

# ***A PORTRAIT OF DEVELOPMENT IN W.S. RENDRA'S POEM BLUES FOR BONNIE***

***(Potret Perkembangan dalam Puisi Blues for Bonnie Karya W.S. Rendra)***

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**Abstract:** *This research aimed to analyze the interrelation between literature, education, and social movements through a case study of the poem Portrait of Development in the Poem: Blues for Bonnie by WS Rendra. The research method used in this study was descriptive qualitative analysis with a sociological literary criticism approach. Data were obtained through close reading, data classification, analysis of the socio-historical context, interpretation of meaning, and synthesis of findings from the poem's text, as well as the expansion of its social-political context during the time of its creation. The findings indicate that WS Rendra's poem functions not only as an aesthetic expression but also as an educational medium that raises public awareness of issues related to development and injustice. By portraying critical social conditions, the poem stimulates reflection and encourages social movements for change. This critique is conveyed through diction, imagery, figurative language, and stylistic choices that illustrate social inequality and dehumanization resulting from development. The conclusion of this research is that literature, particularly poetry, holds great potential as a transformative tool that connects education and the awakening of social consciousness, which in turn can contribute to broader social change.*

**Keywords:** *Education; Literature; Social Movement; Sociological Criticism, WS Rendra*

## ***A. INTRODUCTION***

The poem *Blues for Bonnie* by W.S. Rendra represents development through the use of straightforward and harsh diction, such as the words “*buildings*,” “*highways*,” and “*machines*,” which depict physical progress. However, behind these choices of words lies visual imagery of a city filled with dust, traffic jams, and alienated people, reflecting the darker side of development. Rendra used irony and strong satire to criticize development that prioritizes material aspects while neglecting humanity, as seen in his portrayal of the suffering of the poor. According to (Nurhadi, 2017), the social criticism found in Rendra's poetry collection *Portrait of Development in Poetry* is a form of protest against government policies that are unjust toward the marginalized. From the perspective of style, Rendra uses repetition and parallelism to emphasize the contrast between the “*grandeur of buildings*” and the “*collapse of human dignity*.” In this poem, development is not viewed as complete progress but rather as a distorted representation: physical modernity standing against social decline (Kadir, 2018).

The poem *Blues for Bonnie* by W.S. Rendra conveys criticism of development that is deeply embedded with social values. First, there is the value of social justice when development benefits only the elite while the poor remain impoverished and marginalized. Second, the value of humanity, namely the concern for human dignity that is lost under oppressive modernization; Rendra rejects a form of development that disregards the suffering of the people. Third, the value of social solidarity, expressed through the call not to allow the gap between “*luxurious buildings*” and “*the huts of the poor*” (Kamagi, 2015). This critique also contains an ideological message of resistance against capitalism and the centralized development of the New Order era, which emphasized economic growth while neglecting collective welfare. Thus, the poem asserts that true development should be humanist, just, and aligned with the needs of the common people (Desti & Purwanto, 2025).

The poem *Blues for Bonnie* by W.S. Rendra reflects the socio-political context of development during the New Order era through its depiction of the imbalance between physical progress and the people’s suffering. The diction of “*towering buildings*” and “*highways*” reflects the large-scale development projects promoted by the government to showcase modernity. However, the imagery of “*traffic congestion*,” “*city dust*,” and “*emptiness of life*” illustrates the social impacts of alienation, inequality, and the marginalization of the poor. This aligns with the New Order’s growth-oriented development policies, which often ignored the equitable distribution of welfare. Through irony and satire, Rendra exposes the contradictions: the grandeur of development built upon the people’s suffering. In this way, the poem functions not only as an aesthetic expression but also as an ideological critique of the political-economic hegemony of the New Order, which prioritized stability and modernization while silencing critical voices.

Literature is an aesthetic medium with transformative power, not only within the realm of linguistic beauty but also in raising social awareness and contributing to education. Poetry, as one form of literature, reflects socio-political realities and voices criticism against injustices in society. One Indonesian poet who consistently used his works as a vehicle for social critique is W.S. Rendra.

The poem *Blues for Bonnie*, included in the collection *Portrait of Development in Poetry*, portrays the imbalanced state of development during the New Order era, particularly the kind of progress that failed to side with the common people. Through his poetry, Rendra highlighted social problems, injustice, and inequality that plagued Indonesia at the time. Therefore, poetry functions not only as an aesthetic form but also as a medium of critical education and a driver of social consciousness (Ayuningrum, 2021). This paper aimed to analyze the interrelation between literature, education, and social movements through Rendra’s poem, using a sociological literary criticism approach.

## **B. METHOD**

This research used a descriptive qualitative method with a sociological literary criticism approach. The primary data consisted of the poem *Blues for Bonnie* by W.S. Rendra. The analysis was carried out through close reading and text interpretation, which was then expanded into the socio-political context of Indonesia during the creation of the poem, namely the New Order development era. According to the purpose of literary research was to obtain a complete, holistic, and comprehensive understanding of the reciprocal relationship among the author, the literary work, and society. (Endraswara, 2011) further explained that the sociology of literature is a reflective branch of literary research. He argued that a successful literary work is one that is able to reflect the era in which it was created. The data analysis techniques were carried out in the following steps:

### **1. Textual Reading (Close Reading)**

There are three stages in textual reading:

- a. Reading the poem repeatedly to capture both denotative and connotative meanings;
- b. Identifying intrinsic elements such as diction, imagery, figures of speech, style, and structure; and
- c. Noting significant stanzas that contain social criticism.

### **2. Data Classification**

There are five categories of data classification:

- a. Grouping data from the poem's text into categories, such as;
- b. Diction of social criticism (word choices that allude to development, the people, or power);
- c. Social imagery (visualizations of community life, poverty, injustice);
- d. Figures of speech in criticism (irony, sarcasm, satire); and
- e. Language style reflecting protest or resistance.

### **3. Socio-Historical Contextual Analysis**

This consist of three steps:

- a. Relating the text to the socio-political realities of Indonesia during the New Order;
- b. Analyzing how the poem represents the impacts of development (modernization, urbanization, marginalization of the poor); and
- c. Examining the poet's ideology regarding the position of the people and authority.

#### 4. Interpretation of Meaning

There are three stages of interpretation:

- a. Interpreting the social meanings contained in the poem;
- b. Explaining the social messages that emerge, such as criticism of social inequality, developmental disparity, and dehumanization;
- c. Demonstrating relevance to the theories of sociological literary criticism (Goldmann, Swingewood, or Damono), which argue that literary works are reflections of social reality.

#### 5. Synthesis of Findings

The final step in this method is synthesizing the findings, which consists of three stages:

- a. Formulating the analysis results in descriptive qualitative narrative form;
- b. Illustrating how the poem serves as a medium of social criticism; and
- c. Concluding the role of *Blues for Bonnie* as a representation of the tension between development and the fate of the common people.

### ***C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION***

The poem *Blues for Bonnie* by W.S. Rendra represented the close interconnection between literature, education, and social movements. Through depictions of marginalized lives, Rendra criticizes social injustice, segregation, and the failure of development to bring prosperity to all layers of society. This study used a sociological literary criticism approach, supported by the theories of Lucien Goldmann, Terry Eagleton, and Sapardi Djoko Damono, to interpret the text within its socio-historical context.

The analysis of *Blues for Bonnie* by W.S. Rendra reveals that the poem is imbued with social criticism against development practices in Indonesia during the New Order era. Such criticism is conveyed through diction, imagery, figurative language, and stylistic features that highlight social inequality and dehumanization as the consequences of development. This analysis applies a descriptive qualitative method and a sociological literary criticism approach, emphasizing the close relationship between literary works and socio-historical realities.

#### **The Poem *Blues for Bonnie***

Viewed from its inner structure, the poem has a theme of social criticism; the poet expresses anger, indignation, and distrust toward the prevailing situation. The tone is cynical, and the message conveyed is that readers must maintain their spirit for the nation's progress. From its physical structure, the poem draws heavily from regional vocabulary with visual, tactile, and auditory imagery. The figures of speech employed include personification and metaphor, with typography in the form of free verse. *Blues for Bonnie* is a narrative poem recounting the poet's experiences while in New York. In

this poem, the poet frequently uses satirical styles to capture ironic moments, portraying a cultural contradiction and social disparity symbolized by heaven and hell. The findings and discussion of *Blues for Bonnie* are presented stanza by stanza, analyzed from the perspectives of literature, education, and social movements, as follows:

### **Stanza 1**

*Boston city shabby and withered  
because of strong winds, foul air,  
and the cursed late night*

From the literary perspective, stanza 1 presents imagery of a gloomy city, using the diction “*lusuh dan layu*” to describe decadence. From an educational perspective, this stanza invites reflection on urbanization and environmental degradation. (Saputra et al., 2024) found that urbanization in Indonesia, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Jakarta, has had a significant impact on environmental quality. Rapid urbanization has led to land conversion, the reduction of green spaces, increased greenhouse gas emissions, and declining water quality. Socially, stanza 1 marks the structural condition of urban society characterized by alienation. (Lestari, 2024) shows that in urban communities marked by cultural diversity, varying levels of education, and high social mobility, social structure becomes a key factor in determining law compliance.

### **Stanza 2**

*Georgia. Distant Georgia.  
There, the shacks of the Negroes  
Leaking roofs.  
Earthworms and pellagra*

The repetition of “*Georgia*” functions as a refrain emphasizing nostalgia and suffering. Goldmann views this as an expression of the collective consciousness of the oppressed. From an educational point of view, this stanza can teach the history of racial discrimination. (Anggraini, 2024) argues that civic education plays a vital role in preventing racism in Indonesia, one of which is through instilling tolerance toward differences in ethnicity, race, and religion as a foundation for achieving national integration.

### **Stanza 3**

*With eyes closed  
the Negro rebukes silence.  
And silence answers  
with a sharp kick  
straight to his stomach*

The metaphor of “sepi” that kicks reflects social alienation. From Eagleton’s perspective, this is a symbol of structural repression. Educationally, stanza 3 teaches how art can express inner human suffering. (Putri & Prihwanto, 2024) found that visual arts are activities of processing inner feelings into two- or three-dimensional works. Such artistic activity has a spiritual dimension as a medium for self-dialogue and the cultivation of sensitivity (qalb). The spiritual dimension of visual arts can serve as an alternative for developing human spirituality, encouraging individuals to refine their sense of empathy and awareness.

#### **Stanza 4**

*So in panic  
he behaves like a gorilla.  
An old, hunchbacked gorilla  
roaring and raging*

The depiction of a character as an “*gorilla tua*” symbolizes dehumanization. According to Damono, literature portrays reality through artistic transformation; here, humans are depicted as if they were animals. From an educational perspective, stanza 4 teaches criticism of stereotypes and discrimination. (Tue, 2024) shows that gender equality is a key pillar of a just society. Education has a strategic role in reducing gender stereotypes, changing discriminatory mindsets, and increasing participation of both women and men in all sectors of life.

#### **Stanza 5**

*The Negro looks up.  
His neck taut.  
His eyes dry and red  
staring at heaven*

The symbolism of spirituality appears here. However, heaven offers no hope; instead, it “*melemparkan sebuah jala*”—a metaphor for the social system that ensnares. Socially, this indicates criticism of religious promises that lull the oppressed. (Hipolitus K.K, 2017) notes that multiculturalism and pluralism are both reminders of diversity in collective life, though pluralism is more directly tied to religious diversity. Religious pluralism, in this context, can shape how faith intersects with human suffering.

#### **T Stanza 6**

*Like a black fish  
he flounders in the net.  
Tumbling  
and in vain*

he metaphor of the “*ikan hitam*” reinforces racial symbolism and structural entrapment. From an educational perspective, this stanza conveys critical awareness of social limitations. (Khoiri et al., 2025) explains that a critical pedagogy approach in education can foster students’ critical awareness of social constraints by encouraging them to analyze injustice, power structures, and political dynamics in their environment.

### **Stanza 7**

*The Negro stomps his feet  
Singing curses and oaths.  
His white teeth glistening  
grinning in vengeance*

Stanza 7 is full of resistance energy. From the perspective of social movements, it illustrates protest through art. (Isvara & Ismoyo, 2025) demonstrates that the *Taring Padi* collective has successfully used visual arts such as murals, posters, and banners as effective media to voice social, political, and environmental issues. Education can draw lessons on the importance of expressive resistance to injustice.

### **Stanza 8**

*He feels  
the first rheumatism  
attack his knees*

Biological factors (old age) are depicted as adding to suffering. In Goldmann’s view, this represents the collective fatigue of the oppressed. From an educational standpoint, this stanza can prompt discussion on human limitations and the importance of solidarity. Findings from a social service activity by OSIS at SMAN 5 Cimahi show that such initiatives can successfully foster solidarity among students, as demonstrated by the presence of solidarity values throughout the program.

### **Stanza 9**

*Like a cracked jar  
in a junk shop*

The metaphor of a cracked jar portrays the frailty of an aging body. Literarily, this is a form of tragic symbolism. Socially, stanza 9 reflects how society often perceives the poor and elderly as “*barang bekas*’.” (Ummah, 2024) explains that poverty is a complex issue caused by unequal access to education, health crises, economic inequality, and climate change. Sustainable, long-term solutions are necessary, including local economic empowerment, improved education and health, and inclusive policies that engage communities in decision-making.

### **Stanza 10**

*His wife still there  
faithful but sorrowful.  
Negro children playing in the ditches  
unwilling to attend school*

This stanza highlights the family of the oppressed. Children are uncomfortable at school because the system does not serve them. From an educational perspective, this is a direct critique of unequal access to education. Ardianti et al., (2025) found that educational inequality in Indonesia is a complex issue influenced by disparities in infrastructure, family economic conditions, low public awareness of education's importance, and uneven distribution and quality of teachers. Despite government policies, implementation remains ineffective. Therefore, consistent policies based on local needs and strong transparency are necessary to ensure fair and quality education for all, especially in remote areas.

### **Stanza 11**

*Grief and the world  
are both aged.  
Heaven and hell  
both are worn out.  
And Georgia? O Lord...  
Georgia still haunts him*

Stanza 11 concludes by emphasizing that despite attempts to escape, social wounds (Georgia) remain haunting. From Eagleton's framework, the poem asserts that the suffering of the oppressed cannot be separated from systemic structures. Desti & Purwanto, (2025) shows that the character *Aeng* not only represents the social condition of Indonesian society but also conveys sharp criticism of inequality, injustice, cultural domination, and the psychological pressures experienced by marginalized individuals.

## **D. CONCLUSION**

By analyzing the poem stanza by stanza, it becomes clear that it integrates three dimensions: literature (aesthetics and symbolism), education (critical awareness and social empathy), and social movements (resistance to injustice). Therefore, the impacts of these three aspects can be outlined as follows. First, the poem highlights the transformation of the living spaces of ordinary people as industrialization pushes farmland and villages to the margins. Second, it illustrates the impact of development on the quality of life, particularly for children, through imagery of the loss of play spaces and the presence of noisy, dusty environments. Third, it reveals the contradiction between the government's discourse of prosperity and the reality of poverty among the common people, conveyed through irony. Fourth, the poem underscores the exploitation of workers

and economic injustice with metaphors that vividly depict wages that fall short of meeting basic needs.

Thus, *Blues for Bonnie* is not only valuable as an aesthetic literary work but also functions as a social document and a medium of criticism. Through this poem, Rendra successfully articulated the protest voice of the marginalized against unequal development, while also affirming the role of literature as a mirror of social reality and a vehicle of ideological resistance.

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