

## ***THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL***

**= OSCAR WILDE =**

### **Introduction**

**Oscar Wilde** (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish poet and playwright. After writing in different forms throughout the 1880s, he became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. He is best remembered for his epigrams and plays, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the circumstances of his criminal conviction for "gross indecency", imprisonment, and early death at age 46.

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was among the last written works of Oscar Wilde and is his most popular poem. The poem was written after two years after Oscar Wilde was released from prison and the poem focuses on the execution of one of the prison inmate who was in the same prison as Oscar Wilde.

Oscar Wilde was jailed from 1895 to 1897 because of his indecent relationship with the son of an influential man and the time spend in prison affected his life greatly.

After Oscar Wilde was released in 1897, he soon fled to Paris where he assumed a new name and started writing the poem almost immediately. The poem was revised a couple of times and enlarged before it was published in October.

After his time spent in prison, Oscar Wilde never returned to England again. He died in Paris in 1900, lonely and the shell of the man he once was, but still appreciated his writing.

### **About the Poem**

“The Ballad of Reading Gaol” is a poetic description of Oscar Wilde’s experiences in prison, specifically witnessing the sentence and execution of a fellow inmate at Reading Gaol.

The ballad consists of 109 stanzas and is divided into 6 untitled parts. The 109 stanzas are of 6 lines, of 8-6-8-6-8-6 syllables, and rhyming a-b-c-b-d-b. Some stanzas incorporate rhymes. A version with only 63 of the stanzas, divided into 4 sections of 15, 7, 22 and 19 stanzas, and allegedly based on the original draft, was later included in the posthumous editions of Wilde's poetry edited by Robert Ross

The poem starts by focusing only on one man, a person convicted for murdering his wife and sentenced to death and then slowly starts to describe the living conditions of the prisoners. The contrast between the free people who live outside the prison and the inmates is highlighted by Oscar Wilde in his poem.

The first part of the poem consists of several verses describing the prisoner: his appearance, emotions, and situation. Within this part of the poem, Wilde also compares the condemned inmate’s situation to the situations faced by other men, saying repeatedly that “each man kills the thing he loves” as the inmate killed the woman he loved.

The second part of the poem describes the condemned inmate’s emotional reactions to his approaching death. Although the other prisoners expect him to be depressed and self-pitying, they are surprised to find that he is not upset and seems to be trying to enjoy his time left.

The third part describes the inmate’s continuing indifference, and even contentedness, in the days leading up to his execution. Wilde describes seeing an open grave that had been dug for the man’s corpse. He discusses how although he and the other inmates could not sleep the night before the execution, the man who was to die slept soundly throughout the night. Wilde and the other prisoners anxiously await the morning, and when

morning comes, they anxiously await the execution. Finally, the execution is performed, and Wilde describes the man's strangled cry as he is hanged.

In the fourth part, the prisoners are let out from their cells and walk, saddened and fearful, to the man's grave. The man's corpse is mocked and disrespected by prison officials, but at last he is cremated and buried, and Wilde says that he is "at peace, or will be soon."

The fifth part of the poem is a reflection on the darkness, discomfort, and other horrors of prison life. In comparison to previous parts of the poem, the fifth part contains several references to God and Christ, used to emphasize the religious implications of the suffering the prisoners are forced to endure as punishment for their crimes.

The sixth and final part, also the shortest part, is a summary of the poem. It mentions several important points brought up in other parts of the poem: the disrespect of the man's grave, the inevitability of his death, and his indifference toward his death in the time leading up to his execution. The final stanza is a repetition of the most famous stanza in the poem, found in the first part: "And all men kill the thing they love,/By all let this be heard,/Some do it with a bitter look,/Some with a flattering word,/The coward does it with a kiss,/The brave man with a sword!"

## **Characters used by the poet in the Ballad**

### **Oscar Wilde**

In this poem, the author, Oscar Wilde, is also the narrator. On May 25th 1895 Oscar Wilde was sentenced to 2 years in Reading Jail for the crime of homosexuality. While in Jail he encountered many prisoners, one of the prisoners, Charles Thomas Wooldridge, is the main focus of the ballad of Reading Gaol.

### **Charles Thomas Wooldridge**

The 'he' that is introduced by Oscar Wilde in the opening sentences of the poem is Charles Thomas Wooldridge. Charles Thomas Wooldridge married Ellen Glendell in 1894. Wooldridge being part of the army put a great strain on their relationship; eventually, Ellen began using her maiden name again. When Ellen didn't show up to a meeting between her and Charles, he visited her house and an argument ensued. They ended up on the street outside where Charles slit Ellen's throat using a cut throat razor. He was arrested at the scene. Wooldridge was sentenced to death and he was to spend some time at Reading Jail prior to his execution. It was here where he met Oscar Wilde. Charles Thomas Wooldridge is the main focus of this text, as well as that Wilde dedicated the poem to him (CTW).

### **Guardsman**

The Guardsman is a recurring character throughout this poem. Wilde has included the guardsmen in this poem to show that all men are the same. The guardsman is described similar to the criminal as 'wearing a suit of shabby gray'. This links to the line 'all men kill the thing they love' as it shows that the rule applies to all men, guard or not.

### **Trial Men**

The Trial Men are the other men who are on trial throughout this poem. They are included to emphasize Wilde's view that all men 'kill the thing they love'. Charles is not the only guilty man, every man is guilty of something.

## The Chaplain

The Chaplain is a fairly minor character in this poem. Wilde has included this character to show that God has forgotten the guilty men. They have committed the ultimate sin. This makes the theme of religion more negative.

## The Governor

The Governor of the prison is presented as the personification of judgement. He is described by Wilde as being 'all in shiny black' this presents him as dark and evil, corresponding to the fate of the prisoners.

Themes of the Ballad

## Suffering

The poem focuses on the pain a man suffers when he is deprived of liberty. That man begins to wither away and slowly loses all hope in the future and becomes a man who waits to die. For him, the time spent in prison becomes an endless night spent while being tormented by a guilty conscious. The poet highlights the condition of the prisoner by describing the man who was sentenced to die and the other prisoners. While the man who died seemed calm and free, the other appeared as being plagued by guilt and restless, always looking over their shoulders.

## Faith

A recurrent element in the poem is the references made towards religion and faith. The poet transmits the idea that while in prison, the majority of the prisoners found their faith and return to God. This seems to be a result of the environment they are forced to live, a place where everything is dark and where it seems that hope doesn't exist. Because of this, the prisoners are forced to look for hope in religion and pray that they may be forgiven in the afterlife.

## Death

The Ballad of the Reading Goal can be considered as being the ballad of a dying man, as it tells about the last days of a man executed for killing his family. As a result, the poem contains reflections upon death and life and the way the idea of an imminent death affects a person's behavior. The poet uses numerous images to reflect the ugly side of death and to emphasize the feelings he felt while he was forced to see people who were just waiting to die.

## Critical Analysis of the Poem

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* by Oscar Wilde is a 109 stanza poem separated into six sections. The sections all maintain the same rhyme scheme of ABCBDB. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" is Wilde's most successful poem and was his last great work written before his death in 1900.

This poem was essentially written about Oscar Wilde's experiences in the prison, or rather, one very specific incident that shocked him profoundly, the execution of his inmate.

The poem begins with a discussion of Charles Thomas Wooldridge who was condemned to die in 1896 for murdering his wife in a jealous rage. During an argument they tumbled onto the street, and he slit her throat with a knife. After the murder he begged the officers to arrest him and mourned his action until his death.

While the title says Ballad, the poem almost seems to be an elegy to lament and question the death of his inmate. The poem consists of 109 stanzas that are categorized into 6 parts.

The first stanza begins with the description of the “blood and wine” incident, or the murder by the inmate of the thing he loved. One of the most interesting things about this poem is the way there is a reiteration of the fact that the man killed “the thing he loved”. It clearly seems to be because the speaker yearns to humanize the act of the inmate. In this stanza, the essence of the actual murder is captured. It speaks of the man who killed the thing he loved, and how his hands were tainted with “blood and wine”. The blood part is obvious, but perhaps “wine” indicates that the inmate was intoxicated when he committed the crime. This might have pushed him to do something he wouldn’t have done if he were in his senses. In the second stanza, the speaker speaks of the hardships faced by the man, which are juxtaposed by the poet with his regretful attitude towards the crime he committed.

By this time, it is abundantly clear that the crime was one of passion and not committed in cold blood. In the next few lines, the poet delineates the psychological condition of the prisoner. Soon, the speaker gets to know that the inmate has been sentenced to death and he is shocked.

This leads him to diverge from the point of the actual events that are happening into a world of his own introspection over whether the inmate’s crime was really a great crime. The speaker lists out all the different ways in which men have killed the thing they loved. In the end of this particular section of the poem, he says that

*The kindest use a knife, because  
The dead so soon grow so cold.*

This can be taken as a justification, but it seems to be a product of his frustration at the hypocrisy of the sentencing. He means that men have always killed the thing they loved, and in many cruel ways, but they have never really be executed for it. In his anguish over the execution of his inmate, he says that while all men kill what they love, “yet each man does not die.”

In the following stanzas he describes the kind of shame and disgrace that the inmate was doomed to live with. He is essentially trying to show how we so often demonize the men who do terrible things without seeing them as human beings. He then talks about the actual execution, reiterating that he has really never seen a man who watched “with such a wistful eye”.

This phrase is an extremely important part of the poem as it shoes the other side of the crime, the side that people never think about. This side is the aftermath. He says that the man didn’t try to resist what was happening to him, perhaps implying that he regretted his crime so much that he felt that he deserved his punishment. The speaker describes the everyday things that happen around him, apathetic to the loss of life that will happen and shake the prisoners. This part of the poem is essentially written in order to show the cruelty that the prisoners are doomed to live with.

The most extensive portion of the poem covers the last days before the execution. It is interesting that he seems to do fine while the other prisoners are tormented. It might again bring up the idea that the inmate might not actually want to live with the pain of knowing that he killed the woman he loved and might believe that he deserves his impending death.

After the execution, the body and essence of the man is mocked by the prison staff while the speaker believes that the man is resting in peace. This poem shows the tragedy of imprisonment and the importance of humanizing those who commits crimes. It shows the cruelty that men in prison have to survive, and very often don’t.

## Themes used by the poet in the Ballad

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### Prison conditions

The poem also offers a clear a description of the conditions the prisoners were forced to endure while being incarcerated. Oscar Wilde based his description on the time he spent in prison and the description he offers paints the prison life a being cruel and unjust for those trapped in it. The poet talks briefly about the food, working conditions and living conditions the prisoners had to suffer through.

## Literary Elements used by the Poet in the Ballad

### (1) Setting and Context

The poem takes place in a prison, at the end of the 18th century but no clear date is given.

### (2) Narrator and Point of View

The narrator is a first person narrator who presents the events from a subjective point of view.

### (3) Tone and Mood: Tragic, melancholic

### (4) Protagonist and Antagonist: The protagonist is the simple man and the antagonist is the unjust society.

### (5) Major Conflict

The main conflict is an internal one and it represents the internal battle between a guilty conscious and the desire to be at peace with the actions the narrator had done.

**(6) Climax**

The ballad reaches its climax when the prisoner sentenced to death is hanged.

**(7) Foreshadowing**

The description of the grave foreshadows the fact that at one point, everyone will have to face death and the consequences of what they have done while they were still alive.

**(8) Understatement**

At one point in the poem, the narrator tells the reader that it is sweet to dance with nimble feet above the ground while also mentioning hanging. This proves to be an understatement because only lines later, the poet notes the ugliness of a body after it was hanged.

**(9) Allusions**

At one point in the poem, the narrator compares the one who sentenced the prisoner with Caiaphas who betrayed Jesus Christ. Thus, this could be considered as being an allusion towards the Biblical text and that the prisoner sentenced to death can be seen as Jesus Christ, sentenced to death by the religious leaders of his time.

**(10) Imagery**

The narrator describes in great detail the inmate sentenced to death. The poet thus uses figures of speech that create a vivid image in the mind of the reader, describing a man at peace with himself and ready to face the consequences of his actions. This image amplifies as the ballad advances.

**(11) Paradox**

The way the prisoner who is sentenced to death is described can be considered as being a paradox. Despite knowing that he will die soon, the prisoner seems to be calm and at peace with himself. He doesn't try to argue with those who sentenced him, nor does he lament his fate but rather he enjoys his last days alive. His attitude isn't shared by those surrounding him, who seem hopeless and always worrying about what the next day would bring.

**(12) Parallelism**

Throughout the poem, a parallel is drawn between the way the normal prisoners behaved and the way the man sentenced to death behaved. The narrator highlights constantly the differences between the two groups and adds his own thoughts to the description.

**(13) Metonymy and Synecdoche**

When the narrator talks about the other prisoner, he simply refers to them as being souls. The collective term "souls" is used when the narrator wants to talk about every prisoner.

**(14) Personification: The world had thrust us from its heart**

===== End =====