The Ballad of Reading Gaol by Oscar Wilde

Annotation by Emma Baldwin: A heartbreaking depiction of the losses, betrayals, and tragedies that all 'men' suffer in their lifetime.This poem is Oscar Wilde's most successful poem and was his last great work written before his death in 1900. 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' details the emotional experience of imprisonment, something that Wilde lived first hand when he was sentences to two years hard labor in Reading Gaol after a failed court case with his longterm partner's father. While imprionsed, Wilde wrote another work that's now closely associated with the last years of his life, De Profundis. Wilde died shortly after being released from Reading Gaol.

The poem begins with the story of Charles Thomas Wooldridge who murdered his wife. The man has been sentenced to hang and goes about his life in prison wistfully. Wilde, and the other men, are jealous of his attitude as he has accepted his fate and is the better for it. In the second section Wooldridge is hanged. He meets his death bravely while the other men cower from even the idea. Wilde spends time describing how the monotony of jail is only broken by the terror of it.

In the third section Wilde describes the daily activities of the prisoners and the way they spend their nights. They are haunted by phantoms that seem to be very much alive. The rest of the poem describes the funeral of Wooldridge and how his body was covered in lime. It also speaks on Wilde's general ideas about the justice system and that one must come to God to find happiness. The poem concludes with Wilde restating his original refrain regarding the fact that all men "kill the thing they love," in one way or another.

In 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol,' Wilde engages with themes of loss, imprisonment, and emotional turbulence. The poet works from his own experiences in Reading Gaol, and those of men he met or knew about, to craft this poem about the sorrows of life, love, and solitude. Wilde was separate from everything and everyone he loved during this dark period of his life and those emotions come through in the text. He focuses, through repetition, on how men inevitably destroy that which they love. Context: The poem begins with a discussion of Charles Thomas Wooldridge who was condemned to die in 1896 for murdering his wife in a jealous rage. During an argument they tumbled onto the street, and he slit her throat with a knife. After the murder he begged the officers to arrest him and mourned his action until his death.

Structure and Form: 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' by Oscar Wilde is a 109 stanza poem separated into six sections. The sections all maintain the same rhyme scheme of ABCBDB. The poem feels quite consistent and regular due to this fact, as well as the numerous instances of repetition that Wilde makes use of.

Literary Devices: Wilde makes use of several literary devices in 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol.' These include but are not limited to alliteration, enjambment, and repetition. The latter is one of the most important in the poem. It can be seen in Wilde's broad repeittion of lines like "For each man kills the thing he loves." A numberof the stanzas in this poem are identical or close to identical due to this literary device. It helps the poem maintain its sing-song-like feeling.

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.

1) Before beginning this poem it is important to consider the place from which the poet is writing. Wilde is the speaker in this piece but the actions described in the poem are not his own. They belong to Charles Thomas Wooldridge. For more information about his crime, see "Introduction to…" and read more here. The first lines of the piece take the reader directly to the scene of the murder. Wilde describes the moment directly after Wooldridge was found with his wife. The man did not "wear his scarlet coat," at that time because "blood and wine are red." Wilde is describing the fact that Wooldridge took off his Royal Horse Guards uniform before committing this crime. In this first line there is a simple mistake that Wilde was well aware of. In an effort to maintain the rhyme scheme of the piece he was forced to refer to the coat as red, rather than it's actual color, blue. When they found Wooldridge with his wife there was "blood and wine" on his hands. The man and his wife were found in the street outside their home, but once more Wilde changes a detail to suit the poem. He places Laura in her "bed." It is clear that Wilde pities this woman but also feels some degree of empathy for the murderer himself, likely due to all that will follow.

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.

2) Although Wilde was in Reading Gaol at the same time as Wooldridge he was not there to witness the trial. He imagines the setting in which the deliberations took place, and casts Wooldridge there in his "suit of shabby grey." He describes the man as appearing "wistful," and walking with a "light and gay" step. Although he has been sentenced to die, Wooldridge is not bothered by it. It is known from historical records that Wooldridge deeply regretted his attack on his wife and was satisfied to spent his remaining days, until his execution, in prison.

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.

3) Once more, and not for the last time, Wilde emphasizes the "wistful" way in which Wooldridge carries himself. It is likely that Wilde was jealous of the man's inner peace and acceptance of his dire situation. From his own place in the prison Wilde is able to see Wooldridge as he moves through his daily routine. He observes him looking up at the "little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky." These lines are relevant to both Wilde and Wooldridge. Wilde is able to describe these moments so poignantly because he was there to experience them too. He knows the importance of a simple fleeting beauty of a cloud.

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."

4) For the first time Wilde refers to himself as "I." Here he is, "with the other souls" as they walk in a "ring" around a prison courtyard. This is the manner of exercise that they are allowed to take. While walking the men whisper to one another and Wilde meditates on what Wooldridge, and the other inmates, have done. He does not know whether "the man," presumably Wooldridge had done a "great or little thing." He gets a clue from an inmate behind him who says in a low whisper, "'That fellow's got to swing'." He knows now that the man in question is on death row, waiting to be executed.

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.

5) This revelation, about the pain Wooldridge must be in, causes the narrator to "reel." It sends his head spinning and it is as if the "walls" are moving. The sky that hangs above Wilde's head became "Like a casque of scorching steel." Casque, refers to at the metal helmet of a knight's costume. It is as if the world has compressed itself around the speaker and he is trapped in an even greater nightmare. All he can feel is the pain that Wooldridge must be experiencing, his own problems and future slip to the side.

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.

6) The only thoughts he knows are those of Wooldridge. Wilde is able to, through their shared experiences in Reading Gaol, understand a good portion of what he is going through. Wilde comprehends the fact that this man is "wistful" because he knows he deserves to die. He had "killed the thing he loved / And so he had to die." Wooldridge has accepted his fate and finds peace there.

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!

7) In what is going to be a refrain, Wilde expands his comprehension of Wooldridge's situation, and relates it to all men. All men, "each man," destroys what he loves most in one way or another. Some of these men ruin relationships and possibilities "with a bitter look," others, through a misplaced "flattering word." There is a portion of the male population that, in their fear, betray the ones they love and never own up to it, others, like Wooldridge are "brave" in their choices. While Wilde is not condoning what Wooldridge did, he sees it as being "braver" than slinking away, taking no responsibility.

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.

8) Wilde expands this thought in the next two stanzas making a number of different categories for the ways in which men ruin their lives or drive off the ones they love. Some do it when they are "young," some when they are "old." There are the men who are driven by "Lust," and others by "the hands of Gold."

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.

9) There are men in the world who find folly in other ways. Some are liable to "love too little, some too long." There are the men that "sell" out their love, and others who can only "buy" it. There are men who "do the deed," (killing the thing they love), with tears in their eyes and others who are able to do it "without a sigh." He concludes this stanza by stating that while all men are going to kill "the thing [they] love," not all will die for it as Wooldridge will.

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

10) In the final half of this first section the poet turns to speak about a metaphorical man that does not own up to the "killing" of the thing he loves. This man is one of the cowards. He does not experience the things that Wilde and Wooldridge are forced to. This man will never have to die a "death of shame" with a "noose about his neck." His life will not end "Into an empty place" as Wooldridge's will. This, in many ways, places Wooldridge, a murderer, above other men.

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.

11) Additionally, this unnamed man who did not admit to "killing" the thing he loved does "not sit with silent men / Who watch him night and day." As Wilde and Wooldridge are constantly, this man is not being observed at all times. Men in prison have no privacy. There are people there to watch while one "tries to weep [or] pray." They are there to make sure that one does not kill himself before his day of execution. The prison officials do not, as Wilde says, want to "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.

12) This man does not wake up in a cold sell at "dawn" to see the "Dread figures" of the prison around his room. He does not have to see the Chaplain, or the "Governor all in shiny black" on the day of his execution.

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.

13) On this morning of his execution, the man in the story is forced to rise in "piteous haste" and redress in his "convict-clothes." There is a doctor outside the sell who is there to note everything the man does, even on his way to death. Each "new and nerve-twitched pose" is written down. The man who "does not die" will never see or feel these things. In this way he is blessed, but he is also among the group of men that Wilde considers cowardly.

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.

14) In this short story that Wilde has weaved into the ballad, the man who does not own up to his deeds will never know the "sickening thirst" in one's throat as the "Hangman" enters into the room. This man will not ever experience the binding of his hands with "three leathern thongs." Soon, the man who is being executed will "thirst no more."

H*e 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.

15) Bound and listening to the men around him, the prisoner, who will never be the cowardly man, hears the "Burial Office read" his edict of death. He will never be condemned as this man is, or have to be reminded by the "terror of his soul" that he is not dead, but is about to be. The man will never be forced to pass by "his own coffin" as he makes his way to the "shed" where he will be executed.

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.

16) Finally, Wilde concludes this short narrative very chillingly. The man who is there to die will have to pass by his own coffin, and enter into the "hideous shed" where he will be executed. This is a sight the cowardly man will never see. His lips will never feel as if they are made "of clay" as he prays and begs "For his agony to pass." The last thing this man will not have to feel are the lips of "Caiaphas," the priest in the Bible who organized the execution of Jesus Christ, pressed against his "shuddering cheek." Death will not come to this cowardly man in this manner, but it will come to Wooldridge this way.

Section 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.

17) In the six weeks that Wilde observed Wooldridge, the "guardsman" walking in "the yard," or the outdoor portion of the prison, he was always dressed in the "suit of shabby grey" worn by all prisoners. During this time the man always walked with a "step [that] seemed light and gay." He looked, as he always does, "wistfully at the day." The consistent and unwavering rhyme scheme of this poem is one of it's greatest and most powerful assets. It unifies this long ballad in a way that many poems reach for, but cannot achieve.

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.

18) Wilde repeats the same lines concerning Wooldridge's wistfulness and his gaze upon the sky. He says that he watched the "clouds" that moved through the sky like "raveled fleeces."

H*e 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.

19) Wooldridge is different from the other men in a number of notable ways. His wistfulness keeps him from wringing "his hands" like all the other men do. The other men still have some measure of hope in their hearts, but Wooldridge does not. He "only looked upon the sun" and drank in 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!

20) Additionally, Wooldridge does not "weep…or pine" as others do. He takes in the air like "Some healthful anodyne." It is like medicine or wine to him, driving him forward, peacefully to his death. The sun rejuvenates and soothes him.

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.

21) Wilde once more turns the narration on himself. He, and "all the souls in pain" that are walking in the circle of the prison, forget themselves when they see Wooldridge. All they can think of is their own amazement over Wooldridge's peace of mind. They are envious of his wistful nature. The man stood out to the other prisoners. His "light" step and the way he looked at the day were "strange." This was especially the case when one considers the "debt" that he had to "pay."

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.

22) The man stood out to the other prisoners. His "light" step and the way he looked at the day were "strange." This was especially the case when one considers the "debt" that he had 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!

23) In this stanza Wilde compares two different types of trees. Those that are allowed to grow and flourish, and those like the "gallows-tree" for which there is one purpose only. It's participation in death ruins it's beauty. Men "must die" on it's branches.

T*he 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?

24) Wilde understands that all men long for "that seat of grace" in heaven, but none would choose to swap places with Wooldridge. They are not so anxious to meet God that they want to take their last look at the world "through a murderer's collar."

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!

25) In a conclusion to this thought, the speaker makes another comparison. This time between dancing to "violins" and the dancing that one's feet to "upon the air" after they are hanged. These are two very different things that appear the same.

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.

26) The men are very "curious" about Wooldridge and wonder if when it is their turn to die they will "end the self-same way." They also question Wooldridge's interior life. They do not know if there are times that his mind strays to a "red Hell." Perhaps he is not as peaceful as they think.

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.

27) Finally comes the day that the men go outside and Wooldridge is no longer among them. Wilde knows that that day "he was standing up," ready to be hanged. They knew that they would never "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.

28) Wilde compares their almost meeting during their time in prison to the passing of "two doomed ships" in a storm. They had not spoken to one another or actually met in any time but 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.

29) They were stuck in the same prison, with the same walls surrounding them. They were both "outcast men" that the world had thrust from "its heart." Wilde feels an intimate connection to this doomed man and although Wilde's fate would be different, he knew his path to be dark. They were both caught up in "Sin."

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.

30) While Wooldridge may have reached his end in the previous section, Wilde's narration of prison life is not complete. It is important to note that many of things he will mention can relate to both Wooldridge and himself. Wilde takes the time to describe the "Debtors' Yard" in which there a wall that is consistently "dripping" with water. It was "there" that the man, Wooldridge, or even Wilde himself, "took the air" underneath the dark sky. All the time, no matter where he went, Wooldridge has a "Warder" by his side. Just in case some accident befell him, or he was able to commit suicide.

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.

31) At other times of the day he "sat with those who watched" him day in and day out. These people, the warders of the prison, and the other prisoners, saw him "when he rose to weep / And when he crouched to pray." They were determined to keep him from killing himself.

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.

32) Wilde describes those that watch "The man" They are the "governor" of the prison who strictly enforced the "Regulations Act." A law that was meant to limit the amount of religious expression in public. There is also the "Doctor" who felt no emotion about death and only regarded it as a "scientific fact." The Chaplain was there also who "called" on Wooldridge "twice a day."

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.

33) During the two meals that the men had a day, Wooldridge drank his "beer" and "smoked his pipe." He was "resolute" in his peace and it seemed as if there was no "fear" left in him. He claimed to be glad that his death was "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.

34) No one felt like they could ask why he was anxious for his death to come. The "Warders" did not "dare" to ask him. Especially because they are not meant to speak to the prisoners.

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?

35) It might tempt the warders to do something kind and comfort the murderers. Wilde is taken aback by this and ask what they could really say that would comfort the prisoners?

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.

36) Wilde returns to the exterior of the prison where the main action seems to take place. There, the men "trod the Fool's Parade" around the yard. They knew that their procession around the yard was foolish and that they resembled "The Devil's Own Brigade."

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.

37) Wilde moves on to describe the labor that the men were forced to undertake. Wilde was imprisoned with the requirement of "hard labor." They cleaned the doors and floors until their "nails" were bleeding and each "plank" of the floor was clean and the only sound was the clattering of the "pails" of water.

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.

38) They "sewed" up sacks and broke stones outside. They also sang and banged "tins" together as they "sweated on the mill." All this action served as a brief distraction but "terror" was still at the "heart of every man."

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.

39) The terror within them often laid so still that it could only crawl along like a "clogged wave." They often forgot the terror was there until after their work was done. The men would be reminded as they "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.

40) The "yawning mouth" of the hole seemed to "Gape" for any "living thing." The earth was crying "out for blood." They all knew, whenever they saw that, that some prisoner was going to be hanged.

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.

41) As the men walked back into the prison they would be filled with "Death and Dread and Doom." This would only intensify when they passed the hangman and then entered into their own cells for a lonely night.

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.

42) In the long nights their dreams and thoughts were "full of forms of Fear." They would lay away and try to listen to some sound in the corridor or hope for a glance of the stars through "the bars" of their cells."

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?

43) Wooldridge though, was different. He slept like someone who is in a "pleasant meadow-land." This was baffling to the warders who were made to watch him. They could not understand how he slept so well with death near.

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.

44) On the other side of the spectrum are the men who are facing despair for the first time, like Wilde himself. They are unable to sleep and stay up all night keeping the "endless vigil." Their minds are filled with "pain" and the terror spreads through the prison.

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.

45) They are able, through the walls of the prison, and the glances they see of one another, to take on the guilt of others. It is as if one has been stuck with the "sword of Sin." Which has then allowed "molten lead" to spill from their eyes, all because deeds they had not committed.

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.

46) The "warders" wear "felt" shoes so that when they walk down the halls their footsteps are not audible. They are like ghosts in the night that check each door and "peep" in on the men who are often praying. Those who pray are more than likely among the group that have "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

47) It is not a small group that spends the night praying, but many men. They are like the "mourners of a corpse" who are unable to pull themselves away. The night brings out their prays as if midnight were the trailing end of a "hearse." It urges them forward towards death

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.

48) It seems like the day is never going to come and relieve the prisoners of their pain. Terror is always crouching waiting for them "where [they] lay." It is as if all the evil is manifested itself in spirits and is dancing right in front of them.

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.

49) These spirits of evil glide past their cells and "mock" the moon as a source of light. They seem to be without end and have a "loathsome grace" that the men are unable to avoid.

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!

50) The phantoms eventually start to "mop" away, "hand in hand." They do not vanish as the prisoners would hope, but spin and flip in the air, taunting and terrifying the men.

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.

51) The phantoms also sing out loud for the torment of the prisoners. They are holding a "grisly masque" and singing as if they want to "wake the dead." This is truly a gruesome sight, contained within the prisoner's heads, which they have no choice but to witness every night.

"*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."

52) The ghosts cry out and sing of how all men play with fate. It is like rolling a dice. Some men are even able, through their status, to make it like a game. Those who lose end up in prison, 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.

53) While an outsider might dismisses these phantoms of "things of air," they are much more. They hold in their hands the lives of the prisoners. The ghosts are real, they are "living things," that are "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.

54) The ghosts will still not leave the prisoners alone. They "waltz" around the prison, some in pairs. They climb up and down the stairs and "sneer and leer." This drives the prisoners deeper into their 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.

55) It seems for a moment that morning is coming, but it is not yet time. This night has gone on so long, and the men has been so entrenched in their ghostly dreams, that they are starting to be afraid of the sun. They know it will bring them a "Justice" they aren't prepared for.

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?

56) There is a wind that is "moaning" around the "weeping prison-wall." It brings along with it the slow turning of the wheel of time. Wilde asks what is it the men had done to be controlled by such a "seneschal," or judicial officer. He is referring to the governor, Time, that seems to control them.
)

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.

57) Finally, after a long seemingly endless night, Wilde can see the shadows of the bars of his cell. This lets him know that the sun is beginning to rise and "Move…across the whitewashed wall." He knows, as do the other men, that "somewhere in the world / God's dreadful dawn was red." It is as if the men lost some of their number during the darkness.

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.

58) By six o'clock in the morning the men are up cleaning their cells, and by seven they are still. The prison is cold, their stillness, and the quiet of the building freezes them. It is as if "the Lord of Death" has entered in the prison with the desire 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.

59) It is time now for the entry of death. He did not come to the prison, and to the men, dressed as royalty or riding a "white steed." He does not need these embellishments. All he, and the gallows need, are "Three yards of cord and a sliding board."

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.

60) The morning may have come, but their spirits are not lifted. They "dare not to breathe a prayer" or truly show how unhappy they are. They all know that something has died. The darkness, spirits, and answerless prayers have killed "Hope" in each one of them.

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!

61) The hope is pointless and "Man's…justice" will go where it wants to. It does not just "swerve" to the side to avoid anyone. It will take whoever it wants to. Whether they be "weak" or "strong."

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.

62) The men are waiting for the clocks to strike eight. They are very much on edge and know of the importance of this time of day and have no control over what is happening. Fate will choose who is to face the noose. It could be the "best man" or 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!

63) Just as they have been waiting all night for the morning to come, they now wait for eight o'clock. The men all sit, like stones in the valley with their hearts beating "thick and quick."

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.

64) All of a sudden, the "prison-clock" breaks the silence. It is answered by a "wail" that rises up from the "gaol." It is a sound of "impotent despair," and of wants unmet.

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.

65) It is at this time of day that the noose has made it's choice and the other men in the prison are forced to see the "fearful things" that accompany a hanging like the "hempen rope" that is hooked up over the "blackened beam." They can hear the screams of the dying prisoner combined with the sound of the hanging.

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.

66)They know of the man's "wild regrets and bloody sweats" and how it is these things that forced him to that "bitter cry." Wilde notes that there are none in or out of the prison who understand the anguish of the dying man as well as he. He sympathizes with the man and relates to his living of "more lives than one" and dying more deaths than one."

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.

67) On the day in which the man is hanged there is no church service or blessing from the Chaplain. His face is too "wan" and his heart is tired. He seems to feel the darkness of these moments as well.

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.

68) The prison officials know that the men feel the darkness as well and keep a close eye on them throughout the day. The warders come to open each individual cell and the men are able to leave. They go down the stairs, departing from their "separate Hells."

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.

69) The men are able to leave the prison but not in the way they want to. They are exiting and see other men who's faces are "white with fear" but no men who look "wistfully at the day" as Wooldridge used to.

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.

70) Wilde would never see another "sad" man who was able to look upon the day with the same wistfulness that Wooldridge did. The men, including himself, are able to see the clouds and sky, but are not able to view them as impassively. To them, they symbolize the unreachable freedom.

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.

71) Amongst the men that walk outside are "those" that know that they should be executed as well. They all know that they have committed the same, or a similar crime. But they all have "killed a thing" that was already dead, the hope inside themselves, while Wooldridge had killed his wife. Wilde does find a difference between the two.

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!

72) Wilde notes that any man who is able to "sin a second time" will take up a "dead soul to pain." It will rouse a man from his perpetual nature. It is like opening a great wound that will not stop bleeding.

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.

73) Once more Wilde mocks the procession in which the men walk though the courtyard. They are like "apes" or "clowns" that walk on the "slippery asphalte yard." No one speaks, there is nothing to say.

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.

74) The repetitive nature of the circle they are making focuses their thoughts on the memory of "dreadful things." It is as if "Horror" was before each man and "terror" is creeping right behind. There is no escape.

he 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.

75) The warders are also there. They wear clean uniforms and make it their goal to "herd" the prisoners around. They appear to be upright officers but the men cannot help but notice 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.

76) The warders had been about the job of burying Wooldridge. They had a grave, that was "no grave at all." It as only a bit of mud and sand next to the wall of the prison. There they threw in the body and covered it over with lime to help speed up decomposition and disguise any smell.

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!

77) While this was not a great funeral, the "wretched man" does have his pall, or funeral cloth wrapped over his coffin. It is not of the usual variety though. Wilde describes it as being a "sheet of flame," the lime is burning away his body. This, and his shame, are all that Wooldridge has left.

Stanza Twelve: 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.

78) For the rest of time, until the body is completely gone, the lime will eat the "flesh and bone away." It will be consistent in it's progression, never stopping, and always eating the "heart away."

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.

78) It will take three years for the spot of ground to take "root or seedling there." It will be an "unblessed…sterile" spot that looks up at the sky "with unreproachful stare." Even in death the "murderer" is without reproach.

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.

80) The warders believe that if they were to plant anything there that it would be tainted by the "murderer's heart." But that is not true. The earth, that belongs to God, is "kindlier than men know." If they were to plant flowers there the "red rose" would only be more red and the white rose, more white.

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?

81) Wilde imagines the sight of the roses growing over this grave. He sees the red rose coming from Wooldridge's mouth and a white rose coming from his heart. It is one of those "strange ways" that "Christ brings his will to light."

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.

82) The warders of the prison would never let this happen though. They only give the prisoners "shard, the pebble and the flint." Nothing of beauty is allowed to exist such as the "flowers [which] 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.

83) Never, in the prison, will a red or white rose bloom. Never will it's petals touch the "mud and sand" and serve as a reminder to the men that "God's Son died for all." Wilde believes deeply that beauty will heal mankind and remind the men of the powers of God and the sacrifices of Christ.

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,

84) Although the body of Wooldridge is interred in such "hideous" prison ground, the man is not disturbed. His spirit does not weep.

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.

85) Wooldridge is at peace, or "will be soon." He does not hold any anger for his life, there is nothing that will "make him mad." Additionally, there is nothing to disturb him. There is not a moon or sun where he is now.

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

86) The warders of the prison treated him as "beast" and hanged him thus. The men did not even speak a "requiem" or a piece about the dead man that could have eased the man's soul. They "hurried" him into his grave as if they could not "hid him" fast enough.

T*hey 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.

87) What little Wooldridge had left was stripped from him. He lost his "canvas clothes" and was given over to the flies. The warders are painted in a very bad light here as Wilde imagines them laughing over the body and making fun of the man's "swollen purple throat." With laughter they covered the man with lime.

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.

88) The chaplain of the prison would not even kneel over the grave to say a prayer. It did not receive the "blessed Cross" that was meant to help sinner. Christ gave himself for the sinners of the world but this sinner, Wooldridge, did not even have a cross placed on his grave.

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.

89) This section concludes with the speaker saying that even though all these terrible things have happen, "all is well." The man has passed on, as fate appointed. There are tears spilled for him, but they are only from "outcast men" who can be disregarded. As "outcasts always mourn."

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.

89) In the second to last section of the poem Wilde attempts to make some conclusions about the justice systems. He begins by hedging his bet saying that he does not know whether the laws of the justice system are right or wrong. He only knows that those in "gaol" know, that the "wall is strong" and that the days are endlessly long. He is concerned with the physical here, not philosophical matters of justice.

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.

90) Wilde does say that he knows that every law that was made, since Cain killed Abel, has only made the situation worse. Any attempt to regulate that man does to made has only taken the world backwards. It is as if humankind is throwing away the "wheat" but saving the "chaff."

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.

91) Apparently Wilde does know a number of things about prison and continues on to say that he also understands that all prisons are built with "bricks of shame." Man has built these buildings in an attempt to hid from God and Christ the things that man does to his brothers.

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!

92) The bars they built in these place block out the "gracious moon" and blind man from the "goodly sun." Wilde knows that man should be hiding his acts away, if this is how he is going to behave. These things should not be looked upon by the "Son of God nor son of Man."

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

93) Prison is a prime breeding ground for the "vilest deeds" that mankind can come up with. Vileness reproduces and goodness withered away. It is as if "Anguish" is guarding the gate of the building 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.

94) Wilde paints the prisoners in Reading Gaol as being "little frightened children" that weep as they are "starved." The prisoners are made weak, and the warders "flog the fools. Everyone is mistreated and no one can say anything against the officials for fear of retaliation.

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.

95) The cells that the prisoners are forced to inhabit are "foul" and "dark." The small rooms are filled with the smells, and presence, of "Death." The smell destroys everything else except for lust, which is overwhelming.

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.

96) Wilde continues on to describe other conditions of the prison. The water they drink is "brackish" and dirty. And the bread is bitter and so dense that the warders have to "weigh [it] in scales."

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.

97) The food there is so repellent that even though "hunger and green Thirst" are continual, they are moved to quench them. This does not kill the men. The thing that is their greatest burden is that which weighs on their hearts at 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
han the sound of a brazen bell.

98) Each man must live in his "separate hell" and deal with his own problems. These issues are exacerbated by the silence of the night which is far worse than the prison bell that rings to signify morning.

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.

99) This incredible hell in which they are living is never lifted. Not one person reaches out and tries to speak to them with a "gentle word." Everything is "hard," and all eyes are without pity. There is no one there to comfort them and no one to remember them as they "rot" away.

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.

100) All the men rust in prison, "degraded and alone." There are some that weep and others who curse and moan. No matter what one man, or all men, may do, nothing can change God's laws.

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.

101) The broken hearts of the men resemble the box given to Christ in Mark 14:3. A woman bore the box to Christ, and broke it over his head; it was filled with expensive perfume. The hearts of the men are like a gift to God. They are broken, twisted, gifts that need Christ.

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?

102) It is with a broken heart that one might be forgiven, Wilde states. There is no better way for Christ to 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.

103) Wooldridge is awaiting this same pleasure. He, with his "swollen purple throat," is waiting for the "holy hands" to come and lift him up. The Lord does not hate those who have admitted their wrongs, and have opened their broken hearts to him.

T*he 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.

104) When Wooldridge's sentence was passed down he was given three weeks to live. It was in these three weeks that he healed his soul and became closer to God. He cleansed himself of his deed.

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.

105) Wilde concludes this section by saying that Wooldridge used his own tears to clean the hand that killed his wife. He had to break in order to pay his dues for what he'd done. It is only with tears that one "can heal" and turn the "crimson stain" to "snow-white."

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.

106) Wooldridge is in what Wilde refers to as a "pit of shame." It is a grave and in it, he is covered in lime. The acid eats away at his bones that are entombed in a grave that 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.

107) Wilde asks that the body be left to lie there until the return of Christ. There is no need, he says, for anyone to cry over his body or death. Wilde knows this man "killed the thing he loved," and that his death was justified.

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!

108) Once more Wilde reiterates the refrain of the poem, solidifying that this same fate could, and will, in some manner or another, happen to every man.

About Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde in Dublin, Ireland in October of 1854. As a young child Wilde attended Portora Royal School where he was first introduced to Greek and Roman studies, a passion which would stay with him his entire life. He was a bright child and often won awards. After graduating, Wilde attended Trinity College in Dublin and while there received the Foundation Scholarship, the highest award given to undergraduate students. He would continue to receive awards during his schooling and upon his graduation. One of which, the Demyship Scholarship, allowed him to study at Magdalen College in Oxford.

After graduating from Magdalen, Wilde moved permanently to London. In 1881 he published his first collection, Poems. The next year Wilde toured America giving a total of 140 lectures in nine months. He met with a number of notable literary figures while traveling, including, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Walt Whitman. After returning home he continued to lecture, traveling through England and Ireland until 1884. It was during this time that Wilde established himself as a leader of the "aesthetic movement," or the idea that one should live by a set of beliefs advocating beauty as having it's own worth, rather than as a tool of promotion for other viewpoints.

That same year Wilde married Constance Lloyd with whom he would have two sons. In 1888 Wilde entered his most creative and productive years. He published The Happy Prince and Other Tales, as well as his only novel The Picture of Dorian Grey. At the time of it's publication critics and readers were outraged by it's content and apparent homosexual undertones. While his novel was not received well, he was enjoying success from several plays, such as An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest.

During this same time period Wilde was deeply involved in an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, more commonly known as Bosie. Bosie's father, outraged by the affair, wrote a note to Wilde addressed, "Oscar Wilde: Posing Somdomite" (an accidental misspelling of "sodomite"). Wilde's choice to sue Bosie's father for libel ruined his life

In 1895, after a trial and conviction for "gross indecency," Wilde spent two years in prison under forced labor conditions. This sentence took a great toll on the writer and in 1897, after being released, Wilde moved to London. His last great work, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" was completed in 1898. Oscar Wilde died in 1900 of an ear infection that had been contracted, and untreated, in prison.

Annotation by Emma Baldwin