregnancy, participating vicariously in the passage of time, which otherwise goes on without him.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BABY

Because the mere idea of Tish’s pregnancy gives her and Fonny the strength to embrace a sense of hope about their difficult situation, their baby itself comes to represent the importance of finding slivers of optimism even in the most trying times. Once Tish decides to quit her job so she can visit Fonny every day, she realizes the profound impact her pregnancy has on his spirit, noting, “And I understand that the growth of the baby is connected with his determination to be free.” Given that by the end of the novel Fonny is struggling to withstand the brutal reality of life in jail, this fueling of his “determination to be free” is quite significant, ultimately helping him survive the psychological hardships of his predicament. As such, the baby becomes a symbol of emotional resilience, suggesting to both Fonny and Tish that “what can get worse can get better.”



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *If Beale Street Could Talk* published in 2006.

Troubled About My Soul Quotes

☝ I hope that nobody has ever had to look at anybody they love through glass.

And I didn’t say it the way I meant to say it. I meant to say it in a very offhand way, so he wouldn’t be too upset, so he’d understand that I was saying it without any kind of accusation in my heart.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Tish has these thoughts while visiting Fonny in jail. Having just told him that she's pregnant with his child, she ponders the sad fact that she has to break such life-changing news to him while sitting on the other side of a reinforced piece of glass. This feels like a great injustice, one that emphasizes the ways in which Fonny's imprisonment threatens to negatively impact his relationship with Tish. Tish scrutinizes the way she told him about her pregnancy, feeling as if she "didn't say it the way [she] meant to say it." This is because she wanted to mention her pregnancy in "a very offhand way" that wouldn't "upset" Fonny, a hope that reveals how deeply she cares about him. Indeed, Tish wants to do anything she can to make Fonny's life easier, constantly aware of how difficult it must be to live in prison as an innocent man. However, there is no "offhand," casual way of telling him that she's pregnant, and though she wants to tip-toe around the emotional consequences of what she's just said, she clearly understands that there's only so much she can do to protect him from feeling worried or frightened. In turn, Baldwin shows readers that there's a limit to how much a person can shelter their loved ones from painful realities.

☝ If you cross the Sahara, and you fall, by and by vultures circle around you, smelling, sensing, your death. They circle lower and lower: they wait. They know. They know exactly when the flesh is ready, when the spirit cannot fight back. The poor are always crossing the Sahara. And the lawyers and bondsmen and all that crowd circle around the poor, exactly like vultures. Of course, they're not any richer than the poor, really, that's why they've turned into vultures, scavengers, indecent garbage men, and I'm talking about the black cats, too, who, in so many ways, are worse. I think that, personally, I would be ashamed.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tish compares the "lawyers and bondsmen" who lurk in the halls of the jail to "vultures" "circl[ing]" prey in the Sahara Desert. In the same way that these flesh-hungry birds wait for the exact moment to strike, lawyers and bondsmen wait until they can take advantage of people like Fonny and Tish, who need legal representation or bail money but don't necessarily have the means to secure either (though, of course, Fonny and Tish are lucky that they *do* have access—to some extent—to these resources). When "the lawyers and bondsmen" "circle around the poor," they exploit the fact that these people need help, essentially preying on their desperation and counting on the notion that their "spirit cannot fight back." By highlighting the ways in which this unfortunate dynamic plays itself out in the jail, Tish demonstrates how hard it is for disenfranchised prisoners and their families to avoid malicious people. Worse, this kind of predatory behavior is apparently built into the legal system itself, meaning that the very resources that supposedly help disempowered people advocate for themselves actually harm them even more.

☝ I've never come across any shame down here, except shame like mine, except the shame of the hardworking black ladies, who call me Daughter, and the shame of proud Puerto Ricans, who don't understand what's happened—no one who speaks to them speaks Spanish, for example—and who are ashamed that they have loved ones in jail. But they are wrong to be ashamed. The people responsible for these jails should be ashamed.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Having outlined the exploitative practices of the legal system, Tish thinks about the fact that none of the "lawyers and bondsmen" she sees in the hallways of the jail ever seem to have any sense of "shame." In fact, the only people she sees who *do* feel ashamed are people whose loved ones have been imprisoned. Tish apparently experiences this kind of shame herself, as made clear when she says, "I've never come across any shame down here, except shame like mine." In this moment, then, she admits that she is sometimes embarrassed that her fiancé is in jail. However, this is obviously a fleeting thought, one she knows she shouldn't indulge, since she ultimately believes that people with

imprisoned loved ones are “wrong to be ashamed.” After all, “the people responsible for these jails” are the ones who should feel shame, since they’re nothing but “vultures” swooping down to prey on the vulnerable and disempowered.

●● And I’m not ashamed of Fonny. If anything, I’m proud. He’s a man. You can tell by the way he’s taken all this shit that he’s a man. Sometimes, I admit, I’m scared—because nobody can take the shit they throw on us forever. But, then, you just have to somehow fix your mind to get from one day to the next. If you think too far ahead, if you even *try* to think too far ahead, you’ll never make it.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

After considering the nature of shame, Tish asserts that she’s “proud” of Fonny. Although she sometimes succumbs to a sense of disgrace while walking through the halls of the Tombs, her overall belief is that Fonny has nothing to be ashamed of and, thus, neither does she. After all, he has “taken all this shit” without letting it break him, suggesting that he’s stronger and more resilient than the crooked and spineless authorities who put him in jail in the first place. However, this line of reasoning also reminds Tish of how hard Fonny’s life is as a prisoner. “Nobody can take the shit they throw on us forever,” she worries, knowing that the hardships Fonny faces in jail are surely wearing him down. In order to cope with this, she decides that she and Fonny need to “fix” their minds on the present, focusing solely on getting “from one day to the next,” since projecting themselves into the future will only make the possibility of Fonny’s freedom seem impossibly far away.

●● I can’t say to anybody in this bus, Look, Fonny is in trouble, he’s in jail—can you imagine what anybody on this bus would say to me if they knew, from my mouth, that I love somebody in jail?—and I know he’s never committed any crime and he’s a beautiful person, please help me get him out. Can you imagine what anybody on this bus would say? What would you say? I can’t say, I’m going to have this baby and I’m scared, too, and I don’t want any thing to happen to my baby’s father, don’t let him die in prison, please, oh, please! You can’t say that. That means you can’t really say anything. Trouble means you’re alone.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As Tish rides the bus home from visiting Fonny in jail, she contemplates what it feels like to undergo hardship as a young black woman in America. Unfortunately, she can’t address her fellow passengers on the bus and tell them about her problems, knowing all too well that nobody would be able to say anything that would be of any use to her. Not only that, but she also comprehends that people would only judge her for getting pregnant with an (alleged) criminal’s child. Reflecting upon the fact that she “can’t say” anything about her situation, she suddenly feels the crushing weight of isolation, feeling the profound lack of justice in the spheres of public life. Of course, readers will soon learn that Tish has a strong support network at home, but this doesn’t necessarily help her when it comes to the ways in which she moves through everyday life, since she “can’t really say anything” to people in public about how she actually feels. As such, she’s forced to act like she’s ashamed of Fonny when, in reality, she’s actually quite proud of him. This, however, isn’t something that the average stranger would understand, a fact that denotes just how eager or willing Americans are to assume the worst about young black men like Fonny. In this way, Tish’s “trouble” puts her into a crushing kind of isolation, one in which she can’t even find people (other than her family members) to commiserate with her.

☛ Now, listen, [...] you got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl and all that jive-ass shit. I sure hope I raised you better than that. If you was a bad girl, you wouldn't be sitting on that bed, you'd long been turning tricks for the warden.

Related Characters: Sharon (speaker), Tish (Clementine)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Tish's mother, Sharon, says this to her after Tish reveals that she's pregnant. Although Tish is relatively happy about her pregnancy, she can't help but feel somewhat ashamed that she is going to have a child at such a young age with a man she isn't yet married to and who won't necessarily be there to help her care for the baby. This is perhaps why Sharon goes out of her way to emphasize the fact that Tish has nothing to be ashamed of, saying, "You got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl." By saying this, Sharon makes sure her daughter understands that she isn't judging her. She also shows Tish a certain kind of motherly support that doesn't simply vanish in the face of hardship. Indeed, Sharon expresses her unequivocal acceptance of Tish, stressing how important it is that she learn to embrace life—and specifically her pregnancy—with a sense of pride. This, in turn, is what enables Tish to continue with such strength and self-assuredness throughout the rest of the novel.

☛ Tish [...], when we was first brought here, the white man he didn't give us no preachers to say words over us before we had our babies. And you and Fonny be together right now, married or not, wasn't for that same damn white man. So, let me tell you what you got to do. You got to think about that baby. You got to hold on to that baby, don't care what else happens or don't happen. You got to do that. Can't nobody else do that for you. And the rest of us, well, we going to hold on to you. And we going to get Fonny out. Don't you worry. I know it's hard—but don't you worry. And that baby be the best thing that ever happened to Fonny. He needs that baby. It going to give him a whole lot of courage.

Related Characters: Sharon (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt), Tish (Clementine)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this monologue, Sharon reminds Tish that the only reason she and Fonny aren't married is because racist white people imprisoned him before he and Tish could make their union official. Of course, Tish already knows this, but it's important that she hears her mother say it, since it helps her remember that she shouldn't be ashamed of the fact that she's gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Sharon also urges her daughter in this speech to "think about that baby," framing the child as a beacon of hope in this otherwise uncertain and depressing time. Rather than dwelling on what happens to Fonny, Sharon upholds that Tish should focus on her pregnancy, since "nobody else can do that for" her. By saying this, she gives her daughter a sense of agency, which is incredibly important, considering that Tish feels helpless when it comes to her and Fonny's future. As such, Sharon stresses the fact that Fonny "needs" their baby, thereby giving Tish a sense of purpose that no one—not even the racists working to keep Fonny in jail—can destroy.

☛ Though the death took many forms, though people died early in many different ways, the death itself was very simple and the cause was simple, too: as simple as a plague: the kids had been told that they weren't worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it. They struggled, they struggled, but they fell, like flies, and they congregated on the garbage heaps of their lives, like flies. And perhaps I clung to Fonny, perhaps Fonny saved *me* because he was just about the only boy I knew who wasn't fooling around with the needles or drinking cheap wine or mugging people or holding up stores.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Tish contemplates the racism that has worked its way into the public institutions that have surrounded her and Fonny since they were children. Because they have both witnessed "the death" of many friends, they have come to recognize that the source of this problem is quite "simple": people like Fonny have "been told

that they [aren't] worth shit." Worse, everything around them has "proved" this idea, meaning that they have come to believe in their own worthlessness. As such, they slowly accept the narrative that young black people aren't worthy of success, whether academic or otherwise. This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as young black people fall "like flies" onto the "garbage heaps of their lives."

Thankfully, Tish manages to find solace in her love for Fonny, which keeps her from believing that she's destined for a life of trouble and sorrow. Likewise, Fonny can also invest himself in his relationship with Tish, in addition to his love of sculpture, which keeps him occupied and helps him resist the lifestyle of somebody who "fool[s] around with the needles or drink[s] cheap wine or mug[s] people or hold[s] up stores." Unfortunately, though, he still goes to jail, ultimately suggesting that the racist society in which he exists doesn't care whether or not he contributes to his own disenfranchisement, as racist authorities will find a way to oppress him regardless of what he does.

☝ That same passion which saved Fonny got him into trouble, and put him in jail. For, you see, he had found his center, his own center, inside him: and it showed. He wasn't anybody's nigger. And that's a crime, in this fucking free country. You're suppose to be *somebody's* nigger. And if you're nobody's nigger, you're a bad nigger: and that's what the cops decided when Fonny moved down town.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

After establishing that Fonny turned to sculpture as a way of avoiding the "death" that overtook many of his peers in the streets of Harlem, Tish laments the fact that this "passion" ultimately "got him into trouble." When she explains that Fonny "had found his center," she intimates that the racist society in which she and Fonny exists doesn't allow young black men to gain a sense of self-possession and agency. This is because Fonny's passion for sculpture enables him to avoid the downward spiral that many of his peers enter. Unfortunately, this is in and of itself seen as "a crime," since the bigoted structures of power surrounding Fonny try to force him to "be somebody's nigger." By outlining this terrible conundrum, Tish effectively illustrates

that Fonny's eventual arrest has nothing to do with anything he actually did, and everything to do with his courage to be his own independent and self-assured person in a racist society.

☝ I felt the way I'd felt all day, alone with my trouble. Nobody could help me, not even Sis. Because she was certainly determined to help me, I knew that. But maybe I realized that she was frightened, too, although she was trying to sound calm and tough.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Arnold Hayward, Ernestine (Sis)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Before Tish tells Ernestine about her pregnancy, Ernestine asks her when she's going to visit Hayward, Fonny's lawyer. She also says that she should tell Hayward to contact her (Ernestine) if he asks for more money, and when Tish asks why, she says that Hayward will be more straightforward with her. Despite the fact that Ernestine is trying to help, this conversation makes Tish feel "alone with [her] trouble," as if nothing anyone does will truly change her predicament. This, of course, is somewhat true, since it's obviously the case that nothing Ernestine says to Hayward will change the fact that Tish is pregnant with Fonny's child and will likely give birth before he's let out of prison, if he's let out at all. However, Tish slowly comes to see that Ernestine is "frightened" in the same way that she herself is frightened, and is sharing as much of the burden as she can, trying to do whatever is possible in order to help. And though Tish is right that Ernestine can't make her problems disappear, she's nevertheless lucky to have family members who are so willing to support her—something not everyone has, considering the fact that Frank and Fonny remain utterly unsupported by Mrs. Hunt and the two Hunt daughters.

☝ She moved away from me a little and put my glass in my hand. "Unbow your head, sister," she said, and raised her glass and touched mine. "Save the children," she said, very quietly, and drained her glass.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Sharon,

Joseph, Ernestine (Sis)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

After Tish and her mother tell Ernestine and Joseph that she's pregnant, Tish unintentionally drops her head as the family talks about the baby. Unlike Sharon and Ernestine, Joseph is somewhat skeptical at first, clearly disturbed by the idea of his young daughter giving birth to a child while her lover is in jail. However, Ernestine sees the effect his hesitancy has on Tish, and so she goes to her sister and gives her a drink. When she says, "Unbow your head, sister," she does so as a way of making sure that Tish doesn't approach her own pregnancy with shame and regret. After all, this would be no way to go about such a difficult circumstance, since it will take all of Tish's strength and resilience to emotionally survive this turbulent period. Knowing that cultivating a sense of pride and self-assuredness is the best way to meet life's challenges, Ernestine urges her sister to embrace her situation with confidence.

☝ I guess you call your lustful action love [...]. I don't. I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son. You have a demon in you—I always knew it. My God caused me to know it many a year ago. The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb. But my son will be forgiven. My prayers will save him.

Related Characters: Mrs. Hunt (speaker), Frank Hunt, Fonny (Alonzo Hunt), Tish (Clementine)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hunt says this to Tish after learning that Tish is pregnant with Fonny's child. In contrast to Frank, who expresses his happiness in response to the news, she speaks these venomous words while approaching Tish. "I guess you call your lustful action love," she says, trying to make Tish feel ashamed for having had sex before getting married. This, of course, accords with Mrs. Hunt's intense religious devotion, which she often lords over people in an attempt to feel superior (this has little to do with her actual religious faith

and everything to do with her egomaniacal need to prove her righteousness). Going on, she says that Tish has a "demon" inside of her, implying that she is responsible for "the destruction of" Fonny. Of course, this is a ridiculous thing to say, since Fonny's "destruction" is the result of racism. Nevertheless, Mrs. Hunt clearly believes that Tish has corrupted Fonny and that this corruption led him to commit a crime that ultimately landed him in jail. In this way, it becomes clear that Mrs. Hunt doesn't even believe in her son's innocence. By outlining this oversight, Baldwin showcases the extent to which Mrs. Hunt doubts not only Tish, but Fonny, too.

☝ And Mrs. Hunt added, "These girls won't be bringing *me* no bastards to feed, I can guarantee you that."

"But the child that's coming," said Sharon, after a moment, "is your grandchild. I don't understand you. It's your *grandchild*. What difference does it make how it gets here? The child ain't got nothing to do with that—don't none of us have nothing to do with *that!*"

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Ernestine (Sis), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt), Sharon, Mrs. Hunt

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Before Mrs. Hunt and her daughters finish arguing with Tish and her family members, Mrs. Hunt tries to shame Sharon for the way she has raised Tish and Ernestine, who have both been vocal about their disdain for the Hunt women. By saying that her daughters won't give birth to "bastards," Mrs. Hunt tries to make Tish feel guilty about the fact that she has become pregnant before marrying Fonny. What's ridiculous about this statement, though, is that Fonny's imprisonment is the only reason they're not already married—something Mrs. Hunt surely already knows but is currently choosing to ignore. In fact, by suggesting that Tish's child is going to be a "bastard," Mrs. Hunt makes a grave implication about her own son, essentially suggesting that he will *never* be around to raise his kid. Sharon, for her part, tries to make an appeal to Mrs. Hunt's humanity, emphasizing that the baby Tish births will be her "grandchild." "What different does it make how it gets here?" she asks, imploring Mrs. Hunt to recognize that all human life is precious and—moreover—that the baby will be a part of the family regardless of whether or not Fonny is in prison.

●● *Time*: the word tolled like the bells of a church. Fonny was doing: *time*. In six months *time*, our baby would be here. Somewhere, in time, Fonny and I had met: some where, in time, we had loved; somewhere, no longer in time, but, now, totally, at time's mercy, we loved.

Somewhere in time, Fonny paced a prison cell, his hair growing—nappier and nappier. Somewhere, in time, he stroked his chin, itching for a shave, somewhere, in time, he scratched his armpits, aching for a bath. Somewhere in time he looked about him, knowing that he was being lied to, in time, with the connivance of time. In another time, he had feared life: now, he feared death—somewhere in time.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Sharon, Arnold Hayward, Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

As she sits in Hayward's office and listens to him tell her and Sharon that they need to "buy time" before Fonny's trial, Tish thinks about how torturous it is for Fonny to wait to find out what his fate will be. Indeed, while she and her family members scramble to help Hayward put together a solid defense, Fonny "pace[s]" his cell and "fear[s] death." With each passing day, he experiences the physical passage of time, as his hair grows and his body itches. Similarly, Tish's own body marks the passage of time, the baby growing larger in her womb and reminding her that "in six months *time*" she will be a mother. This only emphasizes the sense of anticipation surrounding Fonny's trial, acting as an internal clock in the novel, one that refuses to let Tish or Fonny forget that time is valuable. After all, each day that Fonny spends in jail is a day of his life that he's missing, and he'll never be able to recapture these important and memorable moments of Tish's pregnancy.

●● They said—they still *say*—stole a car. Man, I can't even *drive* a car, and I tried to make my lawyer—but he was really *their* lawyer, dig, he worked for the city—prove that, but he didn't. And, anyway, I wasn't in no car when they picked me up. But I had a little grass on me. I was on my stoop. And so they come and picked me up, like that, you know, it was about midnight, and they locked me up and then the next morning they put me in the lineup and somebody said it was *me* stole the car—that car I ain't seen yet. And so—you know—since I had that weed on me, they had me anyhow and so they said if I would plead guilty they'd give me a lighter sentence. If I *didn't* plead guilty, they'd throw me the book. Well [...] I was alone, baby, wasn't nobody, and so I entered the guilty plea. Two years!

Related Characters: Daniel Carty (speaker), Tish (Clementine), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Daniel tells Fonny and Tish about his arrest, explaining that he was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit: stealing a car. In fact, it doesn't even make sense that he was associated with this particular offense, since he doesn't know how to drive. As such, it's painfully obvious that the law enforcement officials that pursued him were only interested in arresting him because of his skin color. Then, when they found a small amount of marijuana on him, they knew they had an excuse to lock him up. Of course, there's a large difference between possessing a small bag of marijuana and stealing a car, but this clearly didn't matter to the people prosecuting Daniel, who looked for any opportunity to take him down. What's more, it's worth noting Daniel's assertion that he was "alone," since he suggests that this is the primary reason he agreed to plead guilty to a crime he didn't commit. Without anyone to support him, he knew it would be too risky to stand up for himself. In this way, Baldwin shows readers the ways in which the corrupt legal system can maliciously manipulate people into acting against their own best interests.

☝☝ Man, it was bad. Very bad. And it's bad now. Maybe I'd feel different if I had done something and got caught. But I didn't do nothing. They were just playing with me, man, because they could. And I'm lucky it was only two years, you dig? Because they can do with you whatever they want. *Whatever they want*. And they dogs, man. I really found out, in the slammer, what Malcolm and them cats was talking about. The white man's *got* to be the devil. He sure ain't a man. Some of the things I saw, baby, I'll be dreaming about until the day I die.

Related Characters: Daniel Carty (speaker), Tish (Clementine), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Daniel says this to Fonny and Tish, trying to explain to them what it was like to spend two years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Right away, it becomes clear that his experience in jail has profoundly affected his life even after his release, since he says, "Man, it was bad. Very bad. And it's bad now." This suggests that he hasn't—and perhaps won't—get over the fact that he lost two years of his life. Worse, he knows that he didn't even do anything to deserve this punishment. If he *had*, at least he'd be able to feel as if his jailtime was more or less justified. Without this justification, though, he lacks any kind of closure, ultimately having to simply live with the fact that he was overpowered by a racist legal system. "They were just playing with me, man, because they could," he says, emphasizing his lack of power. When he says that he came to understand what "Malcolm and them cats was talking about," he references Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam's belief that white men are devils. By saying this, Daniel shows Fonny and Tish just how badly he was treated by white people, who did "whatever they want[ed]" to him, abusing him badly enough to make him think that they might actually be devils. Given Fonny's own imprisonment, this is an important conversation, one that helps readers comprehend the horrors of living as a young black man in jail.

☝☝ I know I can't help you very much right now—God knows what I wouldn't give if I could. But I know about suffering; if that helps. I know that it ends. I ain't going to tell you no lies, like it always ends for the better. Some times it ends for the worse. You can suffer so bad that you can be driven to a place where you can't ever suffer again: and that's worse.

[...]

I don't want to sound foolish. But, just remember, love brought you here. If you trusted love this far, don't panic now.

Related Characters: Sharon (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt), Tish (Clementine)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Sharon says this to Tish after waking her daughter up from a nightmare. Having just had a dream in which Fonny drives off a cliff, Tish finds her mother staring down at her, and though Sharon acknowledges that she "can't help" in any truly significant way, she still tries to give Tish advice. Admitting that sometimes things end "for the worse," Sharon takes a realistic approach, trying to urge Tish to recognize that—at the very least—"suffering" *does* end. What's more, she points out that Tish's pain is simply part of being human. After all, pain is evidence that a person is in touch with their emotions, and though it's certainly unpleasant to "suffer," it's better to experience the full spectrum of human feeling than to block these sensations out and never "suffer again." Having said this, Sharon implores Tish to recognize the fortifying effects of love, ultimately giving her daughter something to cling to despite the vast and ominous uncertainties swirling around her.

☝☝ I remembered women I had known, but scarcely looked at, who had frightened me; because they knew how to use their bodies in order to get something that they wanted. I now began to realize that my judgment of these women had had very little to do with morals. (And I now began to wonder about the meaning of this word.) My judgment had been due to my sense of how little they appeared to want. I could not conceive of peddling myself for so low a price.

But, for a higher price? for Fonny?

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tish considers the idea of morality, challenging herself to reevaluate the way she has judged the prostitutes she has seen lined along the streets. For her entire life, she has assumed to have “known” who these women are and what they want, but now she realizes she has “scarcely looked at” them. This implies that she never actually knew them as well as she thought she did. Rather, she simply made assumptions about them based on a vague and unexamined conception of morality. Now, though, she understands that her “judgment of these women had had very little to do with morals.” Instead, Tish has cast “judgment” on these women without stopping to consider what, exactly, might drive them to sell their bodies in the first place. Whereas she always thought that these prostitutes only wanted money—which seemed insignificant to her—she comes to see that this is not necessarily the case. As such, she realizes that she might become a prostitute herself if it meant she might be able to save Fonny. Thankfully, though, her strong support network keeps her from having to do this, since Joseph and Frank have sacrificed their own legal safety by stealing from their employers, thus earning the money to help pay for Fonny’s legal fees.

☞ Will you listen to me? Please? Of course, she’s *lying*. We know she’s lying. But—*she’s*—not—*lying*. As far as she’s concerned, Fonny raped her and that’s that, and now she hasn’t got to deal with it anymore. It’s over. For her. If she changes her testimony, she’ll go mad. Or become another woman. And you know how often people go mad, and how rarely they change.

Related Characters: Ernestine (Sis) (speaker), Arnold Hayward, Fonny (Alonzo Hunt), Victoria Rogers, Tish (Clementine)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Ernestine says this to Tish in a discussion about how they’re going to go about getting Victoria Rogers to change her testimony. In this moment, Ernestine prepares Tish for the very good possibility that Mrs. Rogers will refuse to alter

what she has already said about the case. To do this, she tells her sister that Mrs. Rogers isn’t lying, and when Tish voices her surprise, she clarifies that Mrs. Rogers isn’t telling the truth, either. This is because she (Mrs. Rogers) actively believes that Fonny is the man who raped her. “As far as she’s concerned,” Ernestine says, “Fonny raped her and that’s that, and now she hasn’t got to deal with it anymore.” As such, she presents Mrs. Rogers’s testimony as a coping mechanism, something the woman depends upon in order to avoid having to “deal with” the traumatic experience. In turn, it becomes obvious that Mrs. Rogers will avoid retracting her original statement at all costs, since doing so would mean facing the painful memory once again. And although this is a difficult thing to tell Tish, it’s important that Ernestine help her sister prepare for the worst-case scenario. In this way, Baldwin suggests that supporting a loved one doesn’t always mean soothing them with things they want to hear. Rather, real support sometimes means stating the truth, no matter how much it might hurt. Baldwin also makes a more complex and difficult point about trauma here, showing how it can affect one’s judgment and entire conception of reality.

☞ We are certainly in it now, and it may get worse. It will, certainly—and now something almost as hard to catch as a whisper in a crowded place, as light and as definite as a spider’s web, strikes below my ribs, stunning and astonishing my heart—get worse. But that light tap, that kick, that signal, announces to me that what can get worse can get better. Yes. It will get worse. But the baby, turning for the first time in its incredible veil of water, announces its presence and claims me; tells me, in that instant, that what can get worse can get better; and that what can get better can get worse. In the meantime—forever—it is entirely up to me. The baby cannot get here without me.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Ernestine (Sis)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After Tish has a frank talk with Ernestine about the rather depressing details of Fonny’s upcoming trial, she sits in a bar and feels her baby kick. When this happens, she feels as if

the kick is a reminder that things can “get worse.” After all, the sudden movement surprises her—“stunning” her “heart”—and forces her to consider once again that she will most likely give birth before Fonny is released from jail. As a result, the internal clock that has been ticking throughout the entire novel comes to the forefront of her consciousness, making it impossible for her to ignore the fact that each minute that passes is another minute that Fonny is languishing in prison and missing out on the precious moments of his life. However, the “light tap” also “signal[s]” to her that “what can get worse can get better.” This message emerges because the baby’s growing presence is also a happy occurrence, since Tish is excited to have a child. Despite the many complications surrounding her pregnancy, she finds comfort in the idea of having a baby. What’s more, the baby’s kick reminds her to focus on her pregnancy instead of fixating on the potentially disastrous elements of Fonny’s trial, thereby giving her a sliver of hope and optimism.

☝ It seems to me that if I quit my job, I’ll be making the six o’clock visit forever. I explain this to Fonny, and he says he understands, and, in fact, he does. But understanding doesn’t help him at six o’clock. No matter what you understand, you can’t help waiting: for your name to be called, to be taken from your cell and led downstairs. If you have visitors, or even if you have only one visitor, but that visitor is constant, it means that someone outside cares about you. And this can get you through the night, into the day. No matter what you may understand, and *really* understand, and no matter what you may tell yourself, if no one comes to see you, you are in very bad trouble. And trouble, here, means danger.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tish thinks about the effect of her work schedule on Fonny’s psychological wellbeing. Because she hasn’t yet quit her job at the department store, she sometimes finds herself unable to make it to the jail for the evening visiting hour, and though Fonny claims to “understand,” she knows that this doesn’t mean he isn’t distraught whenever she isn’t there to see him. “No matter what you understand, you can’t help waiting,” she notes,

suggesting that when a person needs emotional support, it doesn’t matter what they tell themselves—all that matters is whether or not somebody is there to help them through difficult times. Indeed, Tish comprehends that this kind of support can sustain a person “through the night” even in the worst circumstances. Because she understands this dynamic, then, it’s easy to see that she feels quite guilty about not quitting her job. At the same time, though, she is working in order to contribute to Fonny’s expensive legal fees. Readers see how truly difficult her situation is, as the injustice of Fonny’s circumstances require her to either neglect him in order to help set him free, or to give up trying to set him free in order to emotionally support him.

☝ I know you worried about the money. But you let *me* worry about that. I got more experience. Anyway, you ain’t making no damn money. All you doing is wearing yourself out, and driving Fonny crazy. You keep on like you going, you going to lose that baby. You lose that baby, and Fonny won’t want to live no more, and you’ll be lost and then I’ll be lost, everything is lost.

Related Characters: Joseph (speaker), Frank Hunt, Fonny (Alonzo Hunt), Tish (Clementine)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Joseph says this to Tish in a conversation in which he convinces her to quit her job. Seeing how much energy she’s expending simply trying to keep her job, he urges her to focus on her pregnancy, insisting that she doesn’t need to worry about money because he and Frank are taking care of the financial side of things. As such, he reminds her that she has a strong and loving support network. This, in turn, enables her to provide the same kind of emotional support to Fonny, who desperately needs any kind of attention that might bolster his psychological resilience in the devastating circumstances of prison. “You lose that baby, and Fonny won’t want to live no more,” Joseph tells his daughter, imploring her to recognize—once again—that her pregnancy is one of the only things keeping Fonny hopeful. In fact, Joseph even suggests that the promise of her baby’s arrival is keeping *everybody* hopeful, as he himself will “be lost” if Tish’s child doesn’t come safely into the world.

●● My presence, which is of no practical value whatever, which can even be considered, from a practical point of view, as a betrayal, is vastly more important than any practical thing I might be doing. Every day, when he sees my face, he knows, again, that I love him—and God knows I do, more and more, deeper and deeper, with every hour. But it isn't only that. It means that others love him, too, love him so much that they have set me free to be there. He is not alone; we are not alone.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Ernestine (Sis), Sharon, Frank Hunt, Joseph, Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

When Tish finally quits her job, she discovers that her mere “presence” has a profound effect on Fonny’s happiness. She, for her part, knows that her “presence” is “of no practical value whatever,” even suggesting that it could be seen as a “betrayal,” since her ability to see Fonny every day is the result of her decision to quit her job, meaning that she has willingly chosen to stop earning money to help get Fonny out of jail. However, this is seemingly a worthwhile sacrifice, since her daily visits fill Fonny with love, showing him not only that she loves him, but that other people do, too. After all, she wouldn’t be able to come to the jail on such a regular basis if Joseph, Frank, Sharon, and Ernestine weren’t all willing to work extra hard to make up for her lost wages. In this sense, her “presence” bears an important message, one that reminds Fonny that—although he’s on his own in jail—he isn’t completely “alone.”

Zion Quotes

●● He cannot tell what time it is, but it does not matter. The hours are all the same, the days are all the same. He looks at his shoes, which have no laces, on the floor beside the cot. [...] He knows that he must do something to keep himself from drowning, in this place, and every day he tries. But he does not succeed. He can neither retreat into himself nor step out of himself. He is righteously suspended, he is still. He is still with fear.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of Fonny as he tries desperately to pass the time in his jail cell. Having dreamt that he was at home working on a sculpture, he wakes up to find that he’s still tragically confined to the Tombs, where he has trouble marking the passage of time. “The hours are all the same, the days are all the same,” Tish narrates, making it clear that one of Fonny’s primary struggles is to grasp how long, exactly, he has been locked away from his own life. Indeed, he wants to maintain his grasp on reality, which is why he attempts to “do something to keep himself from drowning,” though he’s unsuccessful because there isn’t actually anything he can do. “He can neither retreat into himself nor step out of himself,” Tish notes, illustrating how helpless his “fear” has made him. Daunted by the prospect of continuing to languish in jail as an innocent man, Fonny begins to lose his sense of agency, slowly giving himself over to the unrelenting passage of time.

●● I opened my mouth to say—I don’t know what. When I opened my mouth, I couldn’t catch my breath. Everything disappeared, except my mother’s eyes. An incredible intelligence charged the air between us. Then, all I could see was Fonny. And then I screamed, and my time had come.

Fonny is working on the wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling. And, from far away, but coming nearer, the baby cries and cries, cries like it means to wake the dead.

Related Characters: Tish (Clementine) (speaker), Frank Hunt, Sharon, Fonny (Alonzo Hunt)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

These are the last two paragraphs of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and also the only subtle indications of what ends up happening to Tish and Fonny. In the first paragraph, Tish has just found out that Frank has committed suicide, but before she can even respond, she loses her breath and begins to go into labor. When she notes that “everything disappeared” except for Sharon’s eyes, Baldwin provides readers with an image that underlines the significance of motherhood. Indeed, Tish looks into her own mother’s eyes just when she herself is about to become a mother, thus finding strength in

her most ardent advocate. Then, when even her mother's eyes disappear, she sees an image of Fonny, which is yet another reminder of the love that will give her the necessary strength to birth her child.

This image then shifts into a stranger, more ambiguous image of Fonny at work on a sculpture in the second paragraph. Having transitioned from Tish's birthing scene to this abstract and undefined snapshot of Fonny "whistling" and "smiling" as he carves wood, Baldwin perhaps suggests that Tish is carrying Fonny's essence with her as she gives

birth to their child, imagining him at work on a sculpture as a way of soothing herself during labor. Alternatively, Baldwin hints that Fonny won't survive his imprisonment, since his and Tish's baby "cries like it means to wake the dead," a potential allusion to Fonny's possible death in prison. In this way, Baldwin leaves the ending of *If Beale Street Could Talk* open to interpretation, a choice that invites readers to consider the fact that even if Fonny's story *does* end happily, his struggle is one that many young black men continue to face—one that is far from reaching its conclusion.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TROUBLED ABOUT MY SOUL

Tish, whose real name is Clementine, goes to “the Tombs” in Lower Manhattan to visit Fonny, whose real name is Alonzo. However, she only calls him Alonzo when she has to “break down some real heavy shit to him,” which is the case on this particular visit. Sitting on one side of a glass divider at the jail, she picks up a phone, and Fonny picks up his own receiver on the other side. Staring at him, Tish remembers how much she adores his eyes, thinking about how frightened she is each time she visits that it will be the last time she sees him. “I hope that nobody has ever had to look at anybody they love through glass,” she notes.

Tish thinks about what she’s about to tell Fonny, hoping that once he stops worrying about the news she’s about to deliver, perhaps it will make him happy. “Alonzo, we’re going to have a **baby**,” she says. Pausing for a moment, she hastens to add, “I’m glad. I’m glad. Don’t you worry. I’m glad.” However, as she speaks, she sees that he’s lost in thought. She waits as he considers the fact that they’re going to have a baby at such a young age—after all, Tish is nineteen and Fonny is twenty-two. “Are you sure?” he asks, somehow doubting that she’s really pregnant, but she only makes fun of him for asking such a ridiculous question. After they both laugh, Fonny asks if Tish has told Frank—his father—yet, and she says Fonny is the first to know.

Fonny worries aloud about how they’ll raise a **baby** when he’s still in prison, but Tish assures him that her mother and sister will help her while he’s gone, and she also insists that he’ll be free by the time she gives birth. “You sure about that?” he asks. In response, she expresses her confidence that he’ll be released very soon, though internally she knows this might not be the case. Nonetheless, she feels as if she can’t let herself think negative thoughts. “I must be sure,” she thinks.

In the first scene of If Beale Street Could Talk, Baldwin establishes the novel’s preoccupation with love, and readers see right away that this will be a book about the resilience of human connection in difficult times. Tish struggles to connect with Fonny “through glass” but nevertheless manages to focus on the beauty of his eyes, fortifying herself against the difficulties of their forced separation. Baldwin also laces a sense of anticipation into the narrative of this initial scene, as readers—and Fonny—prepare for Tish to “break down some real heavy shit.” This anticipation foreshadows the seemingly endless amount of waiting Fonny and Tish must endure throughout the book, as Fonny’s time in jail stretches on and on. “The Tombs” is the name of a correctional facility in Manhattan.



Because Fonny is in jail and Tish is so young, it’s unsurprising that he immediately begins to worry about her pregnancy. After all, it’s quite possible he won’t be out of prison before the baby comes. Tish’s pregnancy then becomes like a ticking clock, emphasizing all that Fonny is missing out on by languishing in prison. Although the sense of urgency surrounding Tish’s pregnancy and Fonny’s freedom is overwhelming, the idea of having a child also gives him a sense of hope and levity, as evidenced by the fact that he and Tish start joking and laughing shortly after she breaks the news.



Again, Baldwin underlines the ways in which Tish’s pregnancy makes Fonny even more aware of the timeframe of his prison stay. When Tish displays a sense of unshakeable optimism, she commits herself to lending Fonny a sense of hope, knowing that this kind of positive thinking is perhaps the only thing that will keep him resilient.



On Tish's way out of the prison, she walks through "corridors" that remind her of the Sahara Desert because there are so many "lawyers and bondsmen," all of whom are like vultures circling above, waiting for a moment to swoop down and prey on the "poor" and helpless. As she moves through these hallways and passes the many family members who are clearly "ashamed" that their sons and lovers are in jail, she thinks about how they're "wrong to be ashamed," since "the people responsible for these jails should be ashamed." She, for her part, isn't ashamed of Fonny. In fact, she's even "proud" of him, since he has confronted this hardship so admirably.

Despite the fact that she's proud of Fonny, Tish often wonders if the pressure of Fonny's imprisonment might someday become too much to bear. "Nobody can take the shit they throw on us forever," she says, but then she resolves to simply focus on taking things one day at a time. "If you think too far ahead, if you even *try* to think too far ahead, you'll never make it," she notes.

On the bus ride home, Tish thinks about what it's like to be in "trouble," considering the fact that people see life differently when they're struggling with something. Looking around, she realizes she can't ask any of the strangers around her for help, feeling like she can't "depend on people for anything, anymore." Plus, it wouldn't matter if a stranger wanted to help her in the first place, since nobody could truly do something to improve her and Fonny's situation. "I can't say to anybody in this bus, Look, Fonny is in trouble, he's in jail," she realizes. Similarly, she knows nobody can do anything about the fact that she's "scared" about having a child while her lover is in prison. "Trouble means you're alone," she remarks.

Tish reflects on how she and Fonny first became close. When she was only six years old, Fonny was her neighbor, but she didn't pay much attention to him until they got into a fight one day. During this period, Tish was friends with a confrontational girl named Geneva who got into a scrap with Daniel, one of Fonny's friends. When Tish tried to pull Daniel off of Geneva, Fonny tried to pull *her* off of Daniel. To defend herself, she grabbed a small board from the ground and swung it at Fonny, hitting him in the face. Because there was a rusty nail stuck into the end of the board, though, Fonny started bleeding profusely, so Tish ran away. When Fonny caught her, he spit in her mouth but didn't physically hurt her.

When Tish thinks about "lawyers and bondsmen" as vultures, she addresses the fact that the legal system to which Fonny must submit is inherently exploitative and oppressive, since rich white lawyers and bondsmen are simply waiting to profit off of the misfortune of young black men like Fonny. She also rejects the idea that a prisoner's loved ones should be "ashamed" of them—after all, they are at the mercy of unjust power structures, the same structures that enable exploitative lawyers and bondsmen to prey on disadvantaged prisoners and their families in the first place. By examining this dynamic, Tish frames the entire legal system as prejudiced and manipulative.



Tish sets forth an important idea in this moment, upholding that the best way to endure long-lasting hardship is by focusing on the present. She suggests that the burden of constant anticipation can overwhelm even the strongest person.



Part of the isolation Tish feels in this moment has to do with the fact that she and Fonny are at a disadvantage in American society. The structures of power—including the legal system—that rule New York City (and the United States in general) make it all too easy to imprison a black man like Fonny without having to provide much in the way of justification. Because of this, Tish knows she can't stand up in public and ask for help, since there's nothing anyone can do to defeat the injustice of the law. She not only feels "alone," but frightened about what will happen to the father of her unborn child.



Although this is only the story of Fonny and Tish's first true interaction and ultimately has very little to do with their adult relationship, it's worth noting that their connection begins with a sense of animosity. Baldwin thus demonstrates that love can blossom even in strange, unaccommodating circumstances. In the same way that Tish and Fonny manage to fall in love despite their turbulent history, it seems their connection will easily triumph over the hardships of Fonny's imprisonment.



Still narrating the fight she had with Fonny, Tish says that he disappeared for several days, causing her to fear that the rusty nail had given him lockjaw. Afraid she ruined his life by hitting him with the board, she tried to get more information about his condition by visiting his father's tailor shop. When she entered, Frank kindly greeted her and made small talk, but she couldn't bring herself to ask about Fonny. Sensing what she wanted to know, though, Frank indicated that Fonny's mother, Mrs. Hunt, sent him to spend time with relatives in "the country," and he promised to let Fonny know that Tish came looking for him. Several days later, Fonny came to see her and apologized for spitting on her, and she apologized for hitting him.

As kids, Fonny and Tish become close after their fight. Fonny, for his part, dislikes his sisters, and Tish doesn't have any brothers. "And so we got to be, for each other, what the other missed," Tish notes in retrospect. As for Fonny's mother, she is remarkably strict, "a Sanctified woman" who resents her husband because he refuses to conform to her religious lifestyle. This, Tish thinks, is why Mrs. Hunt is extra hard on Fonny, which only drives him away from her. Indeed, Fonny forms a close relationship with his father, who doesn't judge him when he comes to the tailor shop after a fight.

One day as adults, Tish asks Fonny if his parents still make love, and he says they do but that their sex life is full of a strange kind of anger and resentment that ultimately fuels their physical connection but keeps them emotionally distanced from one another. Each night they have intercourse, it is under the pretense that Mrs. Hunt is trying to bring Frank to Jesus, so that she ultimately convinces herself that she's doing something holy by having sex with a man she might otherwise see as nothing but a sinner. "Hadn't been for me, I believe [Frank] would have split the scene," Fonny says. "I'll always love my Daddy because he didn't leave me."

One day before their romantic relationship begins, Tish goes to church with Fonny and Mrs. Hunt. Her own family isn't particularly religious, and Tish can sense that Mrs. Hunt judges her for this, inwardly critiquing her for going to church so infrequently. When she, Fonny, and Mrs. Hunt arrive, they sit in the front row, and Tish notes how performative Mrs. Hunt becomes once the service begins, making a grand display of her holiness and even seeming to compete with another woman by making loud protestations as the music plays. As the furious worship of the congregation rises, Tish feels overwhelmed and frightened, looking at Fonny and impulsively grasping his hand. Ever since that day, Fonny and Tish have never discussed this experience, though Tish feels like she's entering the church again whenever she walks into the Tombs.

In this flashback, readers see that Frank is a kind man who has a connection with Tish, whom he clearly likes. This is important to keep in mind as the novel progresses, as Tish's family ends up inviting Frank into their close circle in order to provide an effective support network for Fonny.



In this section, readers see that judgmental attitudes can strain relationships. This is the case when Fonny distances himself from Mrs. Hunt, as she seemingly tries to shame him into adopting her way of life. The fact that Fonny ends up becoming close to his father because he doesn't judge Fonny only further establishes the fact that kindness and acceptance are what create meaningful human relationships.



By this point in the novel, it's rather clear that Frank and Mrs. Hunt do not have a good relationship, mostly because Mrs. Hunt seems to subject him to the same kind of critical judgment that she also forces upon Fonny. Fonny's statement that he'll "always love" his father because he didn't leave is worth noting as well, since Fonny himself is no doubt worried that his imprisonment will keep him from being there for his own child.



For Tish, religion is inextricably intertwined with Mrs. Hunt's unforgiving judgment, which makes Tish feel inferior. This, it seems, is why she is so put off by the experience of going to church, ultimately feeling a lack of acceptance and a sense of shame about the way she leads her life. This is the same feeling Tish experiences when she walks into the prison, since she knows that she and Fonny are at the mercy of a legal system that judges them harshly without taking into consideration who they actually are. In the same way that Mrs. Hunt looks down upon Tish without stopping to truly get to know her, the jail system subjects black people to unfair judgment simply because they are black.



Having told Fonny about her pregnancy, Tish goes home to tell her family. She knows her mother, Sharon, won't be upset by the news, nor will her older sister, Ernestine. However, she isn't sure what her father, Joseph, will think. Thankfully, Sharon is the first to get home, and Tish helps her unload groceries in the kitchen. Sharon is still a relatively young woman, though she has two grown daughters. Having moved to New York from Birmingham with the dream of becoming a singer, she met Joseph shortly after giving up on her music career. They then settled in Harlem and Joseph took a job working on the waterfront. Now, in the kitchen, Tish senses that Sharon already knows she's pregnant, and she starts to cry. Understanding exactly what's happening, Sharon says, "Tish, I declare, I don't think you got nothing to cry about. You tell Fonny?"

Sharon guesses correctly that Tish is roughly three months pregnant. Soothing her daughter as she cries, she says, "Now, listen, you got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl and all that jive-ass shit. I sure hope I raised you better than that." She then reminds Tish that white people have been making it difficult for black people to live their lives since black people first were brought to America as slaves. Similarly, she says, "that same damn white man" is responsible for the fact that Fonny and Tish aren't married right now, since they would be if he wasn't in jail. Given this unfortunate situation, she says, Tish needs to simply focus on her **baby**, making sure that it comes into this world safely.

Saying that Tish is the only one who can make sure her **baby** arrives safely, Sharon says that she, Frank, and Ernestine will take care of everything else. What's more, she adds that Fonny "needs that baby" because it will lend him "courage." Sharon then says she will be the one to announce the news to Joseph and Ernestine when they get home.

When Joseph arrives, he pours himself a beer and speculates about how much Fonny's lawyer will cost. As he and Sharon talk to one another, Tish stares at a wooden sculpture Fonny made two years ago. "It's of a naked man with one hand at his forehead and the other half hiding his sex," she notes, explaining that Fonny made this at his old vocational school. At this school, the teachers taught the students to make "shitty, really useless things," claiming that the children had to learn to use their hands because they were stupid. "Those kids aren't dumb," Tish thinks. "But the people who run these schools want to make sure that they don't get smart: they are really teaching the kids to be slaves." Because of this, Fonny stole wood from the school and stopped attending, using it to make sculptures because he has an eye for beauty.

Without even having to be told, Sharon understands what's going on with Tish. This demonstrates her skills as a mother, showcasing the fact that she's very much in touch with her children. She not only anticipates that Tish is pregnant, but she immediately soothes her by insisting that she doesn't have anything "to cry about," thereby helping her daughter view her own pregnancy as a good thing, something that might give her and Fonny hope. In contrast to Mrs. Hunt's parenting techniques, Sharon has a remarkable ability to support her loved ones.



Unlike Mrs. Hunt, Sharon knows it's important to support her children with love. This is why she goes out of her way to make sure Tish knows she doesn't think she's a "bad girl" for getting pregnant, since this kind of judgment would only estrange her from Tish and make it harder for her to help her through this difficult period. She also articulates the fact that Fonny's imprisonment has more to do with and racism than with anything he's actually done, suggesting that his predicament is simply a continuation of America's historical bigotry.



Sharon goes out of her way to stress how important the baby will be to Fonny, insisting that it will give him hope and "courage." Tish's pregnancy becomes something that can buoy his (and her) spirits.



The attitude embodied by the vocational school Fonny used to attend encapsulates the harmful narratives that have made their way into society about young African Americans. By devaluing black students, these kinds of institutions create a self-fulfilling prophecy, since they take hope away from children and force them to see themselves as unintelligent and—thus—unsuccessful. In this way, readers see the systemic racism that has followed people like Fonny throughout their lives.



Tish thinks about the fact that Fonny discovered sculpture was something “he could do” to avoid “the death that was waiting to overtake the children” surrounding him in Harlem. This “death,” Tish points out, “took many forms,” though it was really quite simple: “the kids had been told that they weren’t worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it. They struggled, they struggled, but they fell, like flies, and they congregated on the garbage heaps of their lives, like flies.” And whereas Fonny had sculpture to keep him from this fate, Tish had—or has—Fonny.

Judgmental and proper like their mother, Fonny’s sisters Adrienne and Sheila team up against Frank and Fonny, scorning them for their lack of religious faith. Worse, they blame Fonny and Frank for their own shortcomings, resentful of the fact that even though they attended City College to find eligible husbands, nobody has married them. For whatever reason, they take this out on Fonny, and so Fonny has always turned to Frank for support, and vice versa. Thankfully, Fonny also has his “passion” for sculpture, though Tish notes that it is this “passion” that eventually got him arrested. “He wasn’t anybody’s nigger,” she states. “And that’s a crime, in this fucking free country. You’re supposed to be *somebody’s* nigger. And if you’re nobody’s nigger, you’re a bad nigger: and that’s what the cops decided when Fonny moved downtown.”

When Ernestine comes home, she says, “Where’s Jezebel?” This is what she has started calling her younger sister ever since Tish started working as a perfume salesperson in a department store. In contrast, Ernestine works with sick and neglected children in a “settlement house.” A well-read young woman, she has strong opinions and isn’t afraid to lament “the white man’s lying shit.” Now, she talks with her parents about Fonny’s lawyer, whom she found because she works with attorneys as part of her job. As they discuss this, Joseph notes that he thinks the lawyer, Mr. Hayward, wants more money, and though the family can’t possibly cough up more cash, they all agree they must find a way to pay the legal fees, since they see Fonny as family.

Baldwin suggests that the only way for a black person to survive in a racist society is by finding something to support them, something that can provide emotional relief from suffering. Sculpture sustains Fonny and helps him maintain his appreciation of life, though it’s worth keeping in mind that he can’t practice his art in prison. Similarly, Fonny’s imprisonment takes him away from Tish, thereby depriving her of the love that keeps her from succumbing to despair. In turn, readers see the extent to which the legal system actively takes away anything that might help young black people withstand the crushing pressure of racism.



When Tish says it’s a “crime” in America to not belong—in a symbolic but nonetheless serious sense—to a white person, she articulates the unfortunate fact that strong-willed young black men like Fonny are often persecuted for their ambition, independence, and unwillingness to submit to bigotry. She also makes it clear that the Hunt family has a very fraught dynamic, one in which resentment and scorn run wild, making it impossible for the family members to provide one another with love and support. Up against pervasive racism and without a true support network, Fonny has little to turn to.



Since Fonny’s own family (other than Frank) is unwilling or unable to give him loving support, Tish’s family steps in to serve this function. They resolve to pay Fonny’s legal fees because they see him as one of their own family members. This is a testament to their kindness and their ability to extend love to others, especially since they (except for Sharon) don’t even know yet that Tish is pregnant. Their commitment has nothing to do with a sense of obligation and everything to do with their simple desire to help.



Tish tells Ernestine that she plans to see Mr. Hayward on Monday, and Ernestine says she should tell him to call her if he wants more money. Tish agrees, but the entire matter makes her feel sad and afraid, reminding her again that she's "alone with [her] trouble." "Nobody could help me, not even Sis," she notes. Later, as the family sits around the table, Sharon brings out an expensive bottle of brandy and tells Joseph to open it and pour four glasses. Although he seems to understand what's happening, Tish can see that he hasn't yet pinpointed what's about to take place, so he simply pours the brandy. "This is a sacrament," Sharon says, "and, no, I ain't gone crazy. We're drinking to a new life. Tish is going to have Fonny's **baby**."

At first, Joseph can't speak, though a smile slowly works its way into his face. "That's a hell of a note," he finally says, drinking his brandy. Ernestine then comes over to Tish and holds her, crying and smiling at her without uttering a word. When Tish reveals that she's been pregnant for three months, Ernestine says, "Yeah. That's what I figured." In contrast, Joseph is shocked, and Tish clarifies that she got pregnant just before Fonny was arrested in March. This fills Joseph with questions, as he realizes that Tish was pregnant while she and Fonny were trying to find an apartment together so they could get married. "You sure you want this **baby**, Tish?" he asks, and Tish immediately launches into an explanation of how much Fonny and she love each other. "Your father know that," Sharon says. "He's only worried about you."

Stopping Tish from justifying her pregnancy, Joseph tells her not to feel judged. "Don't you go thinking I think you a bad girl, or any foolishness like that," he says. The family stops talking for a moment, each person thinking about the **baby**, and then Ernestine breaks the silence, saying, "Unbow your head, sister." When Tish looks up, they toast "to the newborn." Suddenly in a good mood, Joseph says he hopes Tish has a boy, thinking that Frank would get a kick out of having a grandson. He then asks if he can tell Frank himself, and when Tish says yes, he calls the Hunt family and invites them over.

Even with a healthy support network, Tish feels "alone with [her] trouble." This is because Fonny's problem seems insurmountable, since proving his innocence will be an uphill battle. However, she isn't truly "alone" in this matter, since her family members clearly want to do whatever they can to get Fonny out of prison. The fact that she feels this way, then, illustrates how easy it is to feel isolated when facing hardship, even when a person is surrounded by loving and supportive people.



Like Sharon, Ernestine isn't surprised to hear that Tish is pregnant. This illustrates how closely attuned the women in her family are to her, picking up on the first sign of change in her life. In turn, readers see once again how strong the bond is between Tish and her family members.



Again, Tish's family members make sure that she doesn't feel ashamed for getting pregnant, never wanting her to think of herself as a "bad girl." Her parents understand that if she thinks they're judging her, she will likely distance herself from them, much like Fonny distanced himself from his mother because of her scornful attitude toward him. Picking up on this sentiment, Ernestine tells her to "unbow" her head, inviting Tish to take pride in the fact that she's going to bring life into the world.



Tish thinks about the initial stages of her relationship with Fonny, when she first felt his erection straining through his pants one night and immediately ran upstairs. After that, she didn't see him for several weeks, and when he reappeared, he gave Sharon the sculpture that now sits in the family's apartment. That day, they went to Greenwich Village—where Fonny had moved into his own apartment—and walked around, feeling as if something between them was somehow different. For dinner, they went to a Spanish restaurant where Fonny was a regular, and a kind man named Pedrocito ushered them inside and treated them spectacularly. Later, after Fonny is imprisoned, Tish returns to this restaurant because the waiters are so nice to her, even driving her back to Harlem after her meal. "I will never forget them, never," she says.

Tish continues to think about the first time she had sex, remembering that she and Fonny left the Spanish restaurant and went to his small apartment in the Village, which was cluttered with his sculpting tools. As she reminisces about this, the Hunts arrive at her parents' apartment. Right away, Tish can tell that Mrs. Hunt—in all her religious glory—is "frightened," clearly dreading whatever it is Tish and her family are about to unveil. As Adrienne and Sheila file into the living room, Tish thinks about how proper and condescending they are to people they think are inferior. Once everybody's inside, the two families make idle chit-chat, speaking vaguely about Fonny. At one point, Sheila says Fonny wouldn't be in jail if "he'd done his reading and studying when he should have," and Joseph quickly changes the topic by asking Frank if he brought beer.

Joseph politely asks if Mrs. Hunt will mind if he and Frank have a drink, and she says, "Mind? Frank does not care if we *mind*. He will go right on and do what pleases *him*." She then talks about how she has been speaking to her connections about Fonny's situation, emphasizing the fact that she knows important people who can "pull some strings," though she hasn't made any progress yet. When Sharon asks what Mrs. Hunt and Frank think about Mr. Hayward, they express their skepticism, and Frank says that "it don't mean shit" that Hayward is a white man with a law degree, but that at least he's "not as full of shit" as many other white lawyers. He and Mrs. Hunt then fall into an argument about his pessimism and crass language, and he laments the fact that she cares about Jesus more than her son.

Emotional support doesn't have to come only from family members, as is made clear by the kindness Pedrocito shows Tish after Fonny is arrested. Although If Beale Street Could Talk focuses on the many cruelties and injustices of American society, it also champions a certain amount of faith in humanity, offering up examples of empathy and compassion that help readers maintain a sense of hope regarding the ways in which people treat one another.



It's clear that the resentment running through the Hunt family hasn't disappeared in the aftermath of Fonny's imprisonment. Rather than rallying around Fonny and supporting him, Sheila voices her overall disapproval of the way he has lived his life. In doing so, she puts herself at odds not only with Tish, but Ernestine, Sharon, and Joseph, too, all of whom care deeply about Fonny and have committed to doing anything they can to help him. After all, they understand that he's innocent. Sheila, on the other hand, doesn't seem to care whether or not he committed a crime, since his failure to do "his reading and studying" is evidence enough for her that he deserves punishment.



Frank is wary of Mr. Hayward because he has trouble believing that a white man in a position of power would ever do something to help a black man. This makes sense, considering the fact that Fonny is in this predicament because of white men who have abused their power to make sure he's put in prison, though Baldwin hasn't yet revealed the exact details of how this happened. Mrs. Hunt is perhaps right to urge him to leave behind such pessimistic thoughts, but she ultimately seems more interested in arguing with Frank for the sake of putting him down than actually helping him find hope.



Finally, Adrienne asks Joseph why he insisted that they come over, but she does so in such a disparaging way that Tish can't help but jumping in and criticizing her, saying she never visits Fonny in prison. "And you ain't said a word about it to none of them white-collars ex-antipoverty-program pimps and hustlers and faggots you run with, have you?" she says, adding that Adrienne is too focused on trying to date white men to stop and think about her brother. Then, when her hostility dies down, she looks at Frank and delivers her news, since he's the only one she cares about telling. After a moment, Frank turns to Joseph and says, "You and me going to go out and get drunk," adding that he's "mighty glad."

Unlike Frank, Mrs. Hunt isn't thrilled to hear about Tish's pregnancy. "And who," she says, "is going to responsible for this **baby**?" "The father and the mother," Tish replies. Having processed this information, Mrs. Hunt rises and advances upon her, saying, "I guess you call your lustful action love. I don't. I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son. You have a demon in you—I always knew it. My God caused me to know it many a year ago. The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb. But my son will be forgiven. My prayers will save him." Hearing this, Frank walks over to her and backhand slaps her to the ground, and Sharon reminds him that she has a weak heart. "I think you'll find it's still pumping," he says. "But I wouldn't call it a heart."

After Frank slaps Mrs. Hunt, Sharon begs Joseph to take him out, and though he's hesitant to leave, he eventually escorts Frank away, going out to the bars and leaving the women alone in the apartment. When they're gone, Tish remarks that Mrs. Hunt said a "terrible thing" to her, but Adrienne points out that it was unnecessary for Frank to hit her mother, since she really does have a feeble heart. "She got a weak head," Sharon interjects. "The Holy Ghost done softened your brain, child. Did you forget it was Frank's grandchild you was cursing?" At this point, Adrienne defends her mother by saying that nobody should ridicule her faith, and then she suggests that Fonny is good for nothing, saying, "Who is going to take care of this **baby**?"

The animosity between Fonny and his family members has, it seems, made its way into Tish's relationship with the Hunt women. Because Adrienne seems to resent Fonny so much, Tish can't help but resent her back. In turn, Baldwin illustrates that, in the same way that loving kindness often leads to more kindness, resentment and scorn can also perpetuate themselves.



Mrs. Hunt condescends to Tish by asking who will "be responsible" for the baby, ultimately implying that Tish isn't "responsible" enough to care for her own child. Going on, she casts the same kind of negative judgment on Tish that she has always directed at Fonny, though this time she blames her for corrupting her son. Indeed, she acts as if Fonny is in jail because of Tish, altogether ignoring the fact that Fonny's imprisonment has nothing to do with their relationship and everything to do with an unjust legal process.



Once again, readers see how much the Hunt women and their harsh judgment of Fonny sow division between the two families. Unwilling to accept Tish's pregnancy, they continue to disparage Fonny, focusing not on the situation at hand, but on their feelings of superiority. This, in turn, enables them to avoid having to reckon with the difficult fact that one of their family members is in serious trouble.



Tish says once again that she will be responsible for her and Fonny's child, and then Ernestine threatens Adrienne, saying that if she continues to bother Tish, she'll rip out her Adam's apple. As this dispute continues, the Hunt women prepare to leave, and Mrs. Hunt says she hopes Sharon is "pleased with the way" her daughters behave, adding that her own girls won't be getting pregnant with "bastards." "But the child that's coming," Sharon replies, "is your grandchild. What difference does it make how it gets here? The child ain't got nothing to do with that—don't none of us have nothing to do with *that!*" In response, Mrs. Hunt says, "That child," but she can't go on, instead repeating those two words.

Standing in Mrs. Hunt's way, Tish finishes her sentence, saying, "That child is in my belly. Now, you raise your knee and kick it out." As she stares at her, she says it wouldn't be "the first child" Mrs. Hunt has "tried to kill." After a moment, Ernestine moves Tish out of the way, informing the Hunt women that she, Sharon, and Tish will make sure to never tell the **baby** about them, since "there's no way to tell a baby how obscene human beings can be." When Mrs. Hunt and her daughters finally leave, Tish goes to bed while Ernestine and Sharon stay up waiting for Joseph and Frank to return.

Tish returns to the night she lost her virginity, thinking about how Fonny told her that they've always belonged to one another. "I want you to marry me," he says in this memory. Showing her various in-progress sculptures around his apartment, he tells her he'll always remain faithful and that he doesn't use drugs other than marijuana. Going on, he stresses how important his sculpture is to him, saying that he "live[s] with wood and stone." Because of this, he won't be able to provide her with much money, though he can promise to always love her fiercely and unequivocally. When she says this is fine with her, he leads her to a pallet on the floor and kisses her all over her body, and they have sex for the first time.

After they make love, Tish begins to fret that her parents must be worried about her. She and Fonny travel uptown to Harlem. It's now early morning, and Sharon opens the door, saying, "You're just in time for coffee." Unsurprisingly, Joseph is angry that Tish has been out so late, and though Sharon and Ernestine quickly accept the idea of Tish marrying Fonny, he remains hesitant at first, asking Fonny how he'll provide for Tish. However, Joseph finally gives his blessing to the marriage when Tish tells him that she loves Fonny. When he and Fonny go into the living room to discuss the details of this, Sharon says she's "real pleased." Soon enough, Joseph comes back into the kitchen and puts Fonny's hand atop Tish's, saying, "Take care of each other. You going to find out that it's more than a notion."

It's worth paying attention to Mrs. Hunt's word choice in this scene, as she refers to Tish's unborn child as a "bastard." Considering that a "bastard" is a fatherless child, it becomes clear that Mrs. Hunt doesn't think Fonny will ever be released from prison. This stands in stark contrast to the kind of optimism Tish and her family members are trying to maintain. Perhaps because she recognizes Mrs. Hunt's pessimism—or apathy—Sharon tries to get her to see that the baby has "nothing to do with" whether or not Fonny is set free. Whatever happens, "that child" will need love and support, which Mrs. Hunt is clearly incapable of providing.



In this moment, Tish implies that Mrs. Hunt has "tried to kill" Fonny. She believes that Mrs. Hunt's apathy when it comes to Fonny's case is a blatant indication that she doesn't care what happens to her son. In turn, readers see that Tish—and, by extension, Ernestine and Sharon—find it "obscene" that Mrs. Hunt and her daughters aren't giving Fonny the love and support he needs to survive his imprisonment.



Throughout If Beale Street Could Talk, Baldwin provides flashbacks that detail the progression of Tish and Fonny's relationship. By showcasing their budding love, the author effectively establishes the book's interest in examining close human connections and the ways in which romance affects peoples' lives, as both Fonny and Tish seemingly prioritize their love over everything else. This is made clear by Tish's immediate willingness to marry Fonny even though he can't provide her with much.



When Joseph tells Fonny and Tish to "take care of each other," he emphasizes the importance of loving support. In fact, he goes out of his way to clarify that this is "more than a notion," ultimately urging them to recognize that, although it may seem cliché, love truly can lead to lasting strength and resilience. On another note, this is now the second time in the novel that Tish has delivered big news to her parents. Both times, her family is quite accepting, clearly knowing that subjecting Tish to harsh judgment would only upset her and drive her away.



On the Monday after Tish visits Fonny in jail, she goes to Mr. Hayward's office with Sharon. He informs them that Victoria Rogers—the woman who accused Fonny of raping her—has “disappeared,” most likely having fled to Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, this means Hayward will need to hire special investigators to locate her so that he can convince her to change her testimony. This, in turn, will require Tish's family to come up with more money. To make Tish feel better, Hayward reminds her that Mrs. Rogers isn't the case's only “key witness,” since there's also Officer Bell, who claims to have seen Fonny running away from the crime scene. “If he saw Fonny at the scene of the crime, then why did he have to wait and come and get him out of the house?” Tish asks.

Hayward clarifies that he thinks Officer Bell is the person who told Mrs. Rogers to accuse Fonny. As he talks about the case, Tish sits in his office and looks at the pictures of his white family, feeling as if there's “no connection between” her and the room. “The truth of a case doesn't matter,” Hayward says, explaining that he himself knows Fonny is innocent—he wouldn't, after all, have accepted the case if he believed otherwise. “I know something about Officer Bell, who is a racist and a liar,” Hayward continues, adding that he has told this straight to Bell. Plus, he thinks the District Attorney overseeing the case is also a racist. “Now. You and Fonny insist that you were together, in the room on Bank Street, along with an old friend, Daniel Carty,” he says, explaining that—unfortunately—this testimony “counts for nothing.”

Outlining the difficulties of Fonny's case, Hayward informs Tish and Sharon that Daniel has been arrested by the D.A. and “is being held incommunicado.” In fact, Hayward isn't even allowed to visit him. “What they are doing is really against the law—but—Daniel has a record, as you know,” he says, explaining that the D.A.'s office is clearly trying to scare him into altering his testimony. “And—I do not know this, but I am willing to bet—that that is how and why Mrs. Rogers has disappeared,” he says. Hearing this, Sharon concludes that they have to “buy time,” and Hayward confirms that this is so. Tish, however, can't get past the word, knowing that “time” is the one thing weighing most on Fonny. After all, their **baby** will be born in six months, and each day Fonny spends in prison is torture.

Baldwin begins to reveal the details of Fonny's case. By withholding this information for so long, he has essentially put readers in a position that is somewhat similar to what Fonny himself is going through in jail. Fonny is an innocent man at the mercy of the legal system, meaning that he has no idea—or control over—when he will be released. Similarly, readers wait and wait to find out why Fonny is in jail. A sense of anticipation builds, one that reflects the excruciating anticipation Fonny feels as he wastes away in the terrible environment of the Tombs.



The fact that Daniel and Tish's testimonies “count for nothing” is quite depressing, but it is the unfortunate reality of their situation, especially since the District Attorney—who will be prosecuting Fonny—is just as racist as Officer Bell, the policeman who testified against Fonny. It becomes clear that it will be very hard for Hayward to make sure Fonny gets a fair trial, since the most powerful people involved in the entire process are overtly racist. This demonstrates the ways in which bigotry has worked its way into the city's power structures, making it even harder for somebody like Fonny to prove his innocence.



The D.A.'s attempt to manipulate Daniel into changing his testimony is a perfect demonstration of how people often use fear and intimidation in order to carry out racist agendas. Daniel's “record” puts him in a precarious situation, since the D.A. is clearly trying to use it against him so that he's too afraid to come to Fonny's aid, ultimately isolating both men from one another and making it harder for them to fight their own oppression. On top of this, Mrs. Rogers's disappearance means that Fonny will have to continue to wait for his trial. Using Tish's pregnancy as something of an internal clock, Baldwin stresses how devastating it will be for Fonny to learn that he has to continue to languish in jail.



As she thinks about the fact that time can't "be bought," Tish begins to cry. Coming to her aid, Sharon encourages her to be strong, reminding her that she's "a woman now" and that she can't succumb to desperation because it will take all the strength she has to help free Fonny. Then, before they leave, Hayward stops Tish and tells her that whenever he visits Fonny in prison, Fonny asks how Tish is doing. "And I always say, Tish? she's fine," he says. "But he watches my face, to make sure I'm not lying. And I'm a very bad liar. I'm going to see him tomorrow. What shall I tell him?" He then asks if she can smile for him, so that he can pass this along to Fonny, and when she manages to do this, she notices that "something really human" takes place between them.

After seeing Hayward, Tish thinks back to before Fonny was arrested. In the memory, Fonny bumps into Daniel on the street after many years of not seeing him. The friends then return to his apartment, where they catch up while Tish cooks. As they talk, Fonny tells Daniel that he and Tish are looking for places to rent together but that they can't find an honest landlord who will rent to black people. Daniel then reveals that he's just been in jail for two years. He was accused of stealing a car, even though he doesn't know how to drive. When the police came to arrest him, though, he was carrying marijuana, so they put him in jail and told him that if he pled guilty to stealing the car, they'd give him a reduced sentence and drop the drug charge.

"I was alone, baby, [...] so I entered the guilty plea," Daniel says, lamenting the fact that he spent the next two years of his life in jail—terrible years that have fundamentally changed him. He admits he might feel better about everything if he actually *had* stolen the car, but since he didn't, he can't make sense of the experience. "They were just playing with me, man, because they could," he says. As he begins to cry, Fonny urges him to move on, but Daniel says that the guards and prisoners made him feel "so fucking scared" that he'll never again be able to live a normal life. When it comes time for Daniel to leave Fonny's apartment, he's too afraid to walk to the subway on his own, so Fonny escorts him. In the coming days, Daniel returns and tries desperately to talk about his traumatic memories.

The day after meeting with Hayward, Tish breaks the news to Fonny that Mrs. Rogers has fled. When he hears this, he's distraught, asking how they're going to find her, and when Tish tries to soothe him, he says, "What we going to do about that fucking lawyer? He don't give a shit about me, he don't give a shit about *nobody!* You want me to die in here? You know what's going on in here? You know what's happening to me, to *me*, to *me*, in *here*?" After this explosion, though, he calms down, apologizing and telling Tish that he loves her, asking her not to cry because it's "bad for the **baby**."

Despite Frank's skepticism regarding Hayward, it becomes rather clear in this scene that he genuinely wants to help Fonny. Although he is asking for more money, it's only because he needs to pay special investigators to track down Mrs. Rogers. Hayward is emotionally invested in Fonny's case and in Tish's happiness, and this is something of a breath of fresh air, considering that the other white people in this novel—like Officer Bell and the District Attorney—are openly racist and hateful. Hayward manages to give Tish—and readers—a small sense of hope.



Daniel's possession of marijuana puts him in an unfortunate situation, because although it is a minor offense to have a small amount of the drug, it gives the racist authorities a certain amount of leverage, which they use to manipulate him into working against his own best interests. In turn, readers see how unfair the legal system can be, as law enforcement officials use their power over disenfranchised black men like Daniel. By intimidating Daniel, these officials effectively convince him to give up all hope of trying to prove his innocence.



What becomes most clear in this moment is the extent to which fear can fundamentally change a person's life. Daniel suggests that the fear of being a prisoner is made worse when a person doesn't know what will happen to him. This is significant to the narrative of If Beale Street Could Talk, since Fonny himself is now in a similar predicament to Daniel. In this way, readers come to understand that even if Fonny eventually does get out of jail, the time he has spent as a prisoner will stay with him for the rest of his days. The question of when or if he will ever be set free weighs even more heavily over the story.



This is one of the first times Fonny loses his temper as a result of his harrowing circumstances. Although he's normally rather optimistic given his bleak situation, in this scene he finds himself unable to hold back his anger and desperation, a reaction that is ultimately very understandable. However, he quickly reverts back to his calm, cool demeanor, suddenly trying to soothe Tish. He looks to their love as a way to keep his mind off of depressing thoughts.



While sleeping that night, Tish has a nightmare about Fonny driving full-speed off of a cliff, and when she wakes up, she sees her mother standing above her. Admitting that she knows she can't do much to help, Sharon talks to Tish about the nature of suffering, saying that it *does* "end," though not always for good. "Sometimes it ends for worse," she says. "You can suffer so bad that you can be driven to a place where you can't ever suffer again: and that's worse." She then reminds Tish to focus on her unborn **child**, saying that it will bring Fonny hope. "I don't want to sound foolish," she says before leaving. "But, just remember, love brought you here. If you trusted love this far, don't panic now."

Unable to sleep, Tish thinks about the prostitutes she has "known" throughout her life, women she always judged but never truly "looked at." Now, though, she understands what she never saw before, which is that her "judgment of these women had had very little to do with morals." Indeed, she realizes that nobody sells themselves into prostitution unless they have a very good reason. "I could not conceive of peddling myself for so low a price," she says. "But, for a higher price? for Fonny?"

The next day, Tish goes to work at the department store, feeling sick as she lets people smell the perfume on her skin. She has come to know the ins and outs of this job, understanding that white men have no problem touching her, bringing her wrist to their nostrils. Black men, on the other hand, put their own wrist out so that she can spray the perfume on their skin. After work, she walks with Ernestine along Eighth Avenue until Ernestine insists that they duck into a bar for a frank discussion about how the family is going to find Mrs. Rogers. At this point, the book provides Mrs. Rogers's written statement, clarifying that she has accused Fonny of assaulting her "in the vestibule of her home" and using her "in the most extreme and abominable sexual manner."

Once again, Sharon proves her ability to support her daughter. Rather than telling Tish that everything will turn out fine—which would be a naïve thing to say—she admits that things "sometimes" "end for worse." While this might seem rather depressing, Sharon insists that this is simply part of being alive. Indeed, she frames suffering as a natural part of life, asserting that the only thing worse than feeling pain is numbing oneself to difficult emotions. In the face of such pain, she upholds, the only thing to do is to "trust love."



It's noteworthy that Tish says she has "known" prostitutes her entire life without ever actually bothering to "look" at them. This means that she hasn't really "known" them at all, but has written them off before giving herself a chance to truly consider why, exactly, these women have chosen to sell their bodies. When she says that her "judgment" has "had very little to do with morals," she begins to accept that morality isn't always black and white—rather, a person's choices depend on a number of factors. In her own case, she begins to wonder if it would really be so immoral to become a prostitute if doing so meant she could save Fonny. In this way, her conception of morality begins to shift, as does the way she judges the people around her.



Not only does Tish have to face the ins and outs of racism because of Fonny's trial, she's also subject to subtler—but still harmful—forms of prejudice, as white men objectify her and use their inherent power (both as customers and as white people) to take liberties with how they touch her. By providing Mrs. Rogers's statement, Baldwin shows readers that Fonny and his loved ones are up against a very difficult case, since her accusation portrays him quite unfavorably.



Tish has never met Victoria Rogers, but she knows she's a Puerto Rican woman whose husband abandoned her after bringing her to New York City and having three children with her. Addressing the particulars of Fonny's case, Tish notes that Officer Bell claimed to see him running from the crime scene, though this is virtually impossible, since he later arrested him at his apartment on the other side of Manhattan—a distance much too far to run. Despite how clear it is that Fonny isn't guilty, though, Ernestine points out that it doesn't matter what the truth is. When Tish asks if she thinks Mrs. Rogers was even raped, Ernestine says she *does* believe this part of the story, saying, "I think, in fact, that she was raped and that she has absolutely no idea who did it."

Tish asks Ernestine why she thinks Mrs. Rogers identified Fonny, and Ernestine states the simple fact that Fonny was "presented to her as the rapist." Indeed, she thinks it must have been "easier" for Mrs. Rogers to simply accuse Fonny, since this would spare her from having to continue to think about the experience. "This way, it's over, for her," Ernestine says. She doesn't think they'll succeed in getting Mrs. Rogers to alter her testimony. "You've got to understand: she's not lying," she says, a statement that enrages Tish. Ernestine clarifies that Mrs. Rogers isn't telling the truth, but she adds that the woman isn't *lying*, either. "If she changes her testimony, she'll go mad," Ernestine says, suggesting that Mrs. Rogers has to believe herself in order to stay sane.

Ernestine says she has a plan. Since she knows Officer Bell killed a black boy in Brooklyn two years ago, she intends to have that boy's mother attend the trial, along with Bell's wife, who detests him. This way, Bell will have a harder time presenting himself as a credible witness. Ernestine hopes seeing these women in the courthouse will rattle him so much that he won't seem reliable. Moving on, she says Sharon has to be the one to go to Puerto Rico, since Joseph has to earn money for legal fees, Tish has to focus on her pregnancy, and Ernestine herself has to keep on top of Hayward. And though everything Ernestine has suggested seems difficult, Tish understands that she must remain strong, since things will only "get worse" from here, though the **child** in her womb reminds her that things can also get better.

The most discouraging element of Fonny's case is the fact that the actual truth doesn't seem to matter. It's obvious that Fonny wasn't anywhere near Mrs. Rogers when she was raped, since he was at home on the other side of town, a perfectly sound alibi that would no doubt clear his name if he were a white man. Unfortunately, though, the racist legal system cares more about what a white police officer has to say than what three black people (Fonny, Tish, and Daniel) claim, meaning that in this particular scenario, the truth is less important than the racial hierarchies that fuel the courts.



During this conversation, Ernestine proposes that Mrs. Rogers's accusation of Fonny has little to do with the actual truth. This aligns with the fact that the truth doesn't seem to matter much in this particular court case. Interestingly enough, though, this doesn't mean Mrs. Rogers doubts her own testimony. Indeed, Ernestine wisely suggests that Mrs. Rogers believes Fonny raped her because believing this helps her move beyond the issue altogether. In other words, she searches for a quick resolution, ultimately hoping that this will help her put the entire incident behind her.



The frank but helpful talk Ernestine has with Tish in this scene is a perfect example of how she helps her sister stay strong in these difficult times. Like Sharon, she refuses to simply tell Tish that everything will get better, instead choosing to be honest about how hard it will be to prove Fonny's innocence. At the same time, though, her tireless work to help make things better lets Tish know that she's supported, ultimately allowing her to focus on her pregnancy, which is her only true source of hope and optimism at this point.



As Tish and Ernestine have this conversation, Joseph and Frank have their own discussion in a separate bar. Talking about how bleak Fonny's situation is, Joseph insists that he and Frank need to do something. After all, their families are on the line. "I know some hustles and you know some hustles and these are our children and we got to set them free," Joseph says. With this, the two men decide to take matters into their own hands.

Like Sharon and Ernestine, Joseph and Frank are willing to do anything to help their children. However, the fact that Joseph talks about knowing "some hustles" suggests that he and Frank are going to break the law as a way of addressing Fonny's situation. Baldwin doesn't present this as something to be judged, but rather uses it as an example of the ways in which systemic racism disempowers black people and encourages people like Joseph and Frank to break the law, since this is the only option available to them. In turn, they risk getting arrested themselves, thereby perpetuating a cycle of incarceration.



Fonny's trial is repeatedly postponed, as Hayward struggles to do everything he can to keep the case from going to court before he builds a strong defense. During this period, Tish comes to see that he genuinely cares about what happens to Fonny, especially since his commitment puts him "at odds" with the many racists in the legal system, all of whom want to get the trial over with and don't care at all what happens to a young black man like Fonny. Finally, Hayward succeeds in visiting Daniel in jail, but he can't continue to see him unless he becomes his lawyer. Because Daniel has been beaten, though, he's too scared to agree to this arrangement. Worse, Hayward senses that Daniel has been "drugged" and thus isn't sure it will be safe to use him as a witness.

The way the authorities treat Daniel is yet another indication that the structures of power surrounding Tish and her loved ones are blatantly manipulative. Indeed, by scaring Daniel out of testifying to prove Fonny's innocence, the District Attorney effectively isolates the two young men, who might otherwise be able to help one another stand up to unfair accusations. In this way, readers see that fear and intimidation often disincentivize young black men from advocating for themselves.



As Fonny waits for his trial, Tish continues to work, though she knows she'll soon have to give up her job. Plus, she understands that it's important for her to visit Fonny whenever possible. Meanwhile, Joseph and Frank have started stealing from their jobs—Joseph from the waterfront, and Frank from the garment center. They then sell their stolen wares in Harlem or Brooklyn. "Each of these men would gladly go to jail, blow away a pig, or blow up a city, to save their progeny from the jaws of this democratic hell," Tish notes.

In this section, Baldwin confirms that Frank and Joseph are breaking the law in order to support Fonny and Tish through this difficult period. Readers see that Fonny's imprisonment has not only subjected him to injustice, but has actually created crime, since Joseph and Frank have seemingly no other way to make the money necessary to pay for Fonny's legal fees.



Sharon visits Hayward's office to be briefed for her trip to Puerto Rico. He tells her that Mrs. Rogers is living with her "common-law husband," a twenty-two-year-old man named Pietro who works at a nightclub. Handing her a picture of Mrs. Rogers, he asks if she can bring a picture of Fonny, so Tish gives her a photograph of the two of them. Hayward admits that Sharon's plan to go to Puerto Rico is the only thing that has made him feel optimistic about the case in a long time. However, he also says that the D.A. has been talking to Mrs. Hunt, Adrienne, and Sheila, who have been saying that "Fonny has always been incorrigible and worthless." Needless to say, this could be a very damning thing for Fonny's case.

One of the most frustrating things about Fonny's situation is the fact that his mother and sisters aren't working to help prove his innocence. In fact, they're actively working against him by portraying him as "incorrigible and worthless," two things that have absolutely nothing to do with whether or not he raped Mrs. Rogers. Unfortunately, though, the D.A. will be all too happy to use this information against Fonny, ultimately weaponizing the Hunt women's remarks and making things harder for the people who actually want to support Fonny. As a result, readers see how destructive it can be for a family to hold on to so much resentment.



Tish recalls the night her **baby** was conceived. Thinking back, she vividly remembers the day, when she and Fonny finally find a loft to rent on Canal Street. The landlord is a nice man named Levy, who is happy to give them the space because he appreciates how in love they are (later, when Fonny is in jail, he refuses to rent the loft to anybody else, saying that it'll be waiting for them when Fonny is free). Having closed the deal, Fonny and Tish walk along Sixth Avenue, eventually stopping at a small grocery store. While Tish examines the tomatoes, Fonny goes around the block to buy cigarettes. As she's shopping, she feels a hand on her behind and realizes that a white "junkie" is groping her. She tries to walk away, but he follows her, saying crude things until finally everyone turns to watch.

When Tish tries to leave, the man grabs her arm. Just then, Fonny appears and seizes the junkie, giving him a swift beating and leaving him on the ground. A police officer comes running over, but instead of handcuffing the white man, he moves toward Fonny, so Tish stands between them and answers his questions, explaining that Fonny was only protecting her from the man's harassment. "Is that so, boy?" the officer asks, and Tish says, "He's not a boy. Officer."

The officer—whose badge reads "Officer Bell"—asks Fonny if he lives in the area, and Fonny tells him his address. Bell then declares that he's taking Fonny to the police station. Thankfully, the white owner of the grocery store intervenes and verifies everything Tish has said, even slipping in a few subtle jabs at Bell, causing a number of bystanders to suppress their laughter. In the end, Bell glares at Fonny and says, "Well, be seeing you around."

As Fonny and Tish walk away, Fonny hurls the tomatoes at a wall. He then expresses his dismay that Tish spoke on his behalf. However, his anger abates, and he says, "Don't think I don't know you love me." He then decides to take her to dinner at the Spanish restaurant, and even though he doesn't have any money, Pedrocito agrees to serve them. Once they're sitting down, Fonny talks about how he's to blame for what happened, since he "wasn't thinking" because he was in such a good mood about the loft. "They got us in a trick bag, baby. It's hard, but I just want for you to bear in mind that they can make us lose each other by putting me in the shit—or, they can try to make us lose each other by making you try to protect me from it," he says.

If Beale Street Could Talk is a novel that balances beauty and ugliness, juxtaposing cruelty with snapshots of human kindness. In this section, Baldwin presents Levy's empathy as something that enables Fonny and Tish to advance in life, suggesting that even a relatively small act of kindness can make a big difference. Unfortunately, though, the beauty of this is quickly counteracted by the "junkie" and his aggressive behavior. In turn, it becomes clear that people have to find ways to focus on the goodness of humanity even when evil and malice is seemingly ever-present.



The police officer's immediate assumption that Fonny is the one who did something wrong in this moment shows how racism has made its way into the city's structures of power. Rather than addressing the actual problem, this officer creates a new one by harassing Fonny based on his race, thereby demonstrating the fact that bigotry gets in the way of actually upholding the law.



The grocer's willingness to stand up for Fonny is admirable, but it's worth noting that she actually ends up putting him in danger. She humiliates Officer Bell because this is what he deserves, but she doesn't stop to think about the possible consequences of making him feel inferior. This is because the grocer knows that she—as a white person—will be safe no matter what. She doesn't stop to think about the fact that Bell might take his anger out on Fonny, which is exactly what happens. Bell now has Fonny's address and a desire to harm him.



After their first altercation with Officer Bell, Fonny makes it clear that he has a thorough understanding of how white people in positions of power can seemingly do whatever they want to him. Tragically, all of his fears end up coming true when Bell convinces Mrs. Rogers to accuse him of raping her.



Fonny points out that Officer Bell is certainly going to be after him now, especially since the grocer humiliated him in front of a group of other white people. Later, when Fonny and Tish return to the apartment, they see a police car parked across the street, but they don't say anything, simply watching it roll away as they key open the front door. That night when they're making love, Tish tells Fonny to finish inside of her, and when he does, she feels "very proud," knowing that now they're "one."

When Tish and Fonny see Officer Bell staked outside Fonny's apartment, Baldwin infuses the narrative with a sense of anticipation, as readers know that Bell will soon arrest Fonny for allegedly raping Mrs. Rogers. Even amidst this tension, though, Fonny and Tish focus on their relationship, ultimately throwing themselves even more fervently into one another. When they become "one" after conceiving their child, they essentially use their bond to distract themselves from the terror and injustice they experienced earlier in the day.



In Puerto Rico, Sharon asks an employee at the airport to help her find a driver, and the woman fetches a young man named Jaime, who agrees to transport her wherever she needs to go. Jaime is happy to do this for her, since he's "intrigued" by her presence and seems to comprehend that she "needs him." He brings her to her hotel, where she gets dressed up to visit the nightclub where Pietro works. She then gets back into Jaime's car and gives him the address, jumping out when they arrive and asking him to wait for a while. Inside, she meets with Pietro, revealing who she is and telling him that she wants to see Victoria Rogers. Unfortunately, he refuses to believe that Fonny is innocent, and he insists that Victoria has been through too much to meet her.

Although Pietro's unwillingness to let Sharon see Victoria Rogers poses a problem for Fonny's trial, it's worth considering the issue from his perspective. After all, he is only trying to protect his loved one from hardship, which is exactly what Sharon is trying to do, too. Baldwin shows the extent to which people will go to for the people they care about, and even though it's easy to see Pietro as an antagonist in this moment, it's quite clear that he's only trying to support Victoria—an altogether admirable thing to do.



Pleading with Pietro, Sharon urges him to consider why, exactly, she would let her daughter marry Fonny if she thought he were a rapist. Still, though, he says that Victoria has "been through shit," so much that she doesn't have the emotional energy to meet Sharon. As he stands up to leave, Sharon forces him to look at the photograph of Tish and Fonny, asking him if he'll show it to Victoria. After staring at it for a moment, though, he says, "No," and walks away.

When Sharon asks Pietro to show the picture to Victoria Rogers, she tries to appeal to Mrs. Rogers's humanity. However, Pietro refuses to do this, since he's trying to protect his loved one from further emotional turbulence. And though this is unfortunate for Sharon—and Fonny—it's easy to see that Pietro only wants to support Victoria and make it easier for her to process the traumatic experience of getting raped.



Meanwhile, back in Manhattan, the **baby** becomes restless in Tish's womb, torturing her from the inside. Still, she refuses to quit her job, wanting to earn as much money as she can to help with Fonny's legal fees. Because of this, she sometimes misses the evening visiting hours at the Tombs, and though Fonny understands, Tish knows that seeing her is the only thing he has to look forward to. "If no one comes to see you, you are in very bad trouble," she thinks. "And trouble, here, means danger."

Tish's determination to keep working showcases her strong desire to do anything she can to help Fonny. Unfortunately, earning money to pay for his legal fees requires her to see him less often, since she has to skip certain visiting hours to maintain her work schedule. As such, she finds herself unable to provide him with the emotional support he needs. Readers thus see how difficult it is for her to help Fonny through his imprisonment, as she is caught between multiple responsibilities.



One morning, Joseph sits Tish down and insists that she quit her job. He understands that she's concerned about money, but he assures her that he can be the one to "worry about that." What's more, he says that if she keeps tiring herself out, she'll lose the **baby**. "You lose that baby, and Fonny won't want to live no more, and you'll be lost and then I'll be lost, everything is lost," he says. He also tells her that they all have to take care of one another, saying he'd do anything in the world for her. However, he can't give birth for her, so she has to focus on that herself. "Fonny ain't hardly much more than a boy," he adds. "And he's in trouble no boy should be in. And you all he's got, Tish. You are *all* he's got." The next day, Tish quits her job.

Now that Tish is no longer working, she visits Fonny two times every day. Fonny is overjoyed, and Tish realizes that her "presence" is much more valuable than the money she was making at the department store. Whenever Fonny sees her, he understands that she loves him. What's more, her ability to come see him every day also reminds him that "others love him, too, love him so much" that they've made it possible for her to quit her job. "He is not alone; we are not alone," Tish thinks. As the days go by, Fonny takes delight in watching Tish grow bigger and bigger, reveling in the fact that their **baby** is on its way.

In Puerto Rico, Jaime drives Sharon to Victoria Rogers's address in a *favela* (a low-income area commonly compared to "slums"). When she finally finds her, the woman denies that she is actually Mrs. Rogers, though Sharon is sure she has the right person because of the picture Hayward gave her. After a while, Mrs. Rogers tacitly admits who she is, and Sharon tells her that she's come because Fonny is an innocent man. Saying this, she hands Mrs. Rogers the photograph of Tish and Fonny, and as the woman nervously studies it, Sharon says, "The girl is my daughter. The man with her is Alonzo Hunt. Is this the man who raped you?" In response, Mrs. Rogers says, "One thing I can tell, lady—you ain't never been raped."

To convince Tish to quit her job, Joseph emphasizes how important it is that she remain healthy so she can safely bring her and Fonny's baby into the world. After all, this child is the only thing Fonny has to look forward to, the only thing keeping him from succumbing to despair. Tish sees that her father is right, eventually deciding to quit her job so that now she can not only keep herself (and the baby) in good condition, but also so she can be with Fonny more often, since she is "all he's got."



Again, readers see the impact of Tish's pregnancy on Fonny. With no other forms of hopefulness to cling to, he invests himself in her pregnancy, celebrating her growing figure because it is a sign that something—at least—is going according to plan. Unsurprisingly, seeing Tish every day helps him stay focused on this thin glimmer of hope, infusing his life with a positivity that wouldn't otherwise be available to him.



By showing Mrs. Rogers the photograph of Fonny and Tish, Sharon tries to portray Fonny as a regular man with a regular life, the type of person who is capable of loving and being loved. Unfortunately, she fails to approach the subject of Mrs. Rogers's rape with the appropriate amount of sensitivity. This is perhaps because she's so sure that Fonny didn't rape Mrs. Rogers that she doesn't even stop to think about how blunt her question is when she asks, "Is this the man who raped you?" It's also obvious that Sharon hasn't—like Ernestine—stopped to consider the fact that Mrs. Rogers isn't lying. Although she isn't necessarily telling the truth, she does believe that Fonny is the man who raped her. As such, it's no surprise that she responds poorly to Sharon's ungraceful question, which only forces her to relive the traumatic moment of her rape.



Mrs. Rogers continues to evade Sharon's questions. After a while, then, Sharon moves toward her and stands by her side. As they both look out a window at the ocean, they talk about Mrs. Rogers's rape, and Sharon insists that she knows Fonny would never do such a thing, though Mrs. Rogers remains unconvinced and sticks to her story. At one point, Sharon sees a cross hanging from Mrs. Rogers's neck, and she grips her and puts one hand over the necklace, saying, "Daughter, daughter. In the name of God." With this, Victoria Rogers lets out a terrified shriek, screaming at Sharon and telling her to leave as people flood into the room and separate the two women, ushering Sharon out of the building and back into Jaime's car.

Victoria Rogers's life is dominated by a sense of fear, one that has stayed with her ever since she was raped. Similar to Daniel's fear—which he feels after having spent time in prison—her frightened way of moving through the world will stay with her for the rest of her life. Tragically, Sharon fails to see this, and she makes a grave miscalculation by touching Mrs. Rogers, especially given that Mrs. Rogers is still dealing with the trauma of having survived an act of sexual violence. In this moment, Sharon lets her love of Fonny—and her desire to support Tish—blind her to Mrs. Rogers's vulnerability.



Tish thinks about how often she saw Officer Bell after their first encounter. On one particular night during this period, she's on her way to Fonny's and becomes tense when she sees Bell approaching her, since she's carrying a package of stolen items. "Can I carry that for you?" he asks, and she almost drops everything. "No, thanks very much," she says. At this moment, she makes eye contact with him and is chilled by what she finds. "It was seduction which contained the promise of rape," she notes. "It was rape which promised debasement and revenge: on both sides." "I ain't a bad guy," he says. "Tell your friend. You ain't got to be afraid of me." With this, they part ways, and Tish goes to the apartment, where Daniel is crying and talking about how he was raped in prison. That night, the police come for Fonny.

Tish feels a strange kind of fear when she encounters Officer Bell on the street. Although her primary reaction to his presence is one of revulsion and scorn, she identifies it as a kind of "seduction," one that encompasses elements of violence, "debasement," and "revenge" "on both sides." By casting this sensation in this way, she conveys the ugliness of such human connections (for lack of a better word). Of course, the only reason she and Bell have this dynamic in the first place is because he is a hateful and racist man who has purposefully degraded her and Fonny. As such, readers see that bigotry creates toxic and fraught relationships. Because Officer Bell has treated her so horribly, Tish is oddly drawn to the idea of "debas[ing]" him, ultimately demonstrating that hatefulness only breeds more hatefulness.



ZION

Fonny dreams that he's in his apartment working on a sculpture. "Fonny is working on the wood," Baldwin writes. When he wakes up, though, he's lying in his cell, his hair overgrown and his body unwashed. As he tries to keep his mind busy, he realizes he doesn't know what day it is, a thought that paralyzes him with fear. Looking out the window, he tries to make sense of why he's in prison, but then he tells himself he needs to simply focus on one day at a time. Restlessly, he masturbates, finding brief relief in the act even though it leaves him feeling even more "alone." That evening, Tish comes and tells him that Hayward will be visiting the next day and that he has "got a date fixed for the trial," though she still doesn't know when, exactly, it will be.

Using this brief dream sequence, Baldwin momentarily sets Fonny free, letting him leave the confines of the Tombs and live the life of a sculptor. When Fonny wakes up, though, his reality comes crashing down on him even harder, as he struggles to understand why he's in jail. Worse, even the good news Tish brings about the trial remains shrouded in uncertainty, since she still doesn't know when the court will hear his case. His anticipation only mounts, time stretching out before him and continuing to torment him without the promise of an end date.



Fonny asks Tish if she's seen Frank, and she says he's been working a lot but that he'll be coming to the Tombs with Hayward the following day. They then speak briefly about Fonny's trial, as Tish explains that Hayward hopes to "destroy" Mrs. Rogers's testimony by saying that Officer Bell purposefully made Fonny the only black man in the suspect lineup because Mrs. Rogers had already said the rapist was black. Still, none of this gives Fonny any confidence about the trial, so Tish tells him to stop thinking negatively, urging him to refrain from projecting himself into the future. In response, he apologizes for being negative but tells her that certain things are "happening inside" him, things that only get worse the longer he stays in prison. "I don't have any words for those things, and I'm scared," he says.

Sharon comes home and tells Tish about what happened in Puerto Rico, explaining that she stayed for two days after Mrs. Rogers screamed. Loyal to Sharon, Jaime kept an eye on Mrs. Rogers, eventually watching as Pietro took her away while she had a miscarriage. "She was carried to the mountains, someplace called *Barranguitas*," Sharon says. "You got to know where it is, to get there. Jaime says that she will never be seen again." This, of course, means that the prosecution has lost its "principal witness," but Tish knows that Fonny's case is still a difficult one, especially since Daniel has been taken to a prison outside the city, where Hayward is now trying hard to see him. In addition, Hayward is trying to get Fonny released on bail, though "the state" needs to approve this, and Tish knows they'll set it at an incredibly high price.

Joseph goes to Frank's house to fill him in on what happened in Puerto Rico, saying, "The trial's been postponed because the Puerto Rican chick, dig, has lost her baby and look like she's flipped her wig, too, lost her mind, man, anyway she in the hills of Puerto Rico someplace and she can't be moved [...]." Going on, he tells Frank that "the City" wants to delay the trial until Mrs. Rogers reappears and can testify, meaning Fonny will continue to languish in jail. As the two men speak in the kitchen, Adrienne and Sheila make idle conversation in the next room, their occasional laughter setting Frank and Joseph on edge. Eventually, the sisters enter and Adrienne says, "Is everything all right?" Fed up, Frank throws a glass on the floor and says, "You two dizzy off-white cunts, get the fuck out of my face, you hear?"

Officer Bell's manipulation of the suspect lineup once again illustrates the extent to which the legal system allows for bigotry, since it's quite clear that the entire process made it easy for Bell to imprison Fonny simply because of the color of his skin (and because of Bell's desire to harm him). In spite of this, Tish wants Fonny to focus not on the bleak particulars of his court case, but on the present, since this is the only way he'll manage to survive the emotional turmoil of living in prison as an innocent man—an experience that is clearly beginning to weigh on him.



It's worth recalling that Ernestine told Tish that if Mrs. Rogers changed her testimony, she would "go mad." Of course, Mrs. Rogers isn't actually changing her testimony, but it does seem that Sharon's visit has pushed her over some kind of emotional edge, so that now she has to be taken to a far-off place where "she will never be seen again." In this way, readers see that Ernestine was right when she insisted that trying to force Victoria Rogers into altering her accusation wouldn't work, since she (Victoria) has to believe in her own testimony to maintain a sense of psychological balance. Indeed, even the mere suggestion of Fonny's innocence has now caused her to suffer something of a mental breakdown. On another note, Baldwin reveals in this scene that Mrs. Rogers was pregnant. Given the timing of events, it's quite likely that the baby she ends up miscarrying would have belonged to her rapist—something that would surely also disturb her (understandably) fragile emotional health. Lastly, the fact that Daniel has been moved to a new prison is yet another indication that the legal structures of power are conspiring against Fonny by making it as hard as possible for Daniel to serve as a witness to prove his innocence.



Although Frank's outburst is obviously unfair, it's evident that he is taking his anger out on Adrienne. After all, Frank—unlike Joseph and his family members—has very little emotional support, since his wife and daughters don't seem to care about Fonny's imprisonment as much as he does. As a result, he is quick to feel hopeless. In this moment, then, this sense of desperation manifests itself as a form of anger.



Frank continues to yell at his daughters, telling them that they would be out selling themselves to pay for Fonny's legal fees if they truly cared about him. As he does this, Joseph watches Adrienne and is surprised to see that it's clear she "loves her father with a really desperate love." Indeed, Adrienne recognizes that Frank is hurting. "She would soothe it if she could, she does not know how," Tish narrates. "She would give anything to know how." After a moment, Sheila and Adrienne leave, Frank begins to cry, and Joseph understands that "Frank loves his daughters."

The next day, Tish tells Fonny that his trial has been postponed yet again, and he takes it in stride. "It is not that he gives up hope," Tish realizes, "but that he ceases clinging to it." Still, though, he promises that he'll be "home" someday soon, and the two lovers kiss through the glass divider. He has, Tish thinks, finally come to understand "why he is where he is" in a more profound sense, since he now knows that everybody in the prison has barely done anything to deserve punishment. As the days pass, he tries to stay optimistic, but he's eventually put into solitary confinement "for refusing to be raped." He also loses a tooth and nearly loses an eye. "Something hardens in him," Tish notes, "something changes forever," though he focuses on his and Tish's **baby** as a way of surviving.

Fonny's bail is finally set, but it's incredibly expensive. One day, Tish comes back from the Spanish restaurant and sits in her parents' apartment feeling "heavy" and "scared." As she looks out the window, the **baby** kicks and the phone rings, and when she answers it, she's surprised to hear Adrienne's frantic voice on the other line. Frightened, Adrienne asks if Tish has seen Frank. Apparently, his boss fired him two days ago for stealing, and when he came home he was extraordinarily drunk, yelling at his family members before leaving—nobody has seen him since.

Beneath the scorn and resentment plaguing the Hunt family, there is love. Unfortunately, though, the animosity that runs between Frank and his daughters makes it impossible for them to come to his aid, since Adrienne doesn't even know how to "soothe" his pain. As a result, they remain estranged from one another, completely unable to provide support for each other when they need it most.



It's significant that Fonny "ceases clinging to" hope around the same time that he begins to experience serious violence in jail. It seems the horrors of imprisonment are finally overtaking him, a notion that illustrates the effect that such harrowing experiences have on a person's soul. What's more, Fonny now comprehends that it doesn't matter what he's done to deserve imprisonment, since this is simply how the corrupt legal system apparently operates, taking away a person's freedom simply because of the color of his skin. Because of this bleak reality, the only thing he can continue to "cling" to is the imminent arrival of his and Tish's child.



Although Adrienne's relationship with her father is strained by the tension and resentment that exists in the Hunt family, she still cares deeply about him. Baldwin suggests that certain bonds—certain kinds of love—are capable of withstanding even the most embattled relationships, though it's still unfortunate that Adrienne hasn't found it in herself to support Frank throughout Fonny's imprisonment, which has clearly taken a terrible toll on him.



Adrienne doesn't trust Tish when she says she hasn't seen Frank, but Tish assures her that she would never lie about something like this, promising to call if she hears anything. When she hangs up, Sharon comes in and says she hasn't seen Frank, either. She then fetches Tish some brandy because her stomach is upset. As Tish sips her drink, she looks at the sky and realizes that the only thing she can do is wait. "Until my change comes," she thinks.

As Tish loses herself in her thoughts, Sharon says Ernestine has managed to drum up the necessary money for Fonny's bail. As she explains this, Joseph comes home, and as he says something to Sharon, Tish senses trouble in his voice. When Joseph finally makes his way inside, he tells Tish that Frank has been found "way, way, way up the river, in the woods, sitting in his car, with the doors locked, and the motor running." In her chair, all Tish can think about is whether or not Fonny knows, and then her mother worriedly asks her how she feels. Just as she tries to answer, though, she loses her breath. "Everything disappeared, except my mother's eyes," she narrates. "An incredible intelligence charged the air between us. Then, all I could see was Fonny. And then I screamed, and my time had come."

Tish's (and Baldwin's) use of the phrase, "Until my change comes" is worth examining, since it is a Bible quote that addresses the anticipation she feels in this moment. As Tish sits in her parents' apartment, she clearly senses that she will soon give birth. This, of course, will fundamentally "change" her life, so it makes sense that she would think about this quote, which is pulled from the Old Testament book of Job. However, the quote also aligns with the fear Tish has about what will happen to Fonny. In the book of Job, the line reads, "If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come." Considering the passage's engagement with death and waiting, it becomes clear that Tish can't help but think about the fact that Fonny might die in prison. And yet, despite this worry, all she can do is wait for "change," both in terms of her pregnancy and in terms of Fonny's freedom.



Without any kind of genuine familial support, Frank has committed suicide. With this tragic fact, Baldwin stresses the importance of love, demonstrating that a person isolated from his own family might find it insurmountably difficult to cope with life's various hardships. Tish, for her part, can only stop to consider this tragedy for a moment before she goes into labor. It's worth noting that everything dims but her "mother's eyes," which hover before her as she begins the process of giving birth. This, it seems, is an indication of how vital Sharon's role is in Tish's life. Indeed, the only thing Tish can see is her mother, who represents love, kindness, acceptance, and support. Her mother's face then yields to an image of Fonny, who is yet another loving presence in her life. In these ways, Baldwin shows readers that Tish, unlike Frank, has people to help her make it through difficult times.



“Fonny is working on the wood,” Tish narrates, depicting a scene in which Fonny toils over one of his sculptures, whistling happily as he handles the materials. Then, “from far away, but coming nearer,” comes the sound of his child crying; “the **baby** cries and cries,” yelling out “like it means to wake the dead.”

The final scene of If Beale Street Could Talk is ambiguous, as Baldwin avoids providing readers with a conclusive ending. Under one interpretation, this snapshot of Fonny working on a sculpture can be read as yet another one of his dreams. After all, the scene begins with the phrase, “Fonny is working on the wood,” which is the exact same sentence that Tish uses earlier in the novel, when she’s narrating a dream Fonny has while in prison. If this is the case, then this brief moment is simply an indication that Fonny senses the birth of his child even from the confines of jail, thereby tying him to his family and suggesting that the baby will perhaps provide him with emotional strength even if he remains a prisoner. There is, however, another (bleaker) way of reading this moment, one that hinges upon the novel’s final phrase, which asserts that the baby is crying “like it means to wake the dead.” Under this interpretation, readers might argue that Fonny has perished in prison and that Tish’s baby is now crying out for its father, whom it will never meet. Either way, neither ending indicates whether or not Fonny will ever get out of prison, thereby underlining the depressing fact that many innocent black men like Fonny continue to languish in jail without any hope of gaining their freedom.





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