

Oscar Wilde s The Ballad of Reading Gaol
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Abstract

The Ballad of Reading is a poetic composition, which conveys the bitterness of Oscar Wilde s own experience in prison where he accepted humiliation and wretchedness. Oscar Wilde was at the height of his powers and reputation as a Victorian writer, talker and poet when a crisis befell him. He was legally accused of homosexuality, a supposed accusation which led to two years of hard labour at the Reading Gaol. The Ballad is considered the best and most original of Wilde s poems. It stands as a true reflection of the down trodden with whom Wilde shared suffering, the soul of man under social and political oppression, and the English jails at that time which were merely torture houses. It is a lyrical cry, showing Wilde s abased self and his deep awareness of the meaning of violence with which man is treated in England at that time. However, Wilde assures his readers that bitter experiences lead to spiritual power and true understanding of one s humanism .

قصيدة سجن الردينغ لأوسكار وايلد

ملخص

ان قصيدة سجن الردينغ هي قطعة شعرية تحمل مرارة تجربة اوسكار وايلد في السجن حيث تقبل الاذلال والشقاء. كان وايلد في قمة قوته وشهرته ككاتب في العصر الفكتوري ومتكلم وشاعر حيث اصابته هذه النكبة. لقد اتهم قانونيا بالشذوذ الجنسي اتهام مفترض ادى الى سنتين من العمل الشاق في سجن الردينغ. تعتبر هذه القصيدة الافضل والاكثر اصالة في شعر وايلد وتظهر كتعبير حقيقي للطبقة الكادحة التي شاطرها وايلد العذاب في السجن، ولروح الانسان تحت وطأة الضغط الاجتماعي والسياسي، والسجون الانكليزية في ذلك العصر التي كانت عبارة عن غرف للتعذيب هذه القصيدة هي صرخة شعرية تبين نصف وايلد المعذبة ووعيه العميق لمعنى العنف الذي كان يعامل به الانسان في انكلترا في ذلك الوقت . ويؤكد وايلد لقراءه بان التجارب المريرة تقود الى الحصول على قوة روحية والفهم الحقيقي لانسانية الفرد .

Oscar Wilde s The Ballas of Reading Gaol

Oscar Fingal O Flahertie Wild, born in 1854, in Dublin, is one of the remarkable figures in the late Victorian period who thrived the most fashionable circles of literary London. Achieving the reputation of a society wit, public speaker, bizarre dresser, critic, journalist, skilled dramatist, poet, and novelist, he stands in a direct opposition to the dominating morality of the late Victorian Britain

English society in the nineteenth century was "encompassed by conventionality: every utterance and every action of the individual were required to conform to rigid rules of behavior and ethics, ...even the canons of art and literature were laid down and had to be adhered to." ¹ It was in this stste of affairs that Wilde made it his mission in life to break down such rules or traditions. With the force and the strength of his character he largely succeeded in doing so, and in making a position for himself in literature and society.

When Wilde was at the hight of his powers and reputation as a writer and talker, a blot or catastrophe befell him in 1895. ² He was legally accused of homosexuality and was sentenced to two years hard labour at the Reading Gaol. The genesis of Wilde s crisis was his close friendship to Lord Alfred Douglas, an Oxford undergraduate whom Wild met in 1891 at Tite Street. Douglas was a member of a very old and aristocratic family ; he had youth, he was exceptionally good-looking, and "although only twenty-one, was already showing grest promise as a poet, particularly as a writer of sonnets, which was the form of poetry that appealed most to Oscar." ³ These qualities are no doubt what made Oscar Wilde so devoted to Douglas.

The truth is that Wilde s attaction to Douglas was more sensual than spiritual; Douglas was excessively good- looking, and Wilde worshipped physical beauty. He was indulged in aesthetic as a whloe way of life and he realized the necessity of pure beauty under the influence of both John Ruskin, a professor of art at Oxford⁴, and Walter Pater, who was a great influence of the century for the study of beauty. Their aesthehetic views were adopted by Wilde, who put them into action and became an embodiment of the aesthetic sensibility of the aesthetic Movement in his appearance and behavior . Accordingly, Douglas youthful beauty became to Wilde his ideal

specially for his being such a handsome slim youth of twenty-one, with large blue eyes and golden-fair hair .

The effort of this friendship had far reaching influence on Wilde as well as Douglas. Their intimacy to each other grew by time in an excessive way which negatively influenced Oscar's career and reputation. To Alfred; Oscar was merely a quickening, inspiring, and intellectual influence; to Oscar, Alfred was a model to be imitated as a poet and a mere figure of personal charm. He was quite carried away by Douglas, to whom he wrote letters of extravagant devotion and admiration, almost as a lover to his beloved. Unfortunately, one of the letters got into the hands of a blackmailer who tried to threaten Oscar. For Oscar, it was just a prose poem;

My Own baby,... your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a Marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours shouldMade no less for the madness of music and song than for the madness of kissing Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry.. come here whenever you like. It is a lovely place and only lacks you. Do go to Salisburg first. Always with undying love,

**Yours,
Oscar⁵**

Frank Harris, a close friend to Oscar, who wrote **Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions**, was startled by the letter and tried to warn Wilde of the consequences specially when the scandal grew from hour to another and Douglas's father, Lord Queensberry started to do something to protect his son .

Consequently, Queensberry left a card for Oscar at the Albemarle Club addressed to him, in which he called him a homosexual. Instead of tearing up the card and dismissing the incident, Oscar made a fatal mistake by applying for a warrant for the arrest of Lord Queensberry. Oscar could not endure this nor the idea of giving up Douglas's friendship under threat .

Oscar's action against Lord Queensberry failed; instead of putting him in jail,, Oscar came to be arrested and charged under a

section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and put into cell. He was legally accused of homosexuality.

Of course, the dominating morality of the Victorian age considered Oscar's supposed guilt to be unpardonable and the English society condemned savagely his opposition to its Values⁶. His being thoroughly spoiled by the aristocracy and the weird relationship he held with Douglas, in addition to his startling letters addressed to him, made the judge and the jury at court, at the old Baily stand against him from the very start. Thus, after two trials Oscar was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labor. In a last effort to defend himself, Oscar said:

“It would have been impossible for me to have proved my case without putting Lord Alfred Douglas in the witness-box against his father. Lord Alfred Douglas was anxious to go into the box, but I would not let him do so. Rather than put him into so painful a position, I decided to retire from the case, and to bear upon my own shoulders whatever ignominy and shame might result from my prosecution of Lord Queensberry”⁷

And so began the misery of Oscar Wilde unaware that his own dear friend, for whom he was ready to bear the case, has already left him to face this terrible experience alone. In the Reading Gaol, there he spent most of his imprisonment, the mental torture that he must have suffered was indescribable

Everything was unendurable; not only the material pleasures of life, but the society of his wife and children, the companionship of Alfred Douglas, and above all books and writing materials were denied him. H. Montgomery Hyde mentions in his **Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath**, that Wilde wrote when he came out that the “present prison system seems almost to have for its aim the wrecking and destruction of mental faculties”⁸ In fact, prisoners were not only deprived of books but of all intercourse with the external world.

English jails at that time were merely torture houses, producing crime and lunacy in equal measure. Those who were familiar with prisons in England at that period realized that the punishment which faced Oscar Wilde was one of terrible severity.

Two years imprisonment really meant hard labour, hard fare, and a hard bed. Hard labour involved "largely useless work in the shape of the treadweel, the crank and oakum picking, which had to be performed on a poor and inadequate diet"⁹, all meant to break a man's body and spirit. When Frank Harris visited Oscar once in prison, he asked him "Was the food the worst of it?" Oscar's answer was: "the hunger made you weak, Frank; but the inhumanity was the worst of it; what devilish creatures men are."¹⁰ Oscar meant the officials in prison who were but spirits of hate, punished prisoners for no reason to break their will and rob them hope. The Governor of Reading Gaol himself was vindictive and sadistic by nature.

The outcome of this severe and bitter experience in prison is **The Ballad of Reading Gaol**, which was written under the shadow and shame of his prison sentence, a piece of a somber seriousness. He wrote it when he was released in 1897. In this Ballad he shows the realities of his misery in prison as well as of other prisoners, "in the most powerful lines and of the only moving words which he ever wrote"¹¹ In fact, the whole text displays Wilde as sympathetic human being despite his mistakes, and the ingratitude of Douglas who deserted him the moment Wilde was arrested.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is a poetic composition, which conveys the bitterness of Wilde's own experience in prison where he accepted humiliation and wretchedness. There was a compelling urge within him which stimulated him to write this last poem of his as a kind of test of self-integrity.

When Wilde came to write the Reading Gaol, he was to dedicate it to the memory of the executed guardsman, Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who had been charged with the murder of his wife. The idea of the ballad originated on a day when he noticed the coming of this prisoner, who became an important motive to Wilde's testimony of his commitment to man's fate. Wilde in actual life hated pain and agony, only in Reading Gaol, he did attempt to know the truth of suffering.

The easily noticed problem in the construction of Reading Gaol centers on Wilde's attempt to maintain using his aesthetic style, "as the high-priest of Art for Art's sake,"¹² and to be realistic at the same time. To serve his aesthetic aim, he chose the ballad form

which is mainly narrative and dramatic as his own, thus a form a came to be an apt choice. The selection also, was rendered due to Wilde s admiration to the most popular form of the literary ballad which dominated the Romantic poetry, such as S.T. Coleridge s *The Ancient Mariner*, Wordsworth s *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798), or Keats "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1820). In fact, Wilde loved the lyrical ardour and the musical repetitions of such ballads.

Moreover, the ballads themselves became part of the heritage of the midvictorian poetry. Hence, being a writer who grew in this context, and an inheritor of this heritage, Wilde s choice is a mere product of this literary and local colour. Mathew Arnold s "**The Forsaken Murman**"(1849) which is based on a Danish ballad, William Morris admirabe, William Morris admirable piece, "**Two Red Roses Across the Moon**"(1858), Dante G. Rossetti s second volume of poems, **Ballads and Sonnets** (1881),and A. Charles Swinburne s **Poems and Ballads** (1866), which he wrote as an enthusiast to the ballad form, all shaped and built Wilde s poetic performance of the **Reading Gaol**. Among those poets, however, Rossetti and Keats stand as his masters whom he adored.¹³

Above all that, Wilde aimed at creating an impersonal piece of art, which is a feature mostly characterizes the ballad form. It is true that he avoided mixing poetry with propaganda but in writing this poem, he had created, may be unconsciously, such kind of mixture.¹⁴

He penetrates into the dehumanizing prison system in England in a vivid way which conveys the horror and the bitterness of the life in which prisoners lived. Sometimes the poem sinks into a rather sentimental reflection on the part of the poet; a matter which he tried to avoid. Accordingly, the impersonal form of the ballad gives the poem an objective tone, while the poet s involvement with the misery of the prisoners as one of them gives it a more subjective one.

In an attempt to condemn the institution of capital punishment for the cruelty it imposes on the prisoners, Wilde emphasizes with great intensity the terrible process of the execution of the Royal Horse Guard, Wooldridge. He became not merely an individual but a representative of the condemned man whose fate .

**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.**

(11.367-370)

The execution, which takes place at 8 a.m. is "the occasion of mounting horror and intolerable suspense,... [with] reference to time"¹⁵ and hour whose **little ticks/ Are like horrible hammer – blows (11.77-78)**. It is a dreary experience which adds more agony to the speaker who **walked with other souls in pain (1.19)** and then realizing that **The world had thrust us from its heart/ And God from out His care (11.171-72)**. By **us** Wilde means the condemned man and himself, as if trying to identify his own misery with that wretched man. Both seem to consider that heavenly justice as equivalent to earthly justice since both show indifference to man's fate.

Hyde suggests that Wilde "in writing poor Wooldridge's epitaph, he wrote his own."¹⁶ Wilde goes on to describe the torture of the guardsman as being hanged like

**A beast is hanged;
They did not eve toll;
A requiem 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.**

(11.511-22)

Therefore, we recognize the torture of this horrible death which indicates how prisoners in general and the executed ones in particular are treated and killed like animals "brutalized below the level of any of the brute creation"¹⁷.

This executed prisoner becomes a symbol of all who suffer in Reading Gaol, those who are mocked at and insulted.

There is, indeed, in **The Ballad of Reading Gaol** a heavy loading of religious sentiment, though it seems a sign of contradiction suggested by Wilde's reference to God's indifference when He thrust **us out of His care**. Nevertheless, Wilde, as we find in the above line, associates the procession of the execution of the murderer to Christ's crucifixion and how He was stripped of His clothes, and treated with humiliation, but above all that being laughed and mocked at. This comes to be more clear when Wilde refers to the prisoner's **strangled scream, bitter cry and bloody sweats** which are similar to Christ's. There are also metaphoric allusions to the **Wounds of Christ** and **the bitter wine upon a sponge / was the savour of Remores**. With such references, the poet heightens the suffering of the condemned man, showing at the same time a vivid sign of development or maturity represented through a deep awareness of the fact that **God's eternal Laws are kind (1.612)** as opposed to the laws of the jail that are set against the helpless prisoners. That is why Wilde's imagination conjured up the execution scene with the most awfulness and horror that man could ever felt.

Epifanio San Juan believed that Wilde's **Ballad** is a cry of pain to reflect his sense of indignation at social injustice;¹⁸ in other words, it is the image of the human condition, a vivid picture of the misery his fellows endured in prison under hard labour :

**We tore the trry rope to shreds;
With blunt and bleeding nails:
We rubbed the doore, and scrubbed the foors,
And cleaned the shining rails:
And, rank by rank, we stooped the plank,
And clattered with the pails
We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,
We banged the tins, and bawled the humns,
And sweated on the mill,
But in the heart of every man
Terror was lying still.**

(11.217-28)

And so the poem continues in a great sense of indignation and lamentation, "a veritable cry from the heart of despair,...until he reaches his great indictment of the work system of which prison is the extreme representation"¹⁹

**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.**

(11.535-40)

It is an obvious attack against the ill laws of prisons and the humiliating prison of England. Wilde emphasizes the confinement of prisoners through referring to the strong walls of prison and how they are **built with bricks of shame, and bound with bars** (11.556-57) which increase torture that makes days pass with great length as Years. The bars of prison are further described to give a deeper sense of confinement:

**...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!**

(11.559-565)

Wilde describes the actual sense of imprisonment felt by the prisoners. No moon and no sunshine entered their cell in which they spend twenty three out of the twenty four hours in the day. This was to condemn the prisoners to eternal isolation even from natural scenes. In fact, it is not only external isolation but also a spiritual one since they are deprived of Christ's looks, and mercy. It is a bitter irony when Wilde says that it is better for prisoners to be hidden **lest Christ should see/ how men their brothers maim** (11.557-58). The implication is similar to the above mentioned lines, which indicate that each prisoner is living in his own hell and tortured by the savage warders, hence it is better for Christ's compassion not to confront man's brutality to his fellow men.

However, through out **The Ballad**, Wilde makes his task to give a sacramental value to his experience, to his poor and to the truth life. It is true that the horror of death, which starts with the hanging the guardsman, makes **The gaol rose up a wail/Of impotent despair (11.331-32)**, and the prisoners

**Not dare to breath a prayer,
Or to give an anguish scope;**

Since

**Something was dead in each of us,
And what was dead was Hope.**

(11.357-360)

But in the midst of this dreariness the poet appeals to **Dear Christ and God's sweet air` (1.309)**. It is in the conscious of the poet that God's mercy is there and that the red Hell (prison) cannot prevent saving man from his torture, whom **Christ came down to save (1.529)**. Although the prisoners are considered sinners **Christ for sinner gave` , His Blessed Cross` (11.526-27)**.

Wilde himself who loved excessively the pleasures of life, came to realize its truth and value through the social, physical and spiritual wasteland he spent in prison. He almost to acquire his real identity with a sense of peace. It is God's spiritual power which at least came to be fully recognized, as if agony leads to the communion with God.²⁰

By the end of the poem, one comes out to feel a sense of relief specially when the poem bursts with :

**Ah! Happy they whose hearts can break
And peace of pardon Win!
How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in ?**

(11.620-625)

The inner development goes on within the poet that he starts to believe that the cruel execution of the guardsman is no longer an end in itself since men

**Waits for the holy hands that took
The thief to paradise;**

(11.628-29)

The reference is to one of the thieves who was crucified with Christ; despite his sins, Christ forgave him because he was able to find a spiritual union with God; an indication that the executed man achieve the same union.

Wilde tries to say that death is not an end, since **Christ call forth the dead**, thus **No need to waste the foolish tear/Or heave a windy sigh** (650-53). It seems to be quite true that **The Ballad of Reading Gaol** aims at eternity as Wilde defined it himself.

His experience in Reading Gaol much affected Wilde the man and the writer. After he left prison, he often spoke with affection of the man he had met, and maintained a correspondence with some of the prisoners. His condemnation of the system that torured him and his fellow prisoners "is the dominant theme of the only literary works of an importance which he produced during the last phase of his life"²¹. These are **The Ballad of Reading Gaol** and the two letters which he wrote to the **Daily Chronicle** on prison conditions soon after his release from jail.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol, though it tells a story, goes beyond mere narration. It can be read as an autobiography but one cannot exclude its social and spiritual implications. Frank Harris and George Woodcock estimate **The Ballad** as being the best and most original of Wilde's poems because of his interest in the down trodden with whom he shared suffering, and his detestation, of oppression, cruelty and ugliness which deny man's individualism.²² In his essay "**The Soul of Man Under Socialism**", Wilde reflects somewhat the same social thought; man, he says, must not "live like a badly fed animal"²³ treated with violence and humility. Man's development, Wilde asserts, can be achieved with the assistance of Christianity, if man shows the desire for it.

However, Wilde himself varied in estimating his own ballad. He wanted it to be as good as a poem can be. Once he said "some of the verses are awfully good" and the whole affair is a triumph.²⁴ But it seems that **The Ballad** itself stands opposed to his theory of art. The emotional reality that he grasped in the poem led him to realize that "catastrophes in life bring about catastrophes in art"²⁵ This is what prison did for Oscar Wilde. Despite that, the **Reading Gaol** stands as a lyrical cry, showing his own abasement and misery,

mixed with social awareness, leading it to be universalized into permanent art.

Notes

- ¹ Vyvyan Hollan, **Oscar Wilde and His World** (London: Book Club Associates, 1966), p.5.
- ² H. Montgomery Hyde, **Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath** (London: Methuen, 1963) p. XV.
- ³ Oscar Wilde and His World: p.94.
- ⁴ Hesketh Pearson, "The Oxonian," **The Life of Oscar Wilde** (Harmonds Worth: Penguin Books, 1960), p.36
- ⁵ Quoted in Frank Harris, "Meeting with Lord Alfred Douglas," **Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions** (London: Apater Book, 1965), p.104
- ⁶ Richard Aldington, "Introduction," **The Portable : Oscar Wilde** (New York: University Press, 1957), p.6.
- ⁷ Quoted in **Oscar Wilde and His World**: p. 106 .
- ⁸ **Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath**: p.3.
- ⁹ **Oscar Wilde His Life and Confessions** : p.199.
- ¹⁰ Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamain, "The New Romanticism," **History of English Literature** (London: J.H. Dent, 1947), p.12178.
- ¹¹ James Laver, **Oscar Wilde** (London :Longmans, 1963), p.25.
- ¹² George Woodcock, "The Social Rebel," **oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays**, ed. Richard Ellmann (New Jersey: Prentice – Hall, 1969), p.166.
- ¹³ Flex E. Scheling, **The English Lyric** (New York: Kennikat Press, 1940), p.246.
- ¹⁴ Epifanio San Juan, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol and the Image of the Human Condition," **The Art of Oscar Wilde** (New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1967), p.207.
- ¹⁵ David Lodge, "Oscar Wilde : **The Ballad of Reading Gaol**," **Modes of Modern Writing** (London: Hodder & Stoughton Publication, 1989), p.17.
- ¹⁶ **Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath**: p.69.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.3.
- ¹⁸ **The Art of Oscar Wilde** : p.205.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.209.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ **Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays:** p.163.

²² Ibid., 168.

²³ Hesketh Pearson, ed. "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," **Essays by Oscar Wilde** (London: Methuen , 1950),p.231.

²⁴ **The life of Oscar Wilde** :p.348.

²⁵ **The English Lyric:** p.246.

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