

“The Ballad of Reading Gaol” by Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was imprisoned in 1897 for offences under the Criminal Amendment Act of 1885 which outlawed homosexuality—or, more specifically, homosexual acts. His criminal prosecution followed on the failure of his own libel case against Lord Queensberry who called him a “posing sodomite” [sic] on a post-card left at his gentleman’s club. In court, Wilde offered a defence of the “love that dares not speak its name”. (He also said some rather foolish things about not kissing boys unless they were pretty.) After he had served a three-year prison sentence with hard labour in Reading Gaol where he endured the appalling prison conditions of the day, he settled in Paris where he died of an ear infection in 1900. Meanwhile his wife and sons were forced to change their family name in order to avoid the notoreity which the case aroused in England. Not long after his death his brilliant comedies were revived on stage, yet it took half-a-century before homosexuality was decriminalised in Britain, and rather longer in Ireland. In one view, Wilde was punished for his satires on the British Upper Class which, in fact, was deeply involved in transgressive sexual practices though the truth was deeply hidden. One of the sons of his accuser, Lord Queensberry—who devised the rules for boxing—was the lover of a British Prime Minister Rosebery. Another committed suicide. In recent years Wilde has morphed into “St. Oscar”, a hero of Gay Liberation. His intensely moving poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” reveals the humanitarian side of his nature. His *De Profundis*, a collection of long letters to his former lover “Bosie”, is less impartial and he blames the other for his problems.

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
He did not wear his scarlet coat,
In a suit of shabby gray;
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 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.”

*The prison-cap resembles a
sportsman’s

*sadly or regretfully

*be hanged

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!

[...]

*excessively brightly
coloured

Question Sheet

TASK: Read the poem in this very much abbreviated version or read it in full on the Poetry Foundation Website or Ricorso (Wilde > *Quotations, &c.*) and write carefully-worded answers to AT LEAST TWO of the following questions:

- 1) Wilde writes, “My pain I could not feel.” Consider the use of the word pain in the stanzas above, showing some knowledge of Wilde’s situation and that of the other men in prison.

- 2) Wilde writes, “Dear Christ, the very prison walls Suddenly seemed to reel ...” Do you think that this is a literal evocation of the Christian Saviour or merely an expression?

- 3) Wilde writes, “Each man kills the thing he loves [...]”—hardly a normal reference to the conduct of ordinary people. Is this a personal allusion or a general truth and, if so, what does it mean?
