

The biographical background

The time in prison

Analysis of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”

The creation of the poem

The structure of “The Ballad”

Conclusion



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The time in prison

On 25 May 1895, after two trials, Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years hard labour. He got arrested on 5 April but most of the time he could spend in freedom, released on bail. At first, Wilde was sent to Wandsworth gaol; on 20 November he was transferred to Reading, the jail where he would serve the rest of his sentence.

In these days the prison system was not as humane as today. The aim was not to make people fit for a reintegration in society but merely to lock them away. The men were locked in their cells twenty-three hours of the day and had only one hour exercise in which they were not allowed to talk at all. The food was inadequate, medical treatment was primitive and the small libraries, if there were some at all, were in the charge of narrow-minded chaplains. Monotony determined life in prison and hostile warders used every break of the rules as an excuse to punish the prisoners.

Wilde suffered terribly from the fact that he was not allowed to write at first. Yet, he faithfully obeyed the laws and got through it with ever new tenacity.

Analysis of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”

The creation of the poem

In “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” Oscar Wilde digests his experiences in prison.

The factual background is the execution of Charles Thomas Wooldridge who had murdered his wife. His execution took place in Reading Gaol during the time of Wilde’s imprisonment. But for the ballad this background is of no great importance since Wilde does not concentrate on Wooldridge’s last thoughts before the execution but rather on the way his fellow prisoners feel about it. Besides, there is a lot of criticism of the prison system at that time.

“The Ballad of Reading Gaol” is a poem that derives from its precise biographical context, and was completed relatively quickly.

On 19 May 1897 Oscar Wilde was released from Reading Jail and within less than two weeks, after he had moved to France, he was already at work on ‘The Ballad’.

The first draft was written quickly, but revision and expansion took longer.

In late August he sent it to his publisher, saying it was still unrevised, and

The structure of “The Ballad”

Oscar Wilde’s ballad consists of 109 stanzas which are grouped into six parts.

Part I, consisting of 16 stanzas, tells of a prisoner who murdered the woman he loved and was sentenced to death for that crime. There is a subdivision after the first six stanzas.

Part Ia only focuses on the prisoner; Part Ib, on the other hand, takes a far wider perspective, reflecting about men in general, who all kill “the thing they love” but who do not all have to die. A description about the horrible conditions of prison rounds off that part.

Part II consists of 13 stanzas and is built up similarly to Part I.

The first six stanzas, Part IIa, come back to the condemned man; the remaining seven stanzas, Part IIb, are focusing on a larger group, in this case the whole of the prisoners and their life-and-death fears. The fate hanging over the condemned man seems to be a threat to all of them. Additionally, the life “outside”, where free persons live, love and dance, is contrasted to the life “inside” the prison walls where prisoners sit out their

Part III is the longest one with 37 stanzas. Part IIIa, the first twelve verses, describes how the prisoners see the condemned man for the last time noting the “yellow hole” (III, 61), the grave which is already waiting for the corpse of the man. Part IIIb, consisting of only six stanzas, focuses on the evening and gradual fall of the night. The whole section climaxes in the 19 verses of Part IIIc with the fellow prisoners’ complete identification with Wooldridge during the night preceding his execution. During the night, the inmates have terrible dreams as if they themselves had been condemned to death. Part IIIc closes with a vision of the execution.

Part IV, with its 23 verses, shows in detail how the dead man’s punishment is extended even after death. Part IVa, consisting of six stanzas, features the man’s fellow prisoners on the next morning. Part IVb, two verses, is a short reference to the last night in Part IIIc and is opposed by Part IVc which focuses on the warders and the grave of burning lime. In the last 12 stanzas making up Part IVd, the corpse is buried in a great hurry without a final prayer or a cross to mark the place. The destruction of the prisoner, continuing even after his death, clearly

Part V is concerned with the abstract problem of collective human and social guilt and starts off with a critic remark concerning incarceration. In the first four stanzas, Part Va, the image of the ideal and united community of prisoners is counterposed with the recognition that real life can only happen outside. Prison only intensifies the inmates' isolation and aggression, as Part Vb, and Part Vc, each consisting of four verses, show. Part Vd, with its two stanzas, and Part Ve, with its three stanzas, introduce the religious dimension of execution and criticise the power some "men in red" (V, 91) have over the life and death of people.

Part VI, finally, concludes the ballad in its three verses by once more taking up the theme that "each man kills the thing he loves" (I, 37), repeating almost word for word the relevant verse in Part Ib. It combines the narrative base of the poem, the execution of the prisoner, and its philosophical centre, the problem of guilt and the responsibility of those who pass judgement.

Conclusion

The power of the poem derives from the well-proportioned balance of a realistic presentation of the monotony of prison life and the unavoidable fate that awaits the condemned man and the bits of grotesque fantasy through which Wilde could capture the nightmare quality of the period before the execution. Very important in that context is also the sympathy of the speaker with Wooldridge.

Guilt is presented as lying with the laws that have condemned him and the society which has made and imposed these laws and not with the murderer. The main problem raised in the poem is that of social justice. It is presented so effectively that, although not being a piece of propaganda literature, 'The Ballad' is a very impressive poem which has a strong emotional impact on the reader.