SuperSummary™

The Ballad Of Reading Gaol

Oscar Wilde

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Summary

"The Ballad of Reading Gaol" is a poem by Oscar Wilde. Wilde wrote the poem in exile in 1897 and 1898, shortly after his release from Reading Gaol, where he had been imprisoned for having sex with other men (termed "gross indecency" in Victorian legalese). Wilde did not originally publish the poem under his own name but rather under the pseudonym C.3.3., which was Wilde's prisoner identification number at Reading Gaol.

The ballad, a long poem divided into six numbered sections, describes the execution of a fellow prisoner, Charles Thomas Woolridge, a trooper who was hanged in July 1896 after being convicted of murdering his wife. Wilde uses the incident to reflect upon his experiences in prison and to critique the Victorian penal system.

The poem was immediately popular, with several printings quickly selling out before it even became generally known that Wilde was the author. With its dark themes and message, the poem displays elements of the Victorian gothic that Wilde explored in some of his earlier work (such as his 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), while eschewing the levity and satire so characteristic of Wilde's plays (such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*). The poem's success brought Wilde a small income until his death in 1900, at the age of 46.

Note: The in-text citations used in this study guide refer to section and line numbers. For example, (3.14) refers to the 14th line in the poem's third section. Likewise, (5.4-5) refers to the fourth and fifth lines of the fifth section.

Poet Biography

Oscar Wilde (full name Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde) was an Irish dramatist and poet who became one of the best-known literary figures of the Victorian period. Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin to successful parents with literary achievements of their own: Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, was an ear and eye surgeon who authored books on archaeology, folklore, and literary criticism, while his mother, Lady Jane Wilde (pen name Speranza) was a poet and an expert on Celtic mythology.

In his studies at Trinity College, Dublin, and Magdalen College, Oxford, the young Wilde distinguished himself as a brilliant scholar and writer. In 1878, his long poem *Ravenna* won the prestigious Newisgate Prize at Oxford. Wilde also gained notoriety for his wit and charismatic personality.

At Oxford, Wilde was heavily influenced by the teachings of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, leading figures in the emerging literary and artistic movement of Aestheticism, which emphasized the importance of art in life. Wilde himself went on to become a prominent spokesperson for Aestheticism. His wit and flamboyance quickly combined to make him one of the most recognizable personalities of his time. In 1884, he married Constance Lloyd. Two children, Cyril and Vyvyan, were born to them in 1885 and 1886, respectively.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Wilde wrote and lectured, spending time in the United States and Canada as well as Britain. In 1890, he published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which exemplified many of Wilde's ideas about Aestheticism. The following year, in 1891, Wilde wrote the play *Salome* in French; the play's Biblical subject matter—the attempted seduction and beheading of John the Baptist by the princess Salome, including her disrobing dance of the seven veils for her stepfather Herod—meant it could not be performed on the British stage. In the following years, however, Wilde produced several society comedies, including *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which made him one of the most famous and successful dramatists of his day.

In 1895, at the height of his success, Wilde became embroiled in a public scandal when his relationship with a man, Lord Alfred Douglas, was exposed. At the time, homosexuality was illegal in Britain; in 1897 Wilde was convicted of "gross indecency" with men and sentenced to two years' hard labor at Reading Gaol. While imprisoned, Wilde wrote *De Profundis*, a long letter addressed to Douglas, reflecting on his spiritual experiences during his trials. After his release he left Britain to live in France and Italy, where he wrote his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a meditation on the difficulties of imprisonment. In 1900, at the age of 46, Wilde died in Paris.

Poem text

I

He did not wear his scarlet coat,

For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he loved,
And murdered in her bed.

He walked amongst the Trial Men
In a suit of shabby grey;
A cricket cap was on his head,
And his step seemed light and gay;
But I never saw a man who looked
So wistfully at the day.

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every drifting cloud that went
With sails of silver by.

I walked, with other souls in pain,
Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had done
A great or little thing,
When a voice behind me whispered low,
"*That fellow's got to swing.*"

Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel,
And the sky above my head became
Like a casque of scorching steel;
And, though I was a soul in pain,
My pain I could not feel.

I only knew what hunted thought
Quickened his step, and why

He looked upon the garish day
With such a wistful eye;
The man had killed the thing he loved
And so he had to die.

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each 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!

Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold:
The kindest use a knife, because
The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,
Yet each man does not die.

He does not die a death of shame
On a day of dark disgrace,
Nor have a noose about his neck,
Nor a cloth upon his face,
Nor drop feet foremost through the floor
Into an empty place

He does not sit with silent men
Who watch him night and day;
Who watch him when he tries to weep,

And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him lest himself should rob
The prison of its prey.

He does not wake at dawn to see
Dread figures throng his room,
The shivering Chaplain robed in white,
The Sheriff stern with gloom,
And the Governor all in shiny black,
With the yellow face of Doom.

He does not rise in piteous haste
To put on convict-clothes,
While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes
Each new and nerve-twitched pose,
Fingering a watch whose little ticks
Are like horrible hammer-blows.

He does not know that sickening thirst
That sands one's throat, before
The hangman with his gardener's gloves
Slips through the padded door,
And binds one with three leathern thongs,
That the throat may thirst no more.

He does not bend his head to hear
The Burial Office read,
Nor, while the terror of his soul
Tells him he is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves
Into the hideous shed.

He does not stare upon the air
Through a little roof of glass;
He does not pray with lips of clay
For his agony to pass;

Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek
The kiss of Caiaphas.

II

Six weeks our guardsman walked the yard,
In a suit of shabby grey:
His cricket cap was on his head,
And his step seemed light and gay,
But I never saw a man who looked
So wistfully at the day.

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every wandering cloud that trailed
Its raveled fleeces by.

He did not wring his hands, as do
Those witless men who dare
To try to rear the changeling Hope
In the cave of black Despair:
He only looked upon the sun,
And drank the morning air.

He did not wring his hands nor weep,
Nor did he peek or pine,
But he drank the air as though it held
Some healthful anodyne;
With open mouth he drank the sun
As though it had been wine!

And I and all the souls in pain,
Who tramped the other ring,
Forgot if we ourselves had done

A great or little thing,
And watched with gaze of dull amaze
The man who had to swing.

And strange it was to see him pass
With a step so light and gay,
And strange it was to see him look
So wistfully at the day,
And strange it was to think that he
Had such a debt to pay.

For oak and elm have pleasant leaves
That in the spring-time shoot:
But grim to see is the gallows-tree,
With its adder-bitten root,
And, green or dry, a man must die
Before it bears its fruit!

The loftiest place is that seat of grace
For which all worldlings try:
But who would stand in hempen band
Upon a scaffold high,
And through a murderer's collar take
His last look at the sky?

It is sweet to dance to violins
When Love and Life are fair:
To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
Is delicate and rare:
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air!

So with curious eyes and sick surmise
We watched him day by day,
And wondered if each one of us
Would end the self-same way,

For none can tell to what red Hell
His sightless soul may stray.

At last the dead man walked no more
Amongst the Trial Men,
And I knew that he was standing up
In the black dock's dreadful pen,
And that never would I see his face
In God's sweet world again.

Like two doomed ships that pass in storm
We had crossed each other's way:
But we made no sign, we said no word,
We had no word to say;
For we did not meet in the holy night,
But in the shameful day.

A prison wall was round us both,
Two outcast men were we:
The world had thrust us from its heart,
And God from out His care:
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare.

III

In Debtors' Yard the stones are hard,
And the dripping wall is high,
So it was there he took the air
Beneath the leaden sky,
And by each side a Warder walked,
For fear the man might die.

Or else he sat with those who watched
His anguish night and day;
Who watched him when he rose to weep,

And when he crouched to pray;

Who watched him lest himself should rob
Their scaffold of its prey.
The Governor was strong upon
The Regulations Act:
The Doctor said that Death was but
A scientific fact:
And twice a day the Chaplain called
And left a little tract.

And twice a day he smoked his pipe,
And drank his quart of beer:
His soul was resolute, and held
No hiding-place for fear;
He often said that he was glad
The hangman's hands were near.

But why he said so strange a thing
No Warder dared to ask:
For he to whom a watcher's doom
Is given as his task,
Must set a lock upon his lips,
And make his face a mask.

Or else he might be moved, and try
To comfort or console:
And what should Human Pity do
Pent up in Murderers' Hole?
What word of grace in such a place
Could help a brother's soul?

With slouch and swing around the ring
We trod the Fool's Parade!
We did not care: we knew we were
The Devil's Own Brigade:

And shaven head and feet of lead
Make a merry masquerade.

We tore the tarry rope to shreds
With blunt and bleeding nails;
We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,
And cleaned the shining rails:
And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,
And clattered with the pails.

We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,
We turned the dusty drill:
We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns,
And sweated on the mill:
But in the heart of every man
Terror was lying still.

So still it lay that every day
Crawled like a weed-clogged wave:
And we forgot the bitter lot
That waits for fool and knave
, Till once, as we tramped in from work,
We passed an open grave.

With yawning mouth the yellow hole
Gaped for a living thing;
The very mud cried out for blood
To the thirsty asphalte ring:
And we knew that ere one dawn grew fair
Some prisoner had to swing.

Right in we went, with soul intent
On Death and Dread and Doom:
The hangman, with his little bag,
Went shuffling through the gloom
And each man trembled as he crept

Into his numbered tomb.

That night the empty corridors
Were full of forms of Fear,
And up and down the iron town
Stole feet we could not hear,
And through the bars that hide the stars
White faces seemed to peer.

He lay as one who lies and dreams
In a pleasant meadow-land,
The watcher watched him as he slept,
And could not understand
How one could sleep so sweet a sleep
With a hangman close at hand?

But there is no sleep when men must weep
Who never yet have wept:
So we—the fool, the fraud, the knave—
That endless vigil kept,
And through each brain on hands of pain
Another's terror crept.

Alas! it is a fearful thing
To feel another's guilt!
For, right within, the sword of Sin
Pierced to its poisoned hilt,
And as molten lead were the tears we shed
For the blood we had not spilt.

The Warders with their shoes of felt
Crept by each padlocked door,
And peeped and saw, with eyes of awe,
Grey figures on the floor,
And wondered why men knelt to pray
Who never prayed before.

All through the night we knelt and prayed,
Mad mourners of a corpse!
The troubled plumes of midnight were
The plumes upon a hearse:
And bitter wine upon a sponge
Was the savior of Remorse.

The cock crew, the red cock crew,
But never came the day:
And crooked shape of Terror crouched,
In the corners where we lay:
And each evil sprite that walks by night
Before us seemed to play.

They glided past, they glided fast,
Like travelers through a mist:
They mocked the moon in a rigadoon
Of delicate turn and twist,
And with formal pace and loathsome grace
The phantoms kept their tryst.

With mop and mow, we saw them go,
Slim shadows hand in hand:
About, about, in ghostly rout
They trod a saraband:
And the damned grotesques made arabesques,
Like the wind upon the sand!

With the pirouettes of marionettes,
They tripped on pointed tread:
But with flutes of Fear they filled the ear,
As their grisly masque they led,
And loud they sang, and loud they sang,
For they sang to wake the dead.

"Oho!" they cried, *"The world is wide,*
But fettered limbs go lame!
And once, or twice, to throw the dice
Is a gentlemanly game,
But he does not win who plays with Sin
In the secret House of Shame."

No things of air these antics were
That frolicked with such glee:
To men whose lives were held in gyves,
And whose feet might not go free,
Ah! wounds of Christ! they were living things,
Most terrible to see.

Around, around, they waltzed and wound;
Some wheeled in smirking pairs:
With the mincing step of demirep
Some sidled up the stairs:
And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer,
Each helped us at our prayers.

The morning wind began to moan,
But still the night went on:
Through its giant loom the web of gloom
Crept till each thread was spun:
And, as we prayed, we grew afraid
Of the Justice of the Sun.

The moaning wind went wandering round
The weeping prison-wall:
Till like a wheel of turning-steel
We felt the minutes crawl:
O moaning wind! what had we done
To have such a seneschal?

At last I saw the shadowed bars

Like a lattice wrought in lead,
Move right across the whitewashed wall
That faced my three-plank bed,
And I knew that somewhere in the world
God's dreadful dawn was red.

At six o'clock we cleaned our cells,
At seven all was still,
But the sough and swing of a mighty wing
The prison seemed to fill,
For the Lord of Death with icy breath
Had entered in to kill.

He did not pass in purple pomp,
Nor ride a moon-white steed.
Three yards of cord and a sliding board
Are all the gallows' need:
So with rope of shame the Herald came
To do the secret deed.

We were as men who through a fen
Of filthy darkness grope:
We did not dare to breathe a prayer,
Or give our anguish scope:
Something was dead in each of us,
And what was dead was Hope.

For Man's grim Justice goes its way,
And will not swerve aside:
It slays the weak, it slays the strong,
It has a deadly stride:
With iron heel it slays the strong,
The monstrous parricide!

We waited for the stroke of eight:
Each tongue was thick with thirst:

For the stroke of eight is the stroke of Fate
That makes a man accursed,
And Fate will use a running noose
For the best man and the worst.

We had no other thing to do,
Save to wait for the sign to come:
So, like things of stone in a valley lone,
Quiet we sat and dumb:
But each man's heart beat thick and quick
Like a madman on a drum!

With sudden shock the prison-clock
Smote on the shivering air,
And from all the gaol rose up a wail
Of impotent despair,
Like the sound that frightened marshes hear
From a leper in his lair.

And as one sees most fearful things
In the crystal of a dream,
We saw the greasy hempen rope
Hooked to the blackened beam,
And heard the prayer the hangman's snare
Strangled into a scream.

And all the woe that moved him so
That he gave that bitter cry,
And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die.

IV

There is no chapel on the day

On which they hang a man:
The Chaplain's heart is far too sick,
Or his face is far too wan,
Or there is that written in his eyes
Which none should look upon.

So they kept us close till nigh on noon,
And then they rang the bell,
And the Warders with their jingling keys
Opened each listening cell,
And down the iron stair we tramped,
Each from his separate Hell.

Out into God's sweet air we went,
But not in wonted way,
For this man's face was white with fear,
And that man's face was grey,
And I never saw sad men who looked
So wistfully at the day.

I never saw sad men who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
We prisoners called the sky,
And at every careless cloud that passed
In happy freedom by.

But there were those amongst us all
Who walked with downcast head,
And knew that, had each got his due,
They should have died instead:
He had but killed a thing that lived
Whilst they had killed the dead.

For he who sins a second time
Wakes a dead soul to pain,

And draws it from its spotted shroud,
And makes it bleed again,
And makes it bleed great gouts of blood
And makes it bleed in vain!

Like ape or clown, in monstrous garb
With crooked arrows starred,
Silently we went round and round
The slippery asphalte yard;
Silently we went round and round,
And no man spoke a word.

Silently we went round and round,
And through each hollow mind
The memory of dreadful things
Rushed like a dreadful wind,
And Horror stalked before each man,
And terror crept behind.

The Warders strutted up and down,
And kept their herd of brutes,
Their uniforms were spick and span,
And they wore their Sunday suits,
But we knew the work they had been at
By the quicklime on their boots.

For where a grave had opened wide,
There was no grave at all:
Only a stretch of mud and sand
By the hideous prison-wall,
And a little heap of burning lime,
That the man should have his pall.

For he has a pall, this wretched man,
Such as few men can claim:
Deep down below a prison-yard,

Naked for greater shame,
He lies, with fetters on each foot,
Wrapt in a sheet of flame!

And all the while the burning lime
Eats flesh and bone away,
It eats the brittle bone by night,
And the soft flesh by the day,
It eats the flesh and bones by turns,
But it eats the heart alway.

For three long years they will not sow
Or root or seedling there:
For three long years the unblessed spot
Will sterile be and bare,
And look upon the wondering sky
With unreproachful stare.

They think a murderer's heart would taint
Each simple seed they sow.
It is not true! God's kindly earth
Is kindlier than men know,
And the red rose would but blow more red,
The white rose whiter blow.

Out of his mouth a red, red rose!
Out of his heart a white!
For who can say by what strange way,
Christ brings his will to light,
Since the barren staff the pilgrim bore
Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?

But neither milk-white rose nor red
May bloom in prison air;
The shard, the pebble, and the flint,
Are what they give us there:

For flowers have been known to heal
A common man's despair.

So never will wine-red rose or white,
Petal by petal, fall
On that stretch of mud and sand that lies
By the hideous prison-wall,
To tell the men who tramp the yard;
That God's Son died for all.

Yet though the hideous prison-wall
Still hems him round and round,
And a spirit man not walk by night
That is with fetters bound,
And a spirit may not weep that lies
In such unholy ground,

He is at peace—this wretched man—
At peace, or will be soon:
There is no thing to make him mad,
Nor does Terror walk at noon,
For the lampless Earth in which he lies
Has neither Sun nor Moon.

They hanged him as a beast is hanged:
They did not even toll
A reguiem that might have brought
Rest to his startled soul,
But hurriedly they took him out,
And hid him in a hole.

They stripped him of his canvas clothes,
And gave him to the flies;
They mocked the swollen purple throat
And the stark and staring eyes:
And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud

In which their convict lies.

The Chaplain would not kneel to pray
By his dishonored grave:
Nor mark it with that blessed Cross
That Christ for sinners gave,
Because the man was one of those
Whom Christ came down to save.

Yet all is well; he has but passed
To Life's appointed bourne:
And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourner will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

V

I know not whether Laws be right,
Or whether Laws be wrong;
All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the wall is strong;
And that each day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.

But this I know, that every Law
That men have made for Man,
Since first Man took his brother's life,
And the sad world began,
But straws the wheat and saves the chaff
With a most evil fan.

This too I know—and wise it were
If each could know the same—
That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,

And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.

With bars they blur the gracious moon,
And blind the goodly sun:
And they do well to hide their Hell,
For in it things are done
That Son of God nor son of Man
Ever should look upon!

The vilest deeds like poison weeds
Bloom well in prison-air:
It is only what is good in Man
That wastes and withers there:
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,
And the Warder is Despair

For they starve the little frightened child
Till it weeps both night and day:
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,
And gibe the old and grey,
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
And none a word may say.

Each narrow cell in which we dwell
Is foul and dark latrine,
And the fetid breath of living Death
Chokes up each grated screen,
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust
In Humanity's machine.

The brackish water that we drink
Creeps with a loathsome slime,
And the bitter bread they weigh in scales
Is full of chalk and lime,
And Sleep will not lie down, but walks

Wild-eyed and cries to Time.

But though lean Hunger and green Thirst
Like asp with adder fight,
We have little care of prison fare,
For what chills and kills outright
Is that every stone one lifts by day
Becomes one's heart by night.

With midnight always in one's heart,
And twilight in one's cell,
We turn the crank, or tear the rope,
Each in his separate Hell,
And the silence is more awful far
Than the sound of a brazen bell.

And never a human voice comes near
To speak a gentle word:
And the eye that watches through the door
Is pitiless and hard:
And by all forgot, we rot and rot,
With soul and body marred.

And thus we rust Life's iron chain
Degraded and alone:
And some men curse, and some men weep,
And some men make no moan:
But God's eternal Laws are kind
And break the heart of stone.

And every human heart that breaks,
In prison-cell or yard,
Is as that broken box that gave
Its treasure to the Lord,
And filled the unclean leper's house
With the scent of costliest nard.

Ah! happy day they whose hearts can break
And peace of pardon win!
How else may man make straight his plan
And cleanse his soul from Sin?
How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?

And he of the swollen purple throat.
And the stark and staring eyes,
Waits for the holy hands that took
The Thief to Paradise;
And a broken and a contrite heart
The Lord will not despise.

The man in red who reads the Law
Gave him three weeks of life,
Three little weeks in which to heal
His soul of his soul's strife,
And cleanse from every blot of blood
The hand that held the knife.

And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand,
The hand that held the steel:
For only blood can wipe out blood,
And only tears can heal:
And the crimson stain that was of Cain
Became Christ's snow-white seal.

VI

In Reading gaol by Reading town
There is a pit of shame,
And in it lies a wretched man
Eaten by teeth of flame,
In burning winding-sheet he lies,

And his grave has got no name.

And there, till Christ call forth the dead,
In silence let him lie:
No need to waste the foolish tear,
Or heave the windy sigh:
The man had killed the thing he loved,
And so he had to die.

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!

Wilde, Oscar. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." 1898. *Poets.org*.

Summary

The poem begins by recounting the crime and arrest of the prisoner, presumed to be the real historical figure Charles Thomas Wooldridge ("CTW"), a former trooper who was convicted of murdering of his wife and sentenced to be hanged. In the first part of the poem, the narrator describes the man's appearance and resignation, highlighting how "wistfully" (1.12) he looks at his surroundings. The narrator learns of the man's crime and his sentence, and reflects that, like the condemned man, "each man kills the thing he loves" (1.37) in some way. But not every man shares the same fate.

The second part of the poem focuses on the condemned man's emotional state as his execution approaches. He does not show fear or sorrow, but continues in his melancholy manner. Though the narrator never speaks to the man, he feels a strong sense of kinship with him, as they are both inmates cast out from the rest of the world.

In the third part, the narrator describes some of the daily activities of the condemned man and the other inmates. The condemned man remains fearless even in the days leading up to his execution. One day, as they are coming back from work, the inmates pass the open grave

that has been dug for the condemned man. All are disturbed by this grim reminder of "Death and Dread and Doom" (3.68). The night before the execution, the narrator and the other prisoners cannot sleep, though the condemned man sleeps soundly. Morning comes, and all the inmates wait for the execution. At eight o'clock in the morning, the condemned man is hanged; the narrator listens to his death scream.

In the fourth part, the imprisoned men are let out to view the grave of the executed man. They approach it with the same sadness the dead man had displayed, all of them reflecting on their own sins. The prison officials disrespect the man's corpse, but at last he is buried. The plot of land where his grave is will not be planted on for three years because a murderer's heart is thought to corrupt any seeds that would grow there. The narrator, however, does not think this belief is true, and imagines roses growing out of the man's corpse. The man will soon be at peace, mourned by the remaining imprisoned men.

The fifth part is a meditation on the horrors of prison life, which have a significant impact on those who pass through the penal system. The narrator traces the violence and justice of humanity to Biblical episodes such as Cain's murder of Abel and the teachings of Christ. The narrator reflects on the cleansing effect that imprisonment is supposed to have.

The brief sixth part (only three stanzas) summarizes the poem, reflecting on Reading Gaol as "a pit of shame" (6.2) and on the nameless grave of the condemned man. The final stanza repeats the famous observation made in the beginning of the poem, that "all men kill the thing they love" (6.13).

Background

Historical Context: The Victorian Penal System

The penal system during the Victorian period (1837-1901) is remembered today as extremely harsh, though it did undergo some progressive reforms during this period. British prisons at this time (called "gaols," and pronounced as "jails") were unsanitary and bleak. Many people incarcerated there had been sentenced to hard labor, considered a particularly severe form of penal servitude. Hard labor often involved spending many hours each day completing pointless tasks, such as turning a heavy metal handle called a crank or walking on treadmills—the point wasn't to be productive, but to be punitively exhausted. Inmates who resisted or misbehaved were often subjected to corporal punishment or had their food taken away. In some prisons, including Reading Gaol, incarcerated men spent most of their time isolated in their cells; when they were allowed outside, they were forced to wear caps to cover their faces and were not allowed to converse with each other. These policies—known as the "Separate System" and the "Silent System," respectively—were meant to encourage prisoners to penitently reflect upon their crimes.

There were some efforts to reform the penal system during the Victorian period, especially as progressive ideas about incarceration became more prominent. A series of acts passed by the British Parliament between 1850 and 1900 sought to improve prison life by prioritizing the rehabilitation of convicts. For example, this period saw the introduction of borstals, or separate prisons for young people, where they could be held more safely and potentially redirected away from criminal life on release.

Authorial Context: The Trial and Incarceration of Oscar Wilde

In 1895, Oscar Wilde become embroiled in a series of lawsuits involving the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas. Upon learning about Wilde's relationship with his son, Queensbury publicly accused Wilde of the crime of sodomy (the contemporary British term for illicit sexual activity). In response, Wilde sued Queensberry for criminal libel. In presenting his defense, Queensberry brought forward evidence that proved that Wilde had in fact engaged in homosexual activity with Douglas and other men. Wilde was forced to drop his suit. He himself was then charged with sodomy and gross indecency, as homosexuality was a crime in Victorian Britain. In 1897, Wilde was convicted and sentenced to two years of hard labor.

Wilde was incarcerated at several prisons before arriving at Reading Gaol: He was sent to Newgate Prison for processing before being moved to Pentonville Prison. His hard labor in Pentonville consisted of walking on a treadmill and picking oakum, which meant separating the fibers of old navy ropes. After a few months, Wilde was transferred to Wandsworth Prison, where he was forced to declare bankruptcy and lose his possessions. Only in November of 1895 was Wilde transferred to Reading Gaol, where he was assigned to the third cell on the third floor of Ward C, making his prisoner identification number "C.3.3"—the only name by which he was addressed at Reading. There, he continued to fulfill his sentence of hard labor, until he became very ill and was allowed to stop.

Wilde would have met Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a trooper of the Royal Horse Guards who had been sentenced to death for murdering his common-law wife, a few months after being transferred to Reading Gaol. Wooldridge cut his wife's throat during an argument; then, immediately repentant, he confessed to a police officer. Wooldridge was sent to Reading Gaol to await his hanging, which took place on July 7, 1896. Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol* describes Wooldridge's time at the prison and his execution, and the poem is dedicated to Wooldridge as "C.T.W."

Poem Analysis

Analysis: "The Ballad Of Reading Gaol"

The poem's first-person narrator is typically assumed to be Wilde himself, who was imprisoned at Reading Gaol in 1896 and 1897. At the center of the poem is a fellow incarcerated man convicted of murdering his wife and sentenced to be hanged. Though this man is never named in the poem, he is almost certainly the real historical figure Charles Thomas Wooldridge, to whom Wilde dedicated the poem as "C.T.W." Wooldridge murdered his wife in an argument and was sent to Reading Gaol to await execution.

Wilde describes Wooldridge's crime—taking ample creative license—at the very beginning of the poem. He imagines him with "blood and wine [...] on his hands / When they found him with the dead" (1.3-4), a vivid tableau that heralds the dark gothic realism that saturates the poem. The reference to wine suggests that the man was drunk when he killed his wife and that his crime was thus a crime of passion. This seems to have really been the case, as historical records attest that Wooldridge instantly regretted murdering his wife; indeed, Wooldridge turned himself in soon after committing the crime. However, Wilde also alters the facts to suit his poem, for example when he writes that the man murdered his wife "in her bed" (1.6), even though Wooldridge killed his wife in the street outside of their house. The change makes the murder more gruesomely intimate, occurring in the place the couple shared their most private moments.

Most of the poem explores the psychological and spiritual experiences of the condemned man and the other inmates (including the narrator) who interact with him at Reading Gaol. When he first sees the condemned man, the narrator wonders whether he has done "a great or little thing" (1.22), a dichotomy that the poem soon shatters: For though the man has committed a terrible crime, his experiences following his arrest—as the poem shows—elevate him above his crime and even above the common aspects of humanity. Part of what is so arresting about the man is his paradoxical behavior: Though sentenced "*to swing*" (1.24), the man is "light and gay" (1.10); instead of weeping and wringing his hands,

> He only looked upon the sun
>
> And drank the morning air.

.....

With open mouth he drank the sun

As though it had been wine! (2.17-24)

The condemned man has accepted his guilt and, with it, his punishment: "The man had killed the thing he loved / And so he had to die" (1.35-36). The narrator notes that even in the days leading up to his execution,

His soul was resolute, and held

No hiding-place for fear;

He often said that he was glad

The hangman's hands were near (3.21-24).

The man's resignation endows him with a distinctive and somewhat otherworldly pensiveness that the narrator repeatedly notes throughout the poem: "I never saw a man who looked / So wistfully at the day" (1.11-12, 2.5-6). Later, he again comments,

I never saw a man who looked

With such a wistful eye

Upon that little tent of blue

Which prisoners call the sky (1.13-16, 2.7-10).

The narrator and the other incarcerated men are fascinated by the condemned man. It is "strange" (2.31, 2.33, 2.35) for them to watch his behavior, which suggests that he is at peace. At the same time, they also see themselves in him, wondering if they too "[w]ould end the self-same way" (2.58) and increasingly identifying with the man's experiences and his fate: The narrator compares the connection between the condemned man and himself to "two doomed

ships that pass in storm" (2.67). After all, as the narrator suggests, the man is not ultimately so different from any other person. For just as the man had killed the thing he loved, so too "each man kills the thing he loves" (1.37, 1.53). This refrain is probably the most famous line from the poem. In the narrator's view, everybody fatally harms what they love in some way, whether by causing emotional pain, through betrayal, or—as in Wooldridge's case—by actual murder:

> 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! (1.39-42, 6.15-18).

Though Wooldridge's crime cannot be justified—and the narrator never attempts to do so—there is still something to be admired in the way the condemned man takes responsibility for what he has done. So many others are cowards who destroy what they love with deceit or escape punishment for their actions. A coward like this, as the narrator elaborates at the end of the first part, may not experience the horrors of conviction and the penal system, but he also thus does not experience the spiritual elevation that comes from this form of suffering. Indeed, the peaceful calm of the condemned man and the composure with which he endures his suffering suggests that he has transcended his humanity. At several points in the poem, the narrator even identifies the man with Jesus Christ (for instance, in his reference to "[t]he kiss of Caiaphas" at 1.96).

As the execution of the condemned man approaches, the narrator and the other inmates begin to take on more and more of his burden, even as the man himself does not flag in his resolution. For instance, the night before he is to be hanged, the man sleeps peacefully while the other inmates await the morning anxiously and pray. As the narrator notes, "it is a fearful thing / To feel another's guilt!" (3.91-92). Though each incarcerated man occupies his own "separate Hell" (4.12, 5.58), they are united specifically by their shared experiences in prison. The prison officials, who do not share this experience, are thus unable to understand why the inmates feel such strong sympathy for the condemned man. The night before the execution, when the imprisoned men cannot sleep,

> The Warders with their shoes of felt
>
> Crept by each padlocked door,
>
> And peeped and saw, with eyes of awe,
>
> Grey figures on the floor,
>
> And wondered why men knelt to pray
>
> Who never prayed before (3.97-102).

Later, after the man is hanged, the prison officials mock his corpse while the inmates all reverently mourn him. Their shared suffering has given them a more spiritual outlook on death than those who have not lived their experiences (the doctor, for example, can see death only as "[a] scientific fact" [3.16]).

The theme of suffering and redemption—especially the suffering and redemption of the condemned man—is highlighted throughout the poem through religious references and imagery. The poem makes many references to sin, in particular the state of sin that unites all the imprisoned men. But sinners can be redeemed, an idea symbolized by "that blessed Cross / That Christ for sinners gave" (4.129-30). Indeed, even the condemned man, despite his clear guilt, was "one of those / Whom Christ came down to save" (4.131-32). And in the poem, at least, the condemned man does achieve a measure of redemption. Though the plot of land where his body is buried will not be sown for three years lest his "murderer's heart would taint / Each simple seed they sow" (4.79-80), the narrator declares that "God's kindly earth / Is kindlier than men know" (4.81-82). He even imagines a red rose growing out of the dead man's mouth and a white rose growing out of his heart, with the red rose symbolizing the man's sin of murder while the white rose symbolizes his redemption. After the man's execution, the narrator thus reflects that, "He is at peace—this wretched man— / At peace, or will be soon" (4.109-10).

Throughout the poem, the narrator reflects on the nature of the laws and the penal system. At the beginning of the fifth part, for example, he says:

I know not whether Laws be right,

Or whether Laws be wrong;

All that we know who lie in gaol

Is that the wall is strong;

And that each day is like a year,

A year whose days are long (5.1-6).

The hard labor forced on the prisoners is also described vividly, for instance at the beginning of the third part. In Victorian Britain, convicts sentenced to hard labor (as Wilde was) would spend their days forced to complete pointless, grueling tasks such as breaking rocks or running on treadmills. These punishments were supposed to rehabilitate the prisoners through physical exhaustion; however, in the poem, it is not these punishments that offer true redemption to "sinners" like the narrator and the condemned man—rather, they are spiritually elevated by their *inner* suffering. The narrator thus concludes his poem by repeating his famous refrain, reminding the reader that we all kill the thing we love in one way or another, and that what sets the brave man from the coward is his willingness to take responsibility.

Themes

"Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves"

The poem's famous refrain, "each man kills the thing he loves" (1.37,1.53)—is also the central theme. This idea is as challenging as it is memorable. What does Wilde mean when he accuses everybody of killing the thing they love? The condemned man—Charles Thomas Wooldridge—has literally killed his love, murdering his wife in a fit of rage. But not every case is this obvious, as everybody ruins what they love in their own way:

> 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! (1.39-42, 6.15-18).

Not only do people kill the thing they love in a variety of ways, they do so at different stages in their lives: "some [...] when they are young, / And some when they are old" (1.43-44). They also have different motives, such as "Lust" (1.45) or "Gold" (46). Perhaps most importantly for the narrator, however, not everybody suffers the same punishment for this action. In fact, many do not suffer punishment at all, though it is precisely in that punishment that the poet (and the condemned man) find redemption.

Those who kill the thing they love do not always do so literally. Wilde seems to also have himself in mind when he declares that "each man kills the thing he loves" (1.37). Wilde's tumultuous affairs, especially his affair with Douglas, resulted in his incarceration, which in turn forced him to leave his wife and children. Not only did his family face humiliation and shame because of Wilde's actions, but we can read the marital betrayal and secret infidelity into Wilde's description of the "coward" who "does it with a kiss" and a "flattering word"—ways to avoid his wife's suspicion. And though Wilde was not executed for his misdeeds like Wooldridge, he was punished, suffering "a death of shame" (1.55) that is its own kind of torment.

The Psychological and Spiritual Kinship of Prisoners

Throughout the poem, the psychological and spiritual experiences of the prisoners at Reading Gaol—including those of the condemned man and the narrator—set them apart from the rest of the world. Subjected to the "Separate System" of the Victorian prison, each of the inmates suffers their own "separate Hell" (4.12, 5.58), but they are still united in a certain kinship. They are all "souls in pain" (1.19) who experience the "Debtors' Yard" where "the stones are hard / And the dripping wall is high" (3.1-2), and where they must complete their prescribed hard labor:

> We tore the tarry rope to shreds
>
> With blunt and bleeding nails;
>
> We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,
>
> And cleaned the shining rails:
>
> And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,
>
> And clattered with the pails.
>
> We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,
>
> We turned the dusty drill:
>
> We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns,
>
> And sweated on the mill (3.43-52).

The prisoners become isolated and pathetic figures. The narrator describes them as a parody of a "Fool's Parade" (3.38) or "The Devil's Own Brigade" (3.40). Their experiences, moreover, are unique to their small community, and thus inaccessible to the rest of the world. The prison officials, such as the warders and the guards, cannot understand, for example, why the inmates cannot sleep the night before the condemned man is to be hanged. But for the

narrator and the other inmates, the bond is powerful, if tacit. Thus, though the narrator admits that he never spoke to the condemned man ("we made no sign, we said no word, / We had no word to say" [2.69-70]), he still identifies with him:

> A prison wall was round us both,
>
> Two outcast men were we:
>
> The world had thrust us from its heart,
>
> And God from out His care:
>
> And the iron gin that waits for Sin
>
> Had caught us in its snare (3.73-78).

The narrator does not openly judge whether the penal system is just. Yet the horrors experienced by the prisoners speak for themselves: The Reading Gaol of the poem, painted in the colors of Wilde's gothic realism, conveys a sense of shared shame and terror.

Suffering and Redemption

Throughout the poem, the idea of redemption is strongly tied to physical and spiritual suffering. The condemned man becomes an exemplar of redemption for the other prisoners. What the man has done is not justifiable, and the poem makes no attempt to acquit him. Yet throughout the poem, the narrator and the other incarcerated men wrestle with the question of whether the man can find salvation. The man has accepted his guilt and is resigned to his punishment, looking with a special, almost ethereal "wistfulness" at the world as he awaits his execution. To the narrator, what the man has done is not so unique: Everybody kills the thing they love, in their own way—the condemned man just happens to have done the killing in a more literal manner. The question of whether the man can be redeemed is thus of personal interest to the narrator and the other inmates, who increasingly identify with the man: If he can be saved, then perhaps they can be as well.

Two different kinds of redemption coexist in the poem: social redemption and religious redemption. Social redemption is the idea that offenders can be transformed through the penal system. Indeed, the theoretical purpose of the Victorian penal system was precisely to

rehabilitate convicts. But the practical reality of this system, at least as represented in the poem, is different: The men in Reading Gaol exist in a state of constant terror and suffering, learning to think of freedom as something as unattainable as the sky overhead and of themselves as "outcast men" (2.74) that have been "thrust" (2.75) from the world (and from God). They are debtors to society and their suffering represents the repayment of that debt, but their physical torments become an internalized part of their psychological state and their identity, making this social debt, in other words, something that can never be repaid. Society has rejected them, enclosing them in a prison "built with bricks of shame" (5.16) in an attempt to hide them even from God and Christ.

Religious redemption, on the other hand, is less harsh. While social redemption becomes less and less attainable throughout the poem, the narrator finally concludes that "God's eternal Laws are kind / And break the heart of stone" (5.71-72). Christ, after all, gave his life to save all sinners—including even murderers like the condemned man. Ultimately, the suffering of even the men in Reading Gaol serves first and foremost as a kind of earthly purgatory where they can atone for their deeds:

> How else may man make straight his plan
>
> And cleanse his soul from Sin?
>
> How else but through a broken heart
>
> May Lord Christ enter in? (5.81-84).

In the end, even the condemned man can find peace and redemption, for he has accepted his fate, "And a broken and a contrite heart / The Lord will not despise" (5.89-90). The man's death thus becomes his redemption, "For only blood can wipe out blood, / And only tears can heal" (5.99-100). Though society may turn its back on those it is ashamed of, religious redemption is available even to them. The poem thus ends on a hopeful, though morbid, note.

Symbols & Motifs

Religion and Religious Imagery

Religion and religious imagery pervade the poem, especially in connection with the theme of suffering and redemption. The prison and its inhabitants are imagined as existing far from the world, and also far from God; the language of sin and prayer is everywhere; the prison chaplain appears throughout the poem. In particular, the condemned man's journey toward peace and redemption is conceived of in very religious terms. At times, he becomes almost a Christ figure, who (unlike the coward who does not accept the punishment for his sins) must "feel upon his shuddering cheek / The kiss of Caiaphas" (1.95-96), an allusion to the High Priest who kissed Jesus after betraying him to the Romans.

The ultimate redemption of the condemned man following his execution is also couched in religious symbolism. The narrator, reflecting that "God's kindly earth / Is kindlier than men know," (4.81-82), imagines a red rose growing from the mouth of the man's corpse while a white rose grows from his heart: In this way "Christ brings his will to light" (4.88). What Wilde means by this is explained in the following section, where the narrator contrasts "the crimson stain that was of Cain" (5.101) with "Christ's snow-white seal" (5.102): In other words, the red rose represents the man's sin (the sin of Cain, the first murderer in the Old Testament) while the red rose represents Christ and redemption.

The Body

The body is another important symbol throughout the poem. At the beginning of the poem, the condemned man is described as being caught with blood and wine "on his hands" (1.3). The "wistful eye" (1.14, 1.34, 2.8) with which the condemned man looks at the world is a recurrent motif in the poem. The poem also emphasizes the physicality of the punishments of those incarcerated at Reading Gaol, such as the way the prisoners are forced to pick at ropes "[w]ith blunt and bleeding nails" (3.44) (a description reflecting reality—See: **Background**). Finally, the execution is graphically depicted, as the narrator imagines the way the "nimble feet" (2.53) of hanged man dance midair and listens to his final scream leave his throat. Finally, the mouth and heart of the executed man do not fully stop functioning even after he is executed: His mouth grows the red rose of sin, symbolizing impulsivity and the killing of what is loved, while his heart grows the white rose of redemption, symbolizing purity.

Color

Color symbolism pervades the poem from the very first lines, where the narrator imagines the "scarlet coat" (1.1) of the condemned man and the red blood and wine ("For blood and wine are red" [1.2]) that stained his hands when he was arrested. Color is also used to tie the "suit of shabby grey" (1.8) that the man wears at his trial with the "suit of shabby grey" (2.2) of his prison uniform—already in court, he was doomed to become a prisoner. Contrasted to the prison gray is the unattainable freedom of the sky, "that little tent of blue" (1.15, 2.9)—a bright color that is also the opposite of the "black Despair" (2.16) of the incarcerated men at Reading Gaol.

The color red is particularly prominent, symbolizing sin and guilt: Not only are the coat and hands of the condemned man red when he is caught (literally red-handed), but his soul also strays through a "red Hell" (1.59) in its guilt, while the "dreadful dawn" on which the man is executed is red itself (3.168) and is heralded by the crowing of "the red cock" (3.109). Perhaps most notably, the rose that grows from the man's mouth after he is buried—the rose symbolizing his sin—is red, while the rose that grows from his heart—the rose symbolizing his redemption—is white.

Literary Devices

Form and Meter

Wilde's poem employs a variation of the ballad stanza (hence the title, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"). Ballad stanzas were most closely associated with English folk poetry and usually featured a quatrain (four-line stanza) with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, and with an ABCB rhyme scheme. An iamb is a metrical foot in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable (da-**DUM**). A tetrameter is a line made up of four metrical feet, while a trimeter is a line with three feet. Wilde's take on the ballad, on the other hand, uses sestets (six-line stanzas). Like in the typical ballad, the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter; stanzas employ an ABCBDB rhyme scheme. The poem has a total of 109 stanzas divided into six sections.

Iambic feet in English poetry can be substituted to vary the rhythm. Possible substitutions include replacing an iamb with a trochee (**DUM**-da), as in line 32 of Section 1 ("**Quick**ened"), or replacing two iambic feet with a double iamb—a pyrrhic (da-da) followed by a spondee (**DUM-DUM**), as in line 4 of Section 1 ("When they | **found him**").

Paradox

A paradox is a statement that seems self-contradictory, but contains a deeper meaning or truth. Wilde leans heavily on paradox throughout the poem. The famous refrain "each man kills the thing he loves" (1.37, 1.53) is a particularly challenging paradox, pushing readers to reflect on the ways that they have hurt those that they loved through their sins. Also paradoxical is Wilde's portrayal of the condemned man as "light and gay" (1.10, 2.4, 2.32), eagerly awaiting his death rather than displaying signs of fear. Another important paradox involves the conduct of the prison officials toward the condemned man: They "watch him lest himself should rob / The prison of its prey" (1.65-66)—in other words, the guards prevent death by suicide so that they can execute him. These paradoxes all serve to underline the fundamentally perverse nature of the penal system, which seeks to rehabilitate and redeem those who made others suffer by making *them* suffer or even killing them, "For only blood can wipe out blood, / And only tears can heal" (5.99-100).

Parallelism and Repetition

Parallelism and repetition also play an important role in the poem, creating a sense of thematic and linguistic balance by repeating specific phrases or ideas at different parts of the poem. As in many of Wilde's works, the almost incessant repetition is effective in unifying the poem and highlighting its central themes. The idea that "each man kills the thing he loves" (1.37, 1.53), for example, is underscored through repetition, becoming a kind of refrain as it is restated at key moments in the poem (twice in the first section and once again in the final stanza of the final section).

The poem employs repetition elsewhere too. The "suit of shabby grey" (1.8) that the condemned man wears at his trial resurfaces and is transformed in the "suit of shabby grey" (2.2) of his prison uniform. The "wistful eye" with which the prisoner looks "[u]pon that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky" (1.14-16) becomes another refrain, resurfacing in the second section (2.8-10) and finally in the Section 4 (4.20-22), where it is the other inmates who assume the wistfulness of the now-dead man. Other key ideas that are repeated throughout the poem include the shame of prison life ("death of shame," "House of Shame," "rope of shame," etc.), Hell ("red Hell," "separate Hell," etc.), and the soul ("soul[s] in pain," "sightless soul," "soul intent," etc.).

Further Reading & Resources

Related Poems

"Her Voice" and "My Voice" by Oscar Wilde (1881)

The companion poems "Her Voice" and "My Voice" represent the two sides of a relationship that is coming to an end. In "Her Voice," a woman comes to terms with the end of a love she had intended to have forever, while "My Voice" captures the man's perspective.

"The New Remorse" by Oscar Wilde (1898)

Said to have been written by Wilde to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas while in prison, this short poem is a farewell to a person that the narrator has left with a broken heart. Its theme resonates with the idea that "each man kills the thing he loves" from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

"The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel" by John Betjeman (1937)

British Poet Laureate John Betjeman's poem imagines the moments before Oscar Wilde was arrested in his hotel room. This work can be read as a parallel to "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," which imagines the experiences of a fellow prisoner just before he is executed.

Further Literary Resources

De Profundis by Oscar Wilde (1897)

Wilde's letter to his lover Lord Aldred Douglas ("Bosie"), written during his incarceration, contains themes that also appear in the poem about the nature of imprisonment and the possibility of redemption.

"Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)" by Poetry Foundation (2023)

A comprehensive overview of Oscar Wilde's life and work, suitable for younger and more advanced students seeking to fill gaps in their knowledge.

The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan (1678)

A Christian allegory about the soul's journey through life's temptations, this popular work would have been the only book besides the Bible that Wilde would have been allowed to read while in prison.

Listen to Poem

BBC Reading of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" by Oscar Wilde

A 1994 BBC production of Wilde's poem, featuring notable actors and singers including Ian McKellen, Stephen Fry, and Neil Tennant.