

Humanitarian solidarity in the lyrics “We are the world” by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie: A sociology of literature study

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Article History: Accepted: 1 July 2026; Revised: 15 August 2026; Approved: 2 October 2026

Abstract: This study aims to analyze the representation of humanitarian social reality in the song lyrics *We are the World* by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie through the sociology of literature approach. The study focuses on how the song reflects humanitarian values, solidarity, and social responsibility through its lyrics. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method using the sociology of literature, particularly the sociology of the work, as the analytical framework. Data were collected through documentation and library research and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal four major representations of humanitarian social reality in the song: collective solidarity, concern for social suffering, a call for collective action, and the social function of the song as a medium of public awareness. These findings indicate that the song not only reflects social reality but also encourages empathy and humanitarian concern among listeners. In conclusion, WAW functions as a popular literary work that possesses aesthetic, social, and educational value while promoting humanitarian awareness and collective responsibility.

Keywords: Sociology of literature; song lyrics; We are the world; social solidarity; humanity

Introduction

One form of literature that is closely related to modern society is song lyrics. Although song lyrics are presented together with music, they can be studied as literary texts because they contain diction, imagery, symbols, emotions, and messages that convey particular meanings (Barradas & Sakka, 2022). Similar to poetry, song lyrics use language creatively to express human experiences and social realities (Aminuddin, 2014). Therefore, songs are not only products of entertainment but also literary works that can be analyzed through literary approaches (Wellek, 1949).

Literature is often understood as a social institution because it reflects and responds to the conditions of society through language (Wellek, 1949). Through literary works, readers can understand social issues, humanitarian problems, hopes, and collective values from a different perspective (Aminuddin, 1987). This function is also found in song lyrics, which can communicate social messages while remaining accessible to a broad audience. As a result, song lyrics provide an important medium for examining the relationship between literature and society.

The literary work selected in this study is the song *We are the World* (WAW), written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and recorded by USA for Africa in 1985. The song was created as a response to the hunger crisis in Africa and was intended to encourage global humanitarian support (USA for Africa, 2026). Beyond its musical success, the song became an international symbol of concern, solidarity, and collective responsibility. Its popularity demonstrates how a literary and cultural product can contribute to raising public awareness of humanitarian issues.

Textually, WAW emphasizes the values of unity, empathy, and humanitarian solidarity (Crooke et al., 2024). Expressions such as we, world, and children construct a collective identity that transcends differences in nationality, race, and social background. The lyrics suggest that human suffering should be viewed as a shared responsibility rather than an individual problem (Ratna, 2003). These characteristics make the song relevant for literary analysis because they show the close relationship between textual meaning and social reality (Damono, 1978).

This study applies the sociology of literature approach, which examines the reciprocal relationship between literary works and society (Laurenson, 1972). Specifically, the research focuses on the sociology

of the work because the analysis is directed toward the representation of social reality within the song lyrics themselves. This approach views literature as a social product influenced by historical conditions, collective experiences, and social values (Damono, 1978). Through this perspective, literary texts can be understood not only as aesthetic creations but also as reflections of social phenomena and humanitarian concerns (Faruk H. T., 2012).

Previous studies have discussed song lyrics as literary texts and as representations of social values; however, studies focusing on humanitarian solidarity in WAW through the sociology of literature approach remain limited. Therefore, this research aims to analyze how the song represents humanitarian social reality and constructs the value of solidarity through its lyrics. The research question addressed in this study is: How does the song WAW represent humanitarian social reality through the sociology of literature approach? The findings are expected to contribute to the study of popular literature, particularly song lyrics, as scholarly objects for understanding contemporary social issues. In addition, the song is relevant to SDGs 1 No Poverty because its humanitarian message promotes awareness of poverty, hunger, and global social responsibility (United Nations, 2015).

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to analyze the representation of humanitarian solidarity in the song WAW. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting meanings, values, symbols, and social messages contained in the song lyrics rather than on numerical data (Creswell, 2018). The study applies the sociology of literature approach, particularly the sociology of the work, which examines how social reality is represented within literary texts (Damono, 1978). Through this approach, the song lyrics are analyzed as a literary text that reflects humanitarian concerns, solidarity, and social responsibility.

The primary data source of this study is the official lyrics of WAW, written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie. The data consist of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and lyric excerpts that represent humanitarian values and social solidarity. Secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles, and scholarly references related to sociology of literature, literary studies, and qualitative research methodology. These sources are used to support the interpretation of the lyrics and to provide a broader understanding of the social context reflected in the song.

Data were collected through documentation and library research techniques. Documentation was conducted by collecting, reading, and identifying lyric excerpts relevant to the research focus, while library research involved reviewing theoretical and methodological references related to the study. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, 2014). The findings were then interpreted through the perspective of the sociology of literature to reveal how humanitarian social reality and solidarity are represented in the song lyrics.

Findings and discussion

Based on the research problem in the introduction section, this study focuses on how the song WAW represents humanitarian social reality through the sociology of literature approach. After an in-depth reading of the song lyrics, it was found that this text not only contains universal moral messages, but also reflects particular social situations, namely humanitarian crises, global inequality, and the need for cross-border solidarity. From the perspective of the sociology of literature, this song demonstrates a close relationship among the work, the author, and its readers or listeners.

The results of the study show that the social representation in the song WAW can be grouped into several main themes, namely: (1) collective solidarity as a universal humanitarian value, (2) concern for social suffering, (3) a call for collective action, and (4) the social function of the song as a medium of public

awareness. These four themes do not stand alone, but are interrelated and form one complete unity of social meaning. Thus, this song can be understood not merely as a work of entertainment, but as a cultural text that has social force.

To make the flow of findings easier to understand, the research findings are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Summary of findings

No.	Research Theme	Indicators in the Lyrics	Social Meaning
1.	Collective solidarity	Use of the words we, world, together	Constructing a shared identity as fellow human beings
2.	Humanitarian concern	Expressions about life, choice, and salvation	Showing concern for social suffering
3.	Call for collective action	Calls to give, help, and make change	Literature functions as a driver of social action
4.	The social function of the work	The lyrics are persuasive and emotional	The song becomes a medium of moral education and public awareness

Collective solidarity as a universal humanitarian value

The first and most prominent theme in the song WAW is collective solidarity. This can be seen from the repeated use of the pronoun we. Textually, the use of this word constructs a collective identity, as if all human beings occupied the same moral position. Phrases such as WAW, we are the children affirm that human beings are not separated by geographical boundaries, but are united by humanitarian responsibility.

In the study of the sociology of literature, the use of language in this way shows that a work does not stand neutrally, but forms a particular social awareness. This song presents the world as a space of togetherness, not a space of competition. Thus, the solidarity built in the lyrics is not a narrow solidarity, but a universal solidarity. This work shifts the listeners' attention from individual interests to collective interests.

Following the findings, it can be said that this song positions human beings as social subjects who are mutually bound. The identity of "we" becomes the core message of the song. Through this construction, the suffering experienced by some people is no longer regarded as their problem alone, but as the problem of all people. From this, it is evident that the song functions as a tool for shaping social empathy.

Concern for social suffering

The second theme is concern for social suffering. The song lyrics contain expressions that affirm that there are lives under threat and in need of help. This kind of nuance shows that the song text is built from an awareness of humanitarian crisis. In the social context, this song was born as a response to the hunger and misery occurring in Africa, so its humanitarian message is not abstract, but grounded in concrete reality.

The reading results show that social suffering in this song is not explained statistically or descriptively as in a social report, but rather through emotional language. This is where the power of literature lies. The lyrics do not present numbers, but move the listeners' hearts through simple, persuasive, and touching diction. In this way, social reality is translated into an inner experience that is easier to understand and feel.

This finding shows that literature has a distinctive ability to present social suffering in a humane way. If informative media rely on facts, literature adds an affective dimension. The song WAW successfully makes issues of poverty, hunger, and humanity something close to the listeners' awareness. In other words, this work not only reflects social reality, but also transforms it into a form of collective emotional experience.

A call for collective action

The third theme is a call for collective action. The song lyrics do not stop at expressions of sympathy, but continue the message toward real action. This is visible in the moral appeal that human beings must choose to help, care, and make change. Thus, this song is not only reflective, but also performative, namely encouraging readers or listeners to do something.

This finding is important because it shows that literature can have a practical dimension. In many literary works, social criticism stops at the depiction of problems. However, in WAW, social problems are accompanied by an ethical call to respond. This work builds the logic that humanitarian awareness must be realized in action. Therefore, this song can be understood as a form of literature that not only voices values, but also directs social attitudes.

From the perspective of the sociology of literature, this appeal shows that the text functions in a real social space. Literary works become part of a social mechanism for building opinion, instilling values, and mobilizing concern. This song is not merely read or heard, but also invites collective action. It is here that the social function of the work appears clearly.

The social function of the song as a medium of public awareness

The fourth theme is the social function of the song as a medium of public awareness. Based on the analysis, this song not only represents the voice of the author, but also becomes the collective voice of global society that calls for concern for others. As a text of popular culture, WAW has a wide reach so that its social message is more quickly received by societies across countries.

The research findings show that song lyrics function as a medium of moral education. Listeners are directed to internalize humanitarian values, such as empathy, responsibility, brotherhood, and sacrifice. Within this framework, the song is not merely an aesthetic work, but also a means of shaping social attitudes. The moral message conveyed becomes easy to remember because it is packaged in a musical form that is emotional and communicative.

In addition, the social function of the song is also evident in its ability to bridge the world of art with the world of humanitarian action. This song proves that literary works can take an active position in social reality. In other words, literature not only interprets the world, but under certain conditions also helps drive changes in the way society views the world.

Comparative analysis

Through the comparison technique, the findings of this study can be compared with the concept of the sociology of literature, which emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between literary works and society. Damono explains that literature presents social aspects. while Laurenson and Swingewood view literature as a mirror of the age. The findings of this study are in line with that view because WAW clearly represents social reality in the form of humanitarian crisis, then processes it into a text filled with the value of solidarity. Thus, there is a similarity between theory and research findings, both affirming that literary works are social products.

When compared with literary works that only emphasize personal expression, WAW has a much stronger social orientation. Many popular song lyrics focus on themes of love, loss, or individual experience, whereas this song moves toward collective issues. This difference shows that not all works of popular literature have the same social intensity. In this case, WAW stands out because it makes social suffering the core message, not merely an emotional background.

Comparatively, the findings of this study also show that this song is closer to humanistic literature than to individualistic literature. The similarity lies in the use of simple and emotional language, but the difference lies in the orientation of meaning. This song does not merely express feelings, but organizes those feelings

into a collective drive. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in affirming that popular song lyrics can be read as sociological texts that combine aesthetic, ethical, and social functions at once.

Cause and effect analysis

Through the cause-and-effect technique, the research findings can be explained by looking at the relationship between the social background of the song's emergence and the impact of meaning formed in the text. The main cause of the birth of WAW was a humanitarian crisis that demanded a global response. Situations of hunger, poverty, and social suffering became the trigger for the creation of the work. Because its social background was so strong, the song lyrics were shaped with language emphasizing togetherness, hope, and moral responsibility.

The effect of that background was the emergence of a text with strong social persuasive power. Listeners receive the song not only as entertainment, but also as an ethical call. In this case, the social condition becomes the cause, while the message of solidarity in the song becomes the aesthetic as well as moral effect of that condition. Furthermore, the next effect is seen in the social function of the song, namely shaping empathy, increasing public awareness, and encouraging humanitarian action.

Another cause-and-effect relationship can be seen in the use of collective language. Because the problem faced is global, the lyrics choose the perspective of "we" rather than "I." This choice produces the social effect of a sense of togetherness. Thus, the structure of language in the song cannot be separated from its social purpose. The form of the text was chosen because it matched the effect intended to be created, namely shared concern.

In my view as a researcher, this is precisely where the main strength of WAW lies. This song shows that popular literature can work effectively when the social cause that gives birth to it is strong and when its aesthetic form is arranged clearly to produce a real social effect. In other words, this work successfully connects context, text, and impact as a whole.

Implications

Theoretically, this study affirms that the sociology of literature approach remains relevant for analyzing song lyrics as literary works. Songs can be read not only from their aesthetic elements, but also from their social functions, the context of their emergence, and their impact on society. Thus, this study supports the view that popular literature has an important position in contemporary literary studies.

Practically, the results of this study can be utilized in the teaching of literature, language, and character education. The song WAW can be used as teaching material to instill the values of empathy, solidarity, and social responsibility in university students. In addition, this study also shows that works of art can be an effective medium for connecting the learning of literature with global issues such as poverty, humanity, and international cooperation.

In my opinion as a researcher, the most important implication of these findings is that literature should not only be taught as a beautiful text, but also as a text that lives within society. When students understand that songs, poems, or novels can speak about human suffering and encourage social concern, the learning of literature becomes more meaningful. In this context, WAW is a strong example that literature can become a bridge between aesthetic appreciation and humanitarian responsibility.

Conclusion

The findings show that "WAW" strongly represents humanitarian social reality through the sociology of literature approach, demonstrating that song lyrics function not only as aesthetic expression but also as a medium for conveying social, moral, and humanitarian values. The song reflects the social conditions surrounding its creation through four main themes: collective solidarity, concern for social suffering, a call for collective action, and the use of music as a means of raising public awareness. Its inclusive and

persuasive language, particularly the repeated use of words such as we and world, encourages listeners to view humanitarian problems as a shared responsibility. By connecting social reality, artistic form, and social impact, the song fosters empathy, strengthens humanitarian concern, and promotes collective responsibility toward global issues such as poverty and international cooperation. These findings also confirm the relevance of the sociology of literature approach for examining song lyrics as meaningful literary texts and suggest that “WAW” can be used in literature education to integrate aesthetic appreciation, character development, and humanitarian values. Future studies may examine other humanitarian songs, compare works from different cultural contexts, or investigate audience responses to better understand their influence on social awareness and action.

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