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From Art to Agony: The Transformation of Aesthetic Ideals in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* by Oscar Wilde*

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's life was very controversial in the Victorian period and he had to suffer a lot before death. The shift from aesthetics to suffering, pain, alienation, injustice and social hypocrisy attracts the researcher for the study of Wilde's poem. The study inquires the major reason of Wilde's transformation from subject of aestheticism to truth, the pain and suffering in life. The study aims to explore the change in his aesthetic thought by analyzing his ballad. For the purpose, theology and Christian doctrines explained by Joyce Sila Nduku, Father Patrick Boyle and Olivier Thomas Venard have been used. The major finding of the study is Wilde shifts from his theme of 'art for art's sake' to the suffering, alienation and redemption of common people. The study concludes that Wilde understood social system and meaning of suffering after he lived in the prison. He suffered for salvation and redemption as suffering is for the good reason according to Christianity. The Ballad of Reading Gaol has the hope that the imprisoned murderer's execution provides him religious redemption and peace though he missed social redemption. Social redemption is the love and care of people and possibility of rehabilitation. The prisoner's execution in the ballad is very similar to Jesus Christ's sacrifice for the redemption of all the sinners in the world.

Keywords: Aestheticism, art for art's sake, christian doctrines, redemption, victorian period

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Wilde and Aesthetics

Oscar Wilde was once the poster child of aestheticism—elegant, flamboyant, and famously devoted to the idea that “all art is quite useless” (6). This statement, from the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, reflects Wilde’s belief in “art for art’s sake”—a view central to the Aesthetic Movement of the 19th century. His grandson, Merlin Holland, reflects on this legacy in *Stories for Young People: Oscar Wilde*, where he introduces Wilde not only as a literary genius but as a man who brought color and beauty to Victorian England. As Holland writes in the introduction, Wilde “was a man of great charm and kindness. Selfishness and greed and hypocrisy... upset him, and he believed that one of the most important things in life was to look always for its beauty, even behind its ugliness” (4). Beauty, art, and fashion came so naturally to Wilde and in such depth that he made them the very essence of his existence. During his time at Oxford, he became renowned as an aesthete, even referring to himself as a “Professor of Aesthetics” and dressing in “aesthetic” costume to reflect his ideals (5–6).

Wilde’s belief in beauty and artistic expression was shaped from an early age by his highly cultured upbringing. Born in Dublin in 1854 to an intellectual and artistic family, Wilde was surrounded by literature, language, and myth from childhood. He was greatly influenced by his father, Sir William Wilde, a doctor who treated poor patients in exchange for folktales, and by his mother, Lady Jane Wilde, who nearly ended up in prison for writing about the suffering of her people. As Holland puts it, “Oscar adored his mother and her powerful example as a champion of justice for the weak” (5). Much of Wilde’s outlook on life—including his devotion to beauty, art, kindness, and self-reflection—was shaped by witnessing his parents embody those ideals with pride.

In 1895, at the height of his fame, Oscar Wilde was convicted of “gross indecency” due to his homosexual relationships and sentenced to two years of hard labor. He was imprisoned first in Pentonville and Wandsworth, and later transferred to Reading Gaol. The physical and emotional toll of prison was devastating: Wilde suffered from illness, isolation, and the harshness of Victorian penal conditions. Once celebrated for his wit and style, he was now reduced to silence and suffering. It was during this time that Wilde began to reevaluate the ideals he had once lived by. His experiences in prison profoundly altered his understanding of justice, humanity, and the

role of art. In a letter to his former lover, De Profundis, he reflects not on beauty, but on pain, humility, and forgiveness. Prison did not simply punish Wilde—it transformed him, reshaping both his inner life and his relationship with literature.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol, published in 1898 under the pseudonym “C.3.3.”, Wilde’s prison number, was the first major work he released after his imprisonment. Based on the real execution of a fellow inmate, the poem is a haunting meditation on death, guilt, and the brutality of the prison system. Written in simple language and a restrained ballad form, it stands in stark contrast to Wilde’s earlier works filled with ornate beauty and irony. Here, he does not hide behind style—he speaks directly, with compassion and rage. This shift marks a clear departure from the Aesthetic ideals he once championed. No longer detached or ironic, Wilde’s voice in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is one of emotional truth and moral urgency. This research will examine how Wilde’s prison experience shaped the themes and style of the poem, and how the work challenged the notion of “art for art’s sake” by demonstrating that beauty can coexist with truth, pain, and social criticism.

Various Perspectives on Wilde

Oscar Wilde’s life and writing have fascinated many readers and scholars, especially because of the big change in his work over time. In his early career, he was known for being part of the Aesthetic Movement, which focused on beauty and art without needing a deeper meaning. But after his time in prison, Wilde’s writing became more emotional and serious, often dealing with pain, justice, and truth. Critics have looked closely at this shift by studying works like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis*, and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. This literature review will look at what researchers have said about Wilde’s views on art, how prison changed him, and how people have understood *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* over time. It will also point out what still hasn’t been explored fully, and how this study hopes to add something new.

In the article Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism, Beibei Guan explores Wilde’s role as a key figure in the Aesthetic Movement, focusing on how he embodied and expressed the ideals of “art for art’s sake.” Guan explains that Wilde’s passion for beauty and art was reflected in his attention to clothing, his collection of aesthetic antiques, and his insistence on perfection in the binding and illustration of his books. Wilde was against the Victorian England which was marked by hypocrisy, rigid moral codes, and a narrow sense of propriety. In contrast, Wilde believed that “society was the origin and

foundation of morals, but the sphere of art and ethics were distinct and separate” (Guan 26). Guan also highlights Wilde’s well-known statement: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Wilde 17), which clearly supports his view that “artists should not have ethical sympathies because aesthetics is higher than ethics” (Guan 27).

After Wilde’s imprisonment in 1895, the tone and content of his writing shifted dramatically and many scholars have noted a change through the lens of *De Profundis*. This powerful letter, written during his time in Reading Gaol and addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, blends raw emotional confession with philosophical introspection. Carol Schnitzer highlights that Wilde’s separation from his social world became the “harshest punishment,” forcing him into deep self- reflection and changing how he saw himself and his past. She describes the letter as “an attempt to come to terms with what happened to him in the last five years,” during which he lost everything he once valued (72). It was, in her words, “an effort to find meaning in suffering.” The letter is filled with guilt, self-hatred, a longing for redemption, and emotional pain. Wilde also harshly criticizes Douglas for selfishness, vanity, and indulgence—yet, as Schnitzer notes, “by attacking those traits in his lover, Wilde is implicitly condemning himself” (73).

Schnitzer draws on Gregory Bateson’s idea that “the addict can only change when he admits his lack of control and surrenders to a ‘Power Greater than [him]self’” (313). This idea challenges the foundation of the Aesthetic Movement because it suggests that a life focused on beauty and pleasure, detached from moral responsibility, might actually mask inner helplessness, perhaps addiction. Wilde, too, found himself in this position. As Schnitzer observes, he was “in a predicament similar to that of the alcoholic who tries to demonstrate to himself that he can ‘take it or leave it’ and fails,” referring to his obsession with Douglas (74).

The disgrace that he experienced during his prison days, changed his perception and towards life and arts. He finally acknowledged this helplessness and wrote that “his life, once a ‘brilliant comedy,’ had become a ‘revolting and repellent tragedy’” (Schnitzer 75). The agony and pain that he endured changed his life's priorities. His focus shifted away from beauty and art toward a search for inner peace and a deeper understanding of collective human suffering. After the veil of beauty and art had been

lifted, his priorities shifted that has been away from art for art's sake and toward a search for inner peace and collective human suffering. And yet, even in that moment of clarity, he confessed, "Neither Religion, Morality, nor Reason can help me at all" (Schnitzer 76). This marked a powerful departure from his earlier ideals, where art was everything, to a place where truth and suffering could no longer be hidden behind beauty.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol, Wilde's final work, is often seen as his most emotionally charged poem which is marked by pain, loss, and a deep break from aesthetic detachment. William E. Buckler examines the poem alongside Wilde's letters *De Profundis* and *Carcere et Vinculis*. Unlike his usual silence during creative work, Buckler claims Wilde openly discussed *The Ballad*, sharing "his plans, purposes, anxieties, expectations, enthusiasms, concessions, and apologies" (36). Buckler notes this was because the poem felt too autobiographical, a concern for someone who believed art should be shaped by imagination, not direct experience. As he writes, Wilde's prison life "had, in some instances, taken precedence over the symbolic experiences" that true art demands. (Buckler 37). This conflict marks *The Ballad* as a turning point, where personal trauma reshaped both Wilde's style and message.

Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein offers a psychological reading of the poem, examining it through the lens of trauma and ethical transformation. She explains that trauma is often defined by the unexpected nature of the event and the victim's unpreparedness towards the incident. Both of these apply to Wilde's experience (Hassanein 2215). "Wilde was not prepared for prison," she writes, noting that beyond the emotional devastation of losing his mother, his children, and his wealth, Wilde also faced the long-term humiliation of public disgrace (2213). Wilde had never thought of being arrested and imprisoned because of his ideas. The prison's experience shattered his worldview.

According to Hassanein, trauma affects the entire self. Wilde, once a lover of beauty, could no longer romanticize life after being exposed to the harsh reality of suffering. As with many trauma survivors, Wilde became fixated on his past; "after his release, he wrote virtually about nothing other than his prison experiences and the cruelties of prison life" (2216). Obviously, Wilde's prison experience fundamentally changed how he viewed the world, art, and himself. These scholarly readings show that Wilde's artistic evolution was not just stylistic, but deeply personal. Critics have

convincingly analyzed how his imprisonment altered his worldview, as well as how *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* reflect this shift. However, there is still room to explore how Wilde's aesthetics and ethics blend in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that is not as a complete rejection of beauty, but as a redefinition of it in light of suffering. While many scholars emphasize the break between Wilde's early and late styles, fewer focus on how *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* retains traces of his aesthetic ideals while transforming them through moral and emotional urgency. This research seeks to fill that gap by analyzing *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as a work that bridges art and ethical awakening and shows that Wilde saw something far from world of beauty that carried the weight of human pain and truth.

Exploration of Wilde through Christian Doctrines

This research uses theological criticism to explore the spiritual dimensions of Oscar Wilde's writing. For the purpose, Christian doctrines on suffering and redemption are borrowed to interpret the text. The interpretation of Christian doctrines by Joyce Sila Nduku, Father Patrick Boyle and Olivier Thomas Venard are applied for reading Wilde's texts. Theological criticism examines how literature reflects on themes like suffering, redemption, and the divine through language, imagery, and human experience. Though theology and literature were once seen as opposites, as Olivier Thomas Venard explains, theology and literature have long had a tense relationship. One is seen as grounded in truth and reason, the other in imagination and emotion. However, recent scholars have begun to view these fields as interconnected and capable of enriching each other (Venard 91–92). Christianity believes that the existence of God is manifested through human language, which is shaped by culture, tradition, and imagination. The same is true of literature. Because of this, literature can become a meaningful space for exploring theological ideas, using symbols and stories to express truth in a poetic and persuasive way (Venard 91–92).

This nexus between theology and literature provides a suitable approach for interpretation Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* because the poem centers on themes of guilt, punishment, mercy, and spiritual transformation. These are the ideas central to Christian theology. Rather than focusing on moral judgment or punishment based on merit, Wilde presents suffering as something that can lead to redemption and grace. His portrayal of the condemned man suggests that spiritual awakening often comes not

through justice but through love, sorrow, and compassion. Nduku explains that “Christian theology has long held that suffering has redemptive value when it is united with the suffering of Christ. They approach suffering not out of a desire to glorify pain or misery but because of the transformational and salvific suffering borne in communion with Christ’s passion and for the sake of serving others” (Nduku 28). Wilde’s suffering has also a meaning and his transformation is for the great purpose. This approach is further supported by Wilde’s complex religious background. His father was Protestant, while his mother was drawn to Catholic ritual, and Wilde himself remained fascinated by Catholicism throughout his life. He was likely baptized Catholic as a child and received Catholic last rites on his deathbed (Schramm 254). These personal experiences shaped his spiritual outlook and are reflected in his literary works, where religious symbolism and themes of salvation play a central role.

Wilde’s writing also draws from both Christian idealism and pagan naturalism, combining influences from Greek tragedy and philosophers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. As Schramm notes, Wilde creates a space where the figure of the martyr or scapegoat, often a symbol of innocent suffering, becomes a powerful way to reflect on human pain and spiritual truth (Schramm 255). This blend of religious and philosophical ideas makes theological criticism not only relevant but essential in understanding the moral and spiritual depth of Wilde’s later works, especially *The Ballad of The Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis*. In this study, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* serves as the primary text for applying theological criticism. The poem’s strong focus on guilt, innocent suffering, and spiritual awakening provides grounds to explore Wilde’s engagement with Christian ideas of sin, mercy, and redemption. Supporting texts such as *De Profundis* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have been used to trace the development of Wilde’s spiritual thinking—from his early emphasis on beauty and art to his later concern with the soul, conscience, and salvation. Using theological criticism, this study will focus on religious symbols, biblical allusions, and the role of grace and martyrdom in Wilde’s portrayal of suffering.

To strengthen this reading, the research will also draw on secondary sources by scholars such as Jan-Melissa Schramm and Mona Hassanein, whose works provide theological and philosophical insights into Wilde’s life and writing. These sources help establish a critical framework for understanding Wilde, not just as a literary artist but as a writer, deeply engaged with questions of faith, justice, and spiritual transformation.

This research is based primarily on Oscar Wilde's long poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which captures his post-prison reflections on justice, suffering, and the soul. The poem was written after Wilde's imprisonment in Reading Gaol, and it reflects a shift from his earlier aesthetic ideals to a deeper concern with human pain, morality, and redemption. It stands as a key text through which Wilde's spiritual and theological transformation becomes visible. *De Profundis*, Wilde's epistolary work written during his imprisonment, offers valuable insight into his emotional and spiritual development, especially his thoughts on Christ, suffering, and forgiveness. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, meanwhile, helps trace Wilde's earlier engagement with aestheticism and its moral consequences. Together, these texts show the evolution of Wilde's worldview, allowing a deeper analysis of his relationship with Christian theology and the idea of spiritual transformation.

The Shift from Aesthetic Attachment to Emotional Engagement

This section uses close reading to explore how Wilde's personal suffering, particularly as expressed in *De Profundis*, shaped the emotional and thematic landscape of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Drawing on theological criticism, the analysis will examine how Wilde transforms his earlier ideals of beauty into a deeper, more compassionate form of art that confronts injustice and human suffering.

In his earlier career, Oscar Wilde was known for celebrating beauty and style above all else. The Aesthetic Movement, he insisted that art should exist independently of moral judgement. He famously wrote, "Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art... no artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (6). This sharp divide between art and ethics shaped much of Wilde's early works, where emotional distance, wit, and beauty took priority over emotional truth or moral responsibility. But *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* directly challenges this view. Unlike his earlier works, the poem is filled with emotional urgency, moral awareness, and personal grief. Wilde no longer writes from a place of aesthetic detachment, instead, he writes from experience, pain, and deep reflection. The poem begins with a quiet, aching observation: "I never saw a man who looked / With such a wistful eye / Upon that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky" (l. 13-16). In these lines, Wilde shifts away from the distant elegance of his earlier aestheticism and begins to write from a place of deep human empathy. Though he had

once been known for his dazzling wit, beauty, and rebellion against Victorian norms, Wilde was always someone with a tender heart. Quoted everywhere in social media, “The antidote to negativity is not positivity, it’s warmth” feels especially true for Wilde. His warmth, once wrapped in irony and art, had to be rediscovered through raw human experience.

In prison, stripped of beauty, comfort, and the life he had known, Wilde could no longer hide behind cleverness or aesthetic distance. All that was left was feeling or, heartbreakingly, the absence of it: “And though I was a soul in pain, / My pain I could not feel” (I. 29-30). The trauma left him numb, and yet it also opened his heart to the pain of others. The vibrant world he once celebrated was gone, replaced by a deeper awareness of suffering, not just his own, but everyone’s. This is perhaps why he could write with such aching truth, “For each man kills the thing he loves / Yet each man does not die” (I. 53–54). It is a line that does not just mourn his personal loss, but reaches out to anyone who has ever hurt or been hurt. In that moment, Wilde’s pain becomes more than art—it becomes compassion. Nuduku believes, “Redemptive suffering and Christian hope, as shown in theology, must be incorporated into a living faith. In congregational life, this is achieved by developing a spirituality that is unafraid of pain but learns to embrace it faithfully” (31). Wilde developed spirituality in the prison for redemption and hope.

Witnessing Suffering and Injustice: Prison as Moral Revelation

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written before his imprisonment, Wilde presents the idea that while beauty is important, too much indulgence in pleasure can slowly destroy a person from within. The novel does not clearly state what is right or wrong. This lack of direct moral teaching is intentional. Wilde believed that art should not be used to teach lessons but to make people think and feel. As Holland points out, Wilde did not like telling others what to believe or how to live (7). This reflects his strong belief in aestheticism, the idea that art should focus on beauty and emotional experience rather than moral messages. However, Wilde’s style changed after his time in prison. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he no longer uses clever language or distant irony. Instead, he writes with honesty, emotion, and directness. The suffering he experienced in prison took away the need to hide behind artistic style. His pain had to be expressed clearly and openly with both emotional truth and moral urgency.

This emotional shift is not only personal. It soon turns outward, as Wilde begins to question the system that creates such suffering. While *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* begins with quiet, personal sorrow, it soon becomes a strong criticism of injustice in society. Wilde no longer writes like a distant artist who avoids strong emotions. Instead, he writes as someone who has personally experienced the harshness of prison. In the line “A prison wall was round us both, / Two outcast men were we” (II. 73–74), Wilde shows how he connects with the man who was sentenced to death, as well as with all people who are rejected by society. This shows how Wilde’s pain led him to feel a deeper sense of empathy, not just for himself, but for others who suffer too. He no longer sees suffering as something only tragic or beautiful, but as something that all humans experience. Patrick Boyle argues, “Human suffering has the power to transform because Jesus, through His own salvific suffering is very much present in all human suffering and can act from within that suffering by the power of the Holy Spirit, His consoling spirit” (105). It shows that all humans suffer as Wilde experienced in jail.

Wilde also shows how prison affects the emotions and spirit of the people inside. He writes, “We did not dare to breathe a prayer, / Or to give our anguish scope: / Something was dead in each of us, / And what was dead was Hope” (III. 183–186). These words are not just about Wilde’s pain—they describe the deep sadness and hopelessness felt by all prisoners. Wilde writes using “we” to speak for everyone, not just himself. This is very different from his earlier style, where he often focused on individual beauty and clever language. Now, he writes to give voice to those who have been forgotten or ignored. His criticism of the justice system becomes stronger when he asks, “What word of grace in such a place / Could help a brother’s soul?” (III. 35–36). Here, he shows that religion and law often fail to offer real comfort to people in deep pain. He also writes about the execution with painful honesty: “They hanged him as a beast is hanged: / They did not even toll / A requiem that might have brought / Rest to his startled soul” (IV. 115–118). There is no beauty in this act but only cruelty. Wilde refuses to hide this behind veil of beauty and style. He questions the then justice system of the society. A human being is hanged as if he is a beast. The prison authority even did not toll the bell nor any services that people commonly pay for the dying. It reveals the cruelty associated with the system that one cannot evade in the pretense of beauty.

One of the clearest moral messages in the poem comes in the lines: “Every prison that men build / Is built with bricks of shame, / And bound with bars lest Christ should see / How men their brothers maim” (V. 15–18). Wilde is no longer separating beauty and ethics. In the lines he is using art to tell a moral truth. He argues that prisons do not just punish, they also damage the human spirit. Through this poem, Wilde finds his voice again—not just to describe suffering, but to speak out against it. In this way, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* becomes a powerful kind of art, one that does not hide from pain, but faces it directly. The experience of suffering and injustice changed his outlook towards life and art. He comes face to face with human suffering and uses art to resist the system as a whole.

Art, Redemption, and Reimagining Beauty

In an attempt to clarify trauma, Hassanein notes that traumatic experience is often not fully understood in the moment. It returns later, obsessively, as the survivor tries to make sense of what happened. As she explains, “the repetitive and obsessive return of the experience reflects the victim’s attempts to master the situation” (Hassanein 2216). Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written after his release, can be seen as exactly that as a literary effort to process a devastating experience that continued to haunt him. “Whatever is realized is right,” Wilde wrote in *De Profundis* (22), and in that spirit, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* becomes a realization: an act of understanding pain by turning it into something that could serve not only himself, but the community. As Hassanein puts it, Wilde transformed his “tragedy into something helpful for both the individual and the community,” using literature to raise awareness and promote empathy (2219).

As *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* unfolds, it becomes clear that Wilde is not simply condemning injustice—he is also seeking redemption. But unlike his earlier works, where beauty often served as an escape or as an end in itself, here redemption is grounded in suffering, forgiveness, and emotional truth. The line, “For only blood can wipe out blood, / And only tears can heal” (V. 99–100), carries a stark message: healing cannot come from detachment or aesthetic stylization, but only through direct confrontation with pain. Wilde’s new form of beauty is no longer decorative, it is moral. It bears witness to the rawness of grief and invites readers into a space where that grief can be acknowledged and shared. In lines such as “The man had killed the thing he loved, / And so he had to die” (VI. 11-12), later expanded to “All men kill the

thing they love” (VI. 13), Wilde moves from personal confession to a broader, haunting truth about human nature. Love and destruction are no longer opposites in this poem but they are tragically intertwined, and Wilde does not romanticize this; he accepts it with brutal clarity.

This transformation in his view of beauty is not gentle or reassuring. It is uncomfortable, filled with contradictions. “Some grow mad, and all grow bad, / And none a word may say” (V. 35– 36) portrays the psychological collapse that results from silence and repression—conditions Wilde himself experienced behind prison walls. The poem recognizes the emotional numbness that trauma brings, yet it still believes in the possibility of redemption. In one of the most quietly hopeful lines, Wilde writes, “But God’s eternal laws are kind / And break the heart of stone” (V. 71-72). Here, the idea of divine kindness becomes a kind of spiritual aesthetic—an antidote to the cruelty of manmade laws and institutions. Kindness, not artistic perfection, becomes the most powerful and lasting force Wilde clings to.

This shift is remarkable considering Wilde’s earlier stance that “no artist has ethical sympathies.” Now, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde embraces the very thing he once rejected: an art form that does not retreat from the world but responds to it. He uses poetry not merely to entertain or provoke, but to console, to challenge, and to humanize. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, then, becomes a form of moral testimony. By turning his suffering into language, Wilde offers both himself and his readers a chance at healing. It is not just a poem about justice—it is a poem about survival, redemption, and the moral necessity of compassion. His epigraph has the following lines from the poem:

Yet all is well; he had but passed
To life’s appointed bourne:
And alien tears will fill for him
Pity’s long broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

(IV. 133-138)

The poet mourns for all those who suffer and face great loss in life but the society is unknown about them. The poem expresses sorrow for those who face social exclusion and alienation. Catholic Church explains, “Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good. We could say that man suffers because of a good in which he does not share, from which in a certain sense he is cut off, or of which he has deprived himself. He particularly suffers when he “ought”—in the normal order of things—to have a share in this good and does not have it (12). Wilde had not got the share in good that he must not have missed. Therefore, he suffered to have a share in that good.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol ultimately redefines art itself—not as something aloof or ornamental, but as a vessel for truth, morality, and redemption. Wilde once insisted that no artist should have ethical sympathies, yet in this poem, he demonstrates that ethical sympathy, when born of real pain, does not weaken art—it deepens it. His suffering becomes not just a subject, but a force for moral clarity. In bearing witness to injustice with empathy and honesty, Wilde transforms his tragedy into beauty of the highest kind, one rooted in kindness, humility, and hope.

Conclusion

Through *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde redefines the role of the artist, not as a distant observer, but as a moral witness. His suffering gave birth to a more compassionate art, proving that even in silence and shame, poetry can be redemptive. This shift not only transforms Wilde’s legacy, but invites readers to see beauty not just in pleasure, but also in truth. This is a man who lived a double life, and was fated to, ultimately, write, “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.” (III. 219-222). His entire worldview collapsed as he fell like Rome, the eternal city. This, naturally, led to a shift in his writings, as beauty was no longer enough to survive. He was in search of solace, kindness and a sense of empathy. In an attempt to find them, he managed to rise above self-healing and embrace societal awareness. He found a way to bring comfort and hope, both to himself and to fellow victims of injustice.

He died with much regret, shame and suffering. Perhaps, if the Victorian society was kinder to outcasts and those who were different, maybe he wouldn’t have to die in shame. However, despite all the suffering he faced, he managed to embrace the tragedy that rained down on him, and impactfully create literature that convinced so many

people to be gentler and more accepting of outcasts like him. Wilde had to settle on morality at the end of his days. He successfully created a world that is finally learning how to embrace beauty.

The execution of the murderer of wife in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is for his redemption and it is also for the redemption of the people who are linked with evils. He dies for the good not for the bad according to Christianity. Wilde also suffers for his salvation and redemption. His shift from aestheticism to truth and suffering has also a meaning that he had purgation from what the Victorian society had blamed him for. Homosexuality ruined his life and his family's social reputation. His life in prison and *The Ballad for Reading Gaol* was meaningful for the purgation of his sinful life.

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