



## The story of a hanging

Wilde began his literary career when he won a prize at Oxford University with a poem in 1878; he ended the same career twenty years later as the anonymous, outcast author of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*<sup>1</sup>, whose first six editions gave the author as 'C.3.3.', which was the number of Wilde's prison cell.

This poem, which is made up of 109 stanzas grouped into 6 sections, is Wilde's most famous poetical composition and it is the only work he wrote after his release from prison. Although the writer claimed that 'the idea for *The Ballad* came to me while I was in the dock, waiting for my sentence to be pronounced', the poem tells the story of a hanging which took place in Reading Gaol in July 1896 and which Wilde witnessed as an inmate.

The few stanzas move between the various stages of the condemned man's progress towards the gallows, from the cell to the day of the hanging.

Oscar Wilde  
*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*  
(1898)

Parts 1-5

### 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,  
5 The poor dead woman whom he loved,  
And murdered in her bed.

[...]

I walked, with other souls in pain,  
Within another ring<sup>2</sup>,  
And was wondering if the man had done  
10 A great or little thing,  
When a voice behind me **whispered** low,  
"That fellows got to swing<sup>3</sup>."

Dear Christ! the very prison walls  
Suddenly seemed to reel<sup>4</sup>,  
15 And the sky above my head became  
Like a casque<sup>5</sup> of scorching steel<sup>6</sup>;  
And, though I was a soul in pain,  
My pain I could not feel.

### II

Like two doomed<sup>7</sup> ships that pass in storm  
20 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.

25 A prison wall was round us both,  
Two **outcast** men we were:  
The world had thrust us from its heart<sup>8</sup>,  
And God from out His care<sup>9</sup>:  
And the iron gin<sup>10</sup> that waits for Sin  
30 Had caught us in its snare<sup>11</sup>.

### III

We tore the tarry rope to shreds<sup>12</sup>  
With blunt and bleeding nails<sup>13</sup>;  
We rubbed<sup>14</sup> the doors, and scrubbed<sup>15</sup> the floors,  
And cleaned the **shining** rails:  
35 And, rank by rank<sup>16</sup>, we **soaped** the plank<sup>17</sup>,  
And clattered with the pails<sup>18</sup>.

We sewed the sacks<sup>19</sup>, we broke the stones,  
We turned the dusty drill<sup>20</sup>:  
We banged the tins<sup>21</sup>, and bawled<sup>22</sup> the hymns,  
40 And sweated on the mill<sup>23</sup>:  
But in the heart of every man  
Terror was lying still.

### IV

They hanged him as a beast is hanged:  
They did not even toll<sup>24</sup>

1 Gaol. Carcere, prigione.

2 ring. Cerchio.

3 swing. Essere impiccato.

4 reel. Turbinare.

5 casque. Casco, elmo.

6 scorching steel. Acciaio bruciante.

7 doomed. Condannate.

8 The world ... heart. Il mondo ci aveva scacciati dal suo cuore.

9 And ... care. Dio dalle sue cure.

10 gin. Trappola.

11 snare. Morsa.

12 We tore ... shreds. Facevamo a pezzi la fune incatramata.

13 blunt and bleeding nails. Unghie spuntate e sanguinanti.

14 We rubbed. Strofinavamo.

15 scrubbed. Lavavamo sfregando.

16 rank by rank. Una fila dietro l'altra.

17 plank. Grande tavola.

18 clattered with the pails. Sbattevamo i secchi.

19 We sewed the sacks. Cucivamo i sacchi.

20 dusty drill. Trapano polveroso.

21 We banged the tins. Sbattevamo le lattine (all'ora del pranzo).

22 bawled. Urlavamo.

23 sweated on the mill. Sudavamo in fabbrica.

24 They did not even toll. Non suonarono nemmeno a morto.



45 A requiem that might have brought  
Rest to his startled<sup>25</sup> soul,  
But hurriedly<sup>26</sup> they took him out,  
And hid him in a **hole**.

They stripped him of<sup>27</sup> his canvas clothes,  
50 And gave him to the flies:  
They mocked the swollen purple throat<sup>28</sup>,  
And the stark and staring eyes<sup>29</sup>:  
And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud<sup>30</sup>  
In which their convict lies.

55 The Chaplain would not **kneel** to pray

By his dishonoured grave:  
Nor mark it with that blessed Cross  
That Christ for sinners gave,  
Because the man was one of those  
60 Whom Christ came down to save.

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;  
65 And that each day is like a year,  
A year whose days are long.

25 startled. Sbigottita.

26 hurriedly. Velocemente.

27 They stripped him of. Gli tolsero.

28 They mocked ... throat. Presero in giro la gola gonfia e rossa.

29 stark and staring eyes. Occhi inflessibili e sbarrati.

30 they heaped the shroud. Ammucchiarono il sudario.

## LITERARY COMPETENCE

### 1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1 a person rejected from home or society ..... | 5 genuflect .....                     |
| 2 rubbed .....                                 | 6 brilliant .....                     |
| 3 pit .....                                    | 7 spoke with soft, quiet sounds ..... |
| 4 disgraceful .....                            |                                       |

## > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

### 2 READ the poem again and match the headings of the five parts of the text with the corresponding lines.

- The prisoner's execution: lines .....
- The parallelism between the poet and the murderer: lines .....
- A reflection upon the universality of guilt: lines .....
- The presentation of the prisoner: lines .....
- The reality of life in prison: lines .....

### 3 ANSWER the following questions.

- 1 What did the prisoner have on his hands when he was found by the police?
- 2 Who had he killed? Where?
- 3 Who is the 'I' of line 7?
- 4 What news was he given in line 12?
- 5 What are his reactions to that news?
- 6 What did he share with the prisoner?
- 7 What were the prisoners' common actions?
- 8 What feelings characterised the prisoners?
- 9 What terrible details of the prisoner's death are given in the last part of the poem?
- 10 What does the poet wonder about in lines 61-66?



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➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

**4 RECOGNISE** the characteristics of the old ballad form present in this poem.

**5 FOCUS** on the language of this poem. It contains a strong element of realism, as Wilde described in a letter: 'With regard to the adjectives, I admit there are too many "dreadfuls" and "fearfuls". The difficulty is that the objects in prison have no shape or form'.

- 1 What do the prisoners' actions convey to the reader? What do these actions point out?
- 2 Line 39 contains two symbols referred to the prisoners' moments of rest. Identify them and say what they highlight.

**6 CONCENTRATE** on the protagonist of the poem. The poet chooses as his subject the outcast among outcasts, the prisoner who has inexplicably killed the woman he loved. Can this human being be seen as a symbol? State what he might stand for.

**7 IDENTIFY** the theme of the ballad. What does the poet denounce openly? What is the poem a plea for?

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➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**8 DISCUSS.** Find similarities and differences between this ballad and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (→ 4.12).

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