BLUES-JAZZ’S PERCEPTION IN AN AMERICAN CULTURE IN
JAMES BALDWIN’S “SONNY’S BLUES”

Pahotan Sinaga
Dosen Fakultas Sastra Universitas Methodist Indonesia
e-mail: otan.7naga@yahoo.com

ABSTRAK


Kata kunci: blues-jazz, persepsi, budaya Amerika, musik kulit hitan, kulit putih.

1. INTRODUCTION

Blues embodies jazz (Ward and Burns 117). It is the grief of musicians about life, humanity, and the music itself. It is a “suffering” to achieve freedom, to solve problems, and to perform art. Blues does not simply define the story of the African American as the root and innovator of jazz; most importantly, it shows progression and improvisation of the music. James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” articulates terms in an art form that encapsulates the story of black life, the definition of blues and the related figure, jazz. In fact, all good jazz has blues in it, jazz is inseparable from blues (Marsalis 117).

The blues–jazz motif and its significance for black life and art in “Sonny’s Blues,” provide a paradigm about surviving life and music from “cultural corruption” in society. Listening and suffering, as emphasized at the end of “Sonny’s Blues,” are the only ways to receive jazz as a choice of life. They are the only way to keep jazz “fresh” and “vibrant.” Sonny, Creole, and the members of the band keep jazz fresh at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways.

The Problem

How is blues-jazz’s perceived in an American culture in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”?

The Objective

The objective of the study is to describe the perception of blues-jazz’s in an American culture in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

This Study applies reader response criticism. As a primary concern of theoretical framework, reader response criticism focuses on reader’s responses to literary texts. It is a broad, exciting, evolving domain of literary studies that can help us learn about our own reading process and how they relate to, among other things, specific elements in texts we read, our life experiences, and the intellectual community of which we are a member. (Tyson 153)
3. METHODOLOGY
In conducting the research, the researchers apply descriptive qualitative method. The study focuses on analyzing and interpreting the information (data) that has been gathered. (Berg 200).

Data, the narrations or texts related to perception of blues-jazz in an American culture in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Sonny’s long journey to be a jazz musician represents the meaning of jazz as well as blues. It is an individual expression. It is created based on the musician’s ability to improve his or her own ideas while keeping in harmony with the progression of chords of some tune. Sonny, under the depression of his brother and relatives’ rejection on his choice, learns and improves his piano’s sound, practicing over and over. The narrator’s wife, Isabel, explains: 

…wherever he had been when he was supposed to be at school, he went straight to that piano and stayed there until suppertime. And, after supper, he went back to that piano and stayed there until everybody went to bed. He was at the piano all day Saturday and all day Sunday. Then he bought a record player and started playing records. He’d play one record over and over again, all day long sometimes, and he’d improvise along with it on the piano. Or he’d play one section of the record, one chord, one change, one progression, then he’d do it on the piano. Then back to record. Then back to piano. (Baldwin 96)

Isabel’s folks, like the narrator, do not understand jazz. For them, improvisation is wasting time, a terrible noise, and a “monster.” The narrator describes Isabel’s family’s response: “Isabel finally that it wasn’t like living with sound. And the sound didn’t make any sense to any of them naturally” (96). Sonny, in response to challenges he encounters from his own tribe, has paid his dues, working very hard and suffering from people’s imagination of a life beyond black’s, a cultural recession.

Isabel’s folks perception of Sonny’s music depicts jazz history and society’s perception in the United States. Sascha Feinstein writes that jazz and blues are developing. It experiences up and down in its listener’s perception. It portrays controversy over music as what happened to Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), a group of white musicians, who establish their place in jazz history by being the first band to make a commercial jazz recording (15). Consequently, there was an assumption that jazz became celebrated madness, “a musical expression of the social tumult resulting from World War I” (16). However, while the media felt safe commercializing an all-white band, the African American musicians of the time such as King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton were practically ignored, despite their musical superiority (16). Meanwhile the narrator’s inability to understand Sonny’s choice of a musical leader, Charlie Parker, represents his alienation from the mood of postwar bebop subculture. John M. Reilly, in his essay “‘Sonny’s Blues’: James Baldwin’s image of Black Community,” asserts that the narrator’s ignorance represents a cultural gap. Sonny is attempting to make a virtue of the necessity of the isolation imposed upon him by his color; while the narrator is trying to assimilate as well as he could into the mainstream American culture (166).

Sonny persists the identity of African American among the pressure of white culture. He becomes a heroic figure setting in the black ghetto of alienated from his family and leading his audience to a heightened shared awareness of their cultural identities.

The narrator, who considers himself frees from the darkness of Harlem life by being a high school teacher, is unconsciously places himself in the border of black and white’s identity. His unawareness of his origin, and his dream to live beyond its heritage has drawn him to be a man without identification. He pursues respectability as an “accomplice” among the white standard of life. Lois H. Pratt claims:

They think it’s important to be white, and you think it’s important to be white; they think it’s a shame to be black. And you have
no corroboration around you of any other sense of life. All the corroboration around you is in terms of the white majority standards… (33).

This opinion traps the narrator in his ignorance of black culture, mainly in its music. His adherence to white standards renders his inability to understand Sonny’s preference for jazz over classical music. The narrator states, “I simply couldn’t see why on earth he’d want to spend his time hanging around night clubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people push each other around on a dance floor” (93). Certainly, the narrator is not free as he assumes. Compared to Sonny, he is enslaved by the standard life he creates. To contrast the narrator’s “entrapment,” Sonny believes in his personal choice. Let’s examine the following dialogues:

“Well, Sonny,” I said, gently, “you know people can’t always do exactly what they want to do – “No, I don’t know that,” said Sonny, surprising me. “I think people ought to do what they want do, what else are they alive for” (94)

Sonny’s freedom underscores human rights of personal choice that the narrator does not believe in. Pratt observes that Sonny’s brother is surrounded by the trappings of middle class success (32). He has escaped from the darkness of Harlem streets, obtained a good education and a high school teaching job, and embraced middle class traditions.

To understand jazz, the narrator has to pay a lot of effort. It is a long journey for him to get into Sonny’s blues, to make Jazz his culture, to be in his heritage, and freedom to pursue his choice. Jazz, as he admits at the beginning of the story as the music for good time people, makes life better, more relax, more human, and more real. He starts from an understanding of Sonny’s struggle to stay away from drugs and heroine. Despite trying hard to get rid of drugs influence from his life and music, Sonny admits that it can come again. The narrator answers, “So it can come again. All right.” (102).

Although it is fully immersed, the narrator encounters sound as music when he listens to the “sisters,” voicing “This the old ship of Zion…” (98). Music, the narrator implies, functions as a locking emotion for the “sister.” He describes:

As the singing filled the air, the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last. (99)

The narrator’s perception of jazz really begins when he comes to Sonny’s performance. As he enters the jazz club, he becomes special because everybody greets him warmly and familiarly. When Sonny starts playing, he thinks about music seriously. He assumes that many people including him do not really to hear music unless they make it personal. He says:

But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. As his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours. (104)

He starts searching for Sonny’s personal life, his “suffering,” and his “loss,” yet he knows he has not heard everything. He is in the moment of looking for the most important part of the music when people give applause. When he listened to Sonny’s “Am I blue,” he becomes able to enter his past, his parent’s life, his daughter Gracie, his society, his tears, and Sonny’s. This is the part of the blues’ purpose: to blend the personal and social, past and present, to produce a statement of “the glorious capacity of human beings to take the worst and give it a form of their own choosing” (Reilly).

5. CONCLUSION

The narrator’s account of Sonny’s treatment of the blues coincides beautifully with this definition of jazz as freedom of expression with
groove. Sonny’s blues can help everyone who listens to be free, and the integrity of the expression comes from “paying your dues”. Undoubtedly, blues in Sonny’s Blues” functions as an art of communication. It helps the fraternal reconciliation between Sonny and the narrator, helps the narrator to perceive jazz and his heritage, releases Sonny from the oppression of social issues of race and drug influence, and maintains the spontaneity of “a new tune” with perhaps only a hint of the original remaining its struggle to exist among the mainstream white culture, society’s perception of it as a standard music.

To end, blues does not mean to stay in the grief of life, but to face it bravely and optimistically.

REFERENCES