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# *Crime and Justice in the Victorian Era: The Case of Oscar Wilde*

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## Introduction

This thesis explores the concepts of crime and justice in a period of great social changes in England, the Victorian Era, and focuses on the famous author, poet, playwright and literary critic Oscar Wilde. I intend to analyse crime rates and the subsequent implementation of laws and reforms to control them. Moreover, with a special focus on Wilde's works and life, I wanted to explore the connection between crime and aesthetics in his works and his post-prison criticism about punishment and the British Prison System.

The Victorian Age was a period of social reforms and new discoveries in industry and science, which set Britain in an important position of global power, but some incongruities are evident. The increasing poverty in degraded areas of big cities like London shift attention from greatness to issues, actually these parts of the city were the perfect environment for criminality, where outlaws could act undisturbed. This was partially true, indeed after a careful analysis of articles reporting the rise of crime rates during those years, I focus on the misperception of criminality. Even if little crimes of no importance were a daily occurrence, newspapers and books started writing about crime in a theatrical way, in order to encourage people to buy them. This was implemented by the passing of new laws and reforms regarding crime and punishment, which will be analysed in the second section of the first chapter. One of the most important elements to analyse while dealing with punishment is the Prison System. For this reason, I found it interesting to concentrate attention on the changes made to the Victorian Prison System and the actual modification of pre-existing prison buildings. In the text, I provide an accurate analysis of the Victorian Prison System, more specifically the structure of prisons, the prison staff and the life of inmates in jails.

In the second chapter, the attention goes from the general situation of crime and punishment in Britain to the specific one of the author Oscar Wilde. In the first section, I retrace his life from birth to death, analysing events that could have influenced his view of life. Since two major school of thinking, aestheticism and dandyism, really influenced him, I analyse their main premises and major representatives, in order to understand how they affected Wilde's life and works. Nevertheless, the general aim of this chapter is to

find the multiple connections between crime and aestheticism in some of his works. To name but a few, the essay on the secret poisoner Thomas Griffith Wainewright *Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green*, the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the short tale *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*. The thing in common among the principal characters of these works is that all of them have committed a felony. Especially, Dorian Gray, the main character of the novel, embodies the connection of beauty, art and crime, because his vanity and narcissism led him to become an outcast from society. For this reason, the examination of his character, as well as the character of Wainewright, seemed to me the perfect mean to observe the link that exists between crime and aestheticism.

If the above-mentioned works raise only the issue of crime, in my opinion one of the most famous Wilde's post-prison works connects the theme of crime with that of punishment in a clear way. For this reason, I will dedicate the entire third chapter to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, published in 1898, after the years he spent in the prison of Reading. This poem touches the topic of crime through the description of an actual murder. Wilde describes the actions of Charles Thomas Woolridge, a trooper who killed his wife with a razor in a jealous rage. This horrific scenario and the changes that Wilde made to it are described in the first section of the third chapter, as I think it is the perfect element to show Wilde's peculiar aesthetics of crime.

Another important theme of the ballad connected to crime is the role of the victim as a woman. The place of women in society was a debated issue at the time because during the Victorian Era women were considered merely objects. In crime literature, this could be observed in the theories of the famous author Edgar Allan Poe, who pointed at women as the perfect victims of murder fiction. In this part of the last chapter, I analyse the dead woman compared to the standard passivity of still alive women, the reputation they had in a male oriented society.

As concerns punishment, *The Ballad* and other post-prison works are the perfect example of Wilde's criticism against the Victorian Prison System. The aim of this third section of the third chapter is to describe the problems of life in jails that Wilde tried to denounce after his release. I focus especially on Wilde's letter to the *Daily Chronicle* (1898), where Wilde wrote to the editor of the newspaper to use his influence to help him denouncing the injustices in prisons. He debated the cases of two weak inmates that he met personally while in jail: a poor hungry child and a man with a mental disorder. He

harshly criticized the lack of expertise of doctors about mental illnesses and the inhumane methods they suggested to use to control problematic inmates. I found his testimonies very interesting in order to show how prisons mirrored the inequalities and injustices that existed in Victorian society, where poor people were exploited and neglected.

*The Ballad* also explores the theme of capital punishment, underlining its brutality. The immorality of this system is debated also today because its application is still legal in many areas of the world. The cornerstone of this debate is its uselessness because if a prisoner is dead he can no more understand his mistakes and he has not the possibility to redeem himself. In the case of Wilde, he found this method very unjust and unfair because many criminals did not pay for their felonies since they did not report themselves to the police, while brave men who took their responsibilities were sentenced to death. The author also complains about the burial of their corpse, which did not receive a proper funeral, demonstrating once again the wrongful method used in Victorian Prisons.

To sum up, the following three chapters focus on a study on crime and punishment, which touches three principal issues: the rise of criminality during the Victorian Era, new laws and methods of punishment in order to contrast it and Oscar Wilde's point of view on these two topics.





# 1. The Victorian Era: Respectability, Crime and Reforms

## *1.1 The Victorian Era and the Victorian Compromise*

The legal and criminal situation is extremely connected to its social and political context; therefore, it is important to focus on changes, reforms and discoveries that characterized the historical era during which they were carried out. The period known as Victorian Age lasted from 1837 to 1901. Queen Victoria came to the throne of Britain during a difficult political period due to the big gap between the middle classes and the working classes. It was a period of movements and reforms: worker's demonstrations were common, for instance one can mention the Chartist movement, the largest workers' organization that emerged in 1836 in the capital city of Britain and then started spreading throughout the country in 1838. It asked for more rights for the working class, mostly the extension of the right to vote. Eventually, in 1832 the government presented the *First Reform Bill*, which partly satisfied the middle classes as it extended the right to vote, but continued to ignore the workers' request. It was only under the reign of Queen Victoria that the *Second Reform Bill* was passed. It was the year 1867 and this Act was important because it extended the right to vote to town workers, with an exception for miners and agricultural workers. It was only in 1884, with the *Third Reform Bill* that suffrage was extended to all male workers. Other remarkable social reforms were the *Mines Act* of 1862, which forbade the employment of women and children in mines, the *Education Act* of 1870, which obliged all children under 12 to go to school and the *Prisoners' Counsel Act* of 1836, which gave to prisoners the right to have defence counsel. This last Act will be better analysed in the next paragraph.

It is important to underline that during the Victorian Age three new political parties were created. The conservatives who came from the traditional Tories, the liberals who came from the Wigs, and the Labour party, which was founded in 1900, one year before the queen's death. The foundation of the Labour party was a very innovative and significant reformation, because for the first time workers' representatives could sit in Parliament.

Queen Victoria became a symbol of her time, which was also characterized by an evolution in industry and science. The invention of railways and the steamboat shortened distances, the employment of steam in machines fastened production in factories and pipes and tunnels put sewage out of the city. One may also add the invention of gas lighting and the telegraph. Queen Victoria and her husband Albert Saxon Gotha decided to display all these innovations during the Great International Exhibition of London, in 1851. The exhibition took place in an innovative building, the Chrystal Palace, a greenhouse where goods from Britain and from the Empire were collocated among the trees. The first forty years of her reign were characterized by power and optimism, thanks also to the important colonization policy, which was implemented during those years. The borders of the empire expanded to Australia, New Zealand and Canada, until reaching some parts of Africa and India, when Queen Victoria became Empress. She contributed to the creation of an Empire on which the sun never sets.

In Victorian Britain, a new philosophy started to spread, which was the so-called Utilitarianism, founded by the English philosopher, jurist and social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). In the work *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), he claimed that everything had to be judged according to its standards of utility and its promotion of material happiness of people. This philosophy applied to the world of work and school started bringing negative effects, as it neglected emotions and the spiritual development of the self. If the Utilitarian philosophy had a negative impact on schools and work places, I cannot say the same for the legal system. The philosopher and economist J. S. Mill (1806-1873) stated that Jeremy Bentham “found the philosophy of law a chaos, he left it a Science; he found the practice of the law an Augean stable, he turned the river into it which is mining and sweeping away mound after mound of its rubbish” (Tucker 2014: 156). Also for the law, this philosophy used an approach of anonymity and impartiality that became the foundational unit of decision-making. Contemporary literature and newspapers started doing the opposite; in fact, over anonymity and impartiality, they tended to privilege the individuality of the self. Judgements on individual cases started mediating between the written, abstract legal rules and their application (Tucker 2014: 156).

Society in Victorian Era was divided into classes: the upper class, the middle class and the working class. In general, English men and women had to follow some social

standards of respectability: prudery, style, Catholic faith and good manners were the keywords for respectable people. Sexual matters were a taboo at the time. Men were expected to have a good job and women had to stay at home to look after their children and, in public, they had to maintain a formal and reserved behaviour. It was a male oriented society, as can be noticed also in the poetry of Oscar Wilde, because women were considered as objects.

This time of reforms, discoveries and this show of puritan strict respect was only a façade of what British society was in reality, mainly in the capital city of London. The other face of the coin was the side of society where crime, poverty and drugs were very frequent among English people. Women had to follow strict rules and morals, they had to cover their legs and be respectable but at the same time, the social conditions of the time pushed thousands of women into prostitution. Murder, robbery, pickpocketing, shoplifting, gambling, the use of opium were a daily occurrence in the suburbs of London, the Slums. These parts of the city were degraded areas where poor people lived in appalling conditions: they were too many, the sanitation was poor, diseases started to spread, and, as already mentioned, the rate of crime started to rise; actually, this part of the city of London was the perfect environment for criminals that acted undisturbed. After the passing of the *Poor Law* in 1834, people were obliged to live in big places called Workhouses; here, they were divided into women, men and children, they were amassed and lived in harsh conditions only in change of a shelter and a job.

This contradiction of the Victorian society is known as Victorian Compromise. G.K. Chesterton coined this term in his book *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913); the Victorian society was a hypocritical society, where crime and poverty existed, but they were hidden by a veil of respectability, prudery, good manners and style. In that period, inequality and poverty were justified by a way of thinking called Social Darwinism, a theory based on the ideas of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who affirmed in 1852 that life of humans in society was struggled for existence ruled by the survival of the fittest. In this way, the biological theory of evolution of Darwin was applied in social matters (Rogers, 1972: 265). The negative effect that this way of thinking brought in Victorian Society was the neglecting of the poor due to natural selection. Many writers and newspapers tried to denounce this hypocritical behaviour and its various facets. Among them, I mention Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and his fight against poverty

conditions and cruelty in the suburbs of London, especially in the Workhouses, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and his struggle against death penalty and harsh conditions in Victorian jails, and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), who struggled to improve women conditions in society.

During the Victorian Era, the novel became the leading genre: an increasing number of people started borrowing books from libraries and they started reading novels because they were published in instalments, which means that they appeared serially in newspapers. It is mainly for these reasons that reading novels became easier for Middle Class people. Novelists had now a moral and social responsibility, they had to entertain the readers, but at the same time, they had to convey a social and moral message. This was important to face the social changes that were occurring during those years, the industrial revolution, the struggle for democracy, the increasing poverty in an ever-expanding Britain and the growing crime rates, which began to arouse interest in readers. Leaving aside Early and Middle Victorian Novels, which mainly reflected this necessity to denounce and criticize social injustices, I want to focus on the Late Victorian Novel. This type of novel was characterized by a cruel realism, which studied the influence of social environment on men. Therefore, descriptions were precise but they lacked of judgments and comments, so that the reader was able to draw his own conclusions. Late Victorian Novels had a predilection for failed characters that acted in degraded social settings, the perfect background for their criminal and outrageous behaviour.

All this was a reaction against the Victorian ideology of prudery and respectability, but also against the imperial power that England had at the time. The major theme of these novels was the Double, which represented the core of the Victorian Compromise, the respectable façade that hid the worse problems of society. The major representatives of this writing current were Robert Louis Stevenson, who analysed the double with his criminal and outrageous character Dr. Jekyll, in the novel *The strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Oscar Wilde, with the only novel he wrote, *The picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Here, he analyses the double with the narcissistic character of Dorian Gray and shocked the readers who believed in Victorian morals and standards. I will return to this novel in the next chapter dedicated to Oscar Wilde and the criminal experience connected to art and beauty.

As mentioned previously, in Victorian England, middle class people were avid readers and they always searched for interesting writings. Therefore, it is in this period that in newspapers and books started appearing writings that focused on criminal and scandalous actions, with their outrageous and terrific particulars, sometimes inspired by actual events. In fact, to understand criminal behaviour, barristers started constructing fictions in support of their criminal clients, law reporters put in their newspapers' articles criminal matters to improve their circulation and novelists started employing details of famous trials. They claimed that books and narrative could help political debates about crime and punishment.

Criminal minds, criminal motivations and murders came to the centre of public interest, so different literary genres employed cases of murder trials in the form of the case study to understand criminal motivation. An example could be the newspapers accounts of Jack the Ripper, the famous unidentified killer that acted in Whitechapel, a district of London. Some critics argue the fact that crime literature could have an impact on readers; actually, Stevenson's major work *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* seemed to have resemblances with the five murders committed by Jack the Ripper. Especially, when the second victim Annie Chapman was discovered, the newspaper East London Advertiser started making alarmism by comparing the murder and his modus operandi with the imaginary character of Stevenson's book, Mr. Hyde. To contrast this increase in criminality the government did many changes to improve the legal system of England, from the adoption of new laws to the construction of new prisons all over England.

## *1.2 Legal Reforms and Growing Crime Rates*

In 1837 Queen Victoria ascended to the throne of Britain and the court system was “a jumble of overlapping civil, ecclesiastical, and common law jurisdictions” (Tucker 2014: 163), in fact, the Empire had problems of jurisdiction and extradition with the British Isles and the colonies in Canada and in the United States. These problems with uncoordinated jurisdiction were the most difficult to resolve during the Victorian Era, but it was not the same for legal reforms, which addressed many problems that England was facing at the time.

To understand fully how law and the English legal system changed in the nineteenth century, one has to go back to the previous century. In the eighteenth century, only a small group of rich men with political and economic power led the British government. For this reason, the electorate was small, manipulated and it did not represent the entire population of Britain. Decisions in the context of justice, crime and punishment were in the hands of a small group of chosen ones. Between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, the legal system as we know it today took shape; before this period, trials were not conducted in a wise and judicious way, actually, the only constabulary were parish householders, who assisted citizens who were victims of theft or pickpocketing. The victim, who brought the criminal before the jury, paid prosecutions out of his own pocket. Prisoners were not provided for an appellate procedure and they had to make their own defence, so the legal system did not consider problems such as physical or mental illness and illiteracy, which now are significant factors to consider during a legal process. Most often, the defendant was accused without the assistance of a legal professional. An accusation of theft was enough to open a criminal trial, which was conducted in a very fast and unfair way; for instance, a trial for a capital offence lasted only thirty minutes. Therefore, it was easy enough to be sentenced to death, because almost all felonies were considered as capital in the eighteenth century.

The only chance that the prisoner had to live was a royal pardon, which implied the fact of being exiled to the American colonies; the returning from transportation, which frequently happened for various reasons, such as revenge on the prosecutor, was considered a capital offence. Each year, a few hundred lawbreakers were hanged in a theatrical way, a method that was supposed to be efficient to fight against criminality. The paradox is that many known offenders, whose serious and terrible crimes were known to the whole society were never prosecuted nor killed; they were simply shipped overseas in other British colonies.

During the nineteenth century, professionals started following criminal trial proceedings. Some of the most notable personalities of the time, such as the radical Samuel Romilly and the Christian philanthropist Elizabeth Fry struggled to render forensic process and penal conditions more humane. It was only in 1836, with the Prisoners' Counsel Act, that "professional men could now be employed to defend those whose alleged villainy was of the highest order" (Tucker 2014:157). An example of trial

conducted during the 19th century is that of William Palmer, who was accused of murder in 1856. It lasted for twelve days, which was a record for the time because trials were expected to end in a few minutes. During his trial, which took place in the Central Criminal Court, many people paid a huge amount of money to assist, they were men and women, including also famous authors like Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins. It is interesting the report that Dickens wrote after assisting the trial: he scrutinized the physiognomy of Palmer and searched for physiological proofs of his villainy. It came out that his malice was intrinsic to his person and could be evident to all. The jury took only one hour and eighteen minutes to find him guilty, he was given the capital punishment and he was executed where he was born, in the Staffordshire (Tucker 2014: 158).

In the nineteenth century, parish constables, private security guards and Yeomanry Regiments (troops that had to quell riots and civil disturbances) maintained the order in the English streets. Regarding private properties, only rich families could have servants that guarded their house. The increasing urban disorders in the suburbs of London, the so-called Slums, led government to make the decision of creating the Metropolitan London Police Force in 1829, whose members are better known as Bobbies. Its creator was the member of the conservative party Robert Peel. After some years, a similar police force was created also in provincial locations. Its usefulness could be seen in the fight against riots; in the later Victorian years, they started diminishing considerably compared to the massive insurrections of the early decades.

Regarding the legal system and its related reforms, in the Victorian Era, the “Bloody code” was progressively abolished. It was a collection of two-thousand capital offences, which included murder, forgery, pickpocketing and stealing (only in certain circumstances). In the 1860s, only murderers and traitors were condemned to death. Afterwards, this goal was followed by the cessation of public executions; in fact, from 1868 they were no more conducted in squares and public places, but in prisons. Other offences were punished with imprisonment and transportation. The restriction of the death penalty was an important achievement, but in this little scenery of humanity, harsher penalties were gradually applied to criminals. In fact, during the 1830s and 1840s, corporal punishment had been almost abolished; however, in 1863, the English government reintroduced it.

In Victorian England, like nowadays, the legal system used the services of a divided profession: on one side, there were Barristers, self-employed lawyers who had rights of audience in the Higher Crown Courts. They were gentlemen who enjoyed considerable autonomy and independence, even if over the years their code of conduct hardened progressively. On the other side, there were solicitors and attorneys (term that was no longer used since 1875), who represented the lower branch of the profession. They did not do their job out of passion, but they were commercial men; for this reason, Victorian novels described them as detective-like figures who served the accused only to make profit. During the Victorian Era, some important improvements were made in the area of these two professions. Education to become a solicitor or a barrister became more and more complicated and formalized; in 1825, the Law Society, a professional association for the representation of solicitors, was established and in 1834, some first measures were taken against whom practiced this profession in an illegal and dishonest way. In 1860, with the Solicitor's Act the first examination system was instituted. In 1847, the Inns of Court appointed Readers, Barristers who delivered lectures, and five years later, a Council of Legal Education was created. From the same year, it started organizing a system of examination for Barristers.

During the reign of Queen Victoria, it is true to say that crime rates started rising very quickly. In the degraded areas of the city, where the Working Class lived, people were forced to commit small offenses to survive. In fact, the majority of them lived in very poor conditions: they were amassed in workhouses, where wages were low and sanitation was degraded. Therefore, children were forced to steal to eat something and many women were forced into prostitution. As regards violent crimes and murders, the situation was little different. Victorian society started thinking that government reforms and policies against crime had failed. They mistakenly believed that crime rate was worsening, even if the annual publication of criminal statistics did not indicate so.

The cause of this incorrect belief can be found in the increased access that people had to tales of crime on printed media, especially the periodical press. The Victorian middle class preferred reading above all other interests; they read novels, stories in instalments and articles in newspapers. Therefore, the reports of daily violent crimes and murders in the streets of England brought an illusion of increasing violence, which already existed but it was not put to paper. In fact, the "New Journalism" of the time, no



longer focused on political, economic or financial problems, but on more sensational and popular events, because “nothing seized the Victorian public imagination like the trial of a notorious killer in the Central Criminal Court” (Tucker 2014:156). Especially in middle and late Victorian times, readers and the press were obsessed with crime of every genre, particularly with murder. The statistics in this study derived from an accurate word frequency analysis on *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* (Casey 2011: 369). The first one was the most influential newspaper in all Britain because its readers were people from almost every social class, so not only the middle classes or the upper classes. The sensationalism, which marked this period, affected all people that read articles on crime and murder; for instance, bold headlines were used to attract the attention of readers that were more and more interested in this topic.

All this had consequences. One of them took the name of London Garrotting Panics, two “moral panics” of which the most important one occurred in 1862. With the term “Moral panic” scholars mean the fear of outcasts groups and criminals. In the late 1850s and early 1860s in many newspapers’ articles people read about the “ticket-of-leave men”, which were criminals that thanks to their good behaviour in prison could be released. People started writing letters to *The Times* to express their anxiety about it, but the panic culminated on July 17, 1862, when an article was written on the assault of James Pilkington with the aim of denouncing the folly of tickets-of-leave. Pilkington was a Member of Parliament who was assaulted and robbed in 1862; it was after this event that complaints about the inefficacy of the prison system and the police force increased. Newspapers started publishing also many articles on cases of robbery with garrotting. As Christopher A. Casey reports in his article about the connection between the press and crime, “The number of articles printed containing references to “robbery” and “violence” in *The Times* increased from 90 in the year ending on September 30, 1861, to 136 in 1862, and to 174 in 1863” (Casey 2011:378).

Some images in newspapers represented the fear of citizens and the impotence of the New Metropolitan Police against garrotters, which implemented the panic among the population, rather than decrease it. In fact, this growing alarmism created a sort of vicious cycle. The new Police made more arrests, which created more material for newspapers’ articles that, as an effect, inflated crime statistics. Therefore, people believed that crime was worsening and asked for more police checks and arrests. At this point, the cycle

started repeatedly. The reality was that crime at the time existed, overall in the suburbs of large cities like London, but there was a misperception of its exponential growth.

### *1.3 Penal Institutions: a Look at the Prison System*

In the early 1830s, the English prison system was made up of facilities of different ages, for instance reused old gaols, underground dungeons and small cellblocks near town halls and workhouses. The new and reformed prisons were those constructed after 1823, the year of the Gaol Act, which provided the introduction of regular inspections carried out by the Visiting Justices, the substitution of male warders with female ones for female prisoners. In addition, the governor, the chaplain and the surgeon, three major figures in Victorian prisons, had to write journals recording their work and it was put on paper a classification system to divide prisoners. They were divided by gender, age and type of crime they committed, with the aim of not influencing each other.

At the time, children had to carry out small crimes to survive in a context of poverty and injustices, but in prisons, they had a special treatment. With the Youthful Offenders Act of 1854, children under the age of 16 who were guilty of crimes could be imprisoned for a maximum of fourteen days and then brought to Reformatory schools for a period of time between two and five years. Volunteers with the aid from state grants administered those places. It is interesting to mention the prison visitor and philanthropist Sarah Martin (1791-1843), who put her efforts into trying to convert to justice criminal children. In fact, when released, they were more likely to return to the criminal world than other categories of people. Sarah Martin took care especially of five children. According to the Gaol Register of December 28th, 1839 they did not commit serious crimes, they were arrested on charges of being thieves and vagabonds or sentenced for being absent from apprenticeships. Her observations quoted in Helen Rogers' article *Incarcerated Bodies* (2016), reveal that children's conditions in Victorian prisons were relatively good compared to those in workhouses or streets: "The greatest number of these boys are better fed than when out of prison; the cleanliness they are obliged to observe and regular hours for sleep, if annoying . . . soon promote comfort" (Rogers, 2016: 21). The boys examined were neglected and poor, without a careful family, except one of them, and they were searching for approval and affection. In prisons and Reformatory schools, they received

a sort of Christian education thanks to teacher or volunteers, but the regime was strict. Punishment was carried out through freezing baths, military style exercises and hard labour. Sarah Martin was a very important personality at the time and after her death, other activist women carried out her program and started going to gaols, Reformatory Schools and workhouses to help prisoners and workers in need.

As regards prisons, in the 19th century, the British government chose to look at two types of new punitive methods that were extremely argued in the United States. In their article *The Persistence of the Victorian Prison* (2022: 366), Dominique Moran, Matt Houlbrook and Yvonne Jewkes mention these two punitive systems. The Separate System, according to which criminals had to live in separate cells every day and every night, and the Silent System, according to which prisoners were forced to do hard labour in silence during the day and they had to stay in separate cells during the night. Between them, the Separate system gained a dominant position, but in some gaols, also the Silent one was employed. In Victorian England, Catholicism was the religion of the Empire and supporters of this system thought that introspection and solitude, fundamentals of the Bible, could help offenders to redeem themselves. To follow this method of punishment, a certain type of prison was needed. The walls had to be sound proof and high enough so that it was impossible for the prisoners to look out and the cell had to be big enough to maintain a stable prisoners' mental health. The ventilation system and the opening of the cells' doors was an obstacle to the separation, but it was solved by putting on male prisoners masks and on female ones veils in order to render recognition more difficult. Moreover, sanitation had to be improved, so some cells were provided of windows that could be opened to make prisoners with tuberculosis breathe fresh air. Beside the cells' doors were present some candle alcoves that enabled prisoners to read the Bible and maintain a sort of respectable behaviour through their catholic faith. Prisoners were exercised in groups connected with a long chain that did not touch the ground, so that they could not communicate with each other. They were not allowed to receive visits from the outside world. Among the cells, galleries, atria and iron stairs provided a clear view of the entire prison, where officers circulated around to control and observe prisoners' behaviour, in a way to be able to see also their colleagues. The role of the guards is reported in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898): for instance, in the 11<sup>th</sup> stanza of the first

section, Oscar Wilde complains about the lack of privacy in Victorian prisons, where the silent guards controlled criminals all day and all night.

Under the reign of Queen Victoria, over fifty pre-existing prisons were modified and from 1842 to 1877 with a specific building program, ninety new prisons were constructed following this design, among them were the Public Works prisons at Portland, Portsmouth and Chatham. Here, felons had to do hard and manual work, in order to pay for their mistake. In 1865, an Act made separation and hard labour in Victorian prisons compulsory and with the Prison Act of 1877, the government assigned the administration and finance of local prisons from local magistrates to a new Prisons Commission. An example of typical Victorian prison is the HM Prison Reading, which is located in Reading, Berkshire, England. It is better known as Reading Gaol and it is famous thanks to Oscar Wilde's Ballad. It was built between 1842 and 1844, so it is a perfect example of prison built following the design of the separate system, and it was closed only in 2014. The main building was cruciform and it displayed Tudor-Gothic details, which were employed also for workhouses and hospitals of the time. A great part of the original Reading prison was demolished in the 1970s.

Two main types of prisons existed in Victorian Britain; there was the County prison and the Convict prison. The first one housed low-grade felons, which committed crimes such as poaching, little thefts, affray and vagrancy, therefore they served sentences of a maximum of one month. These prisons were administrated locally until 1877. The second one housed prisoners who were accused of committing serious crimes and therefore were incarcerated in gaols administered by the Crown, such as the King's Bench, Marshalsea and Fleet prisons, which were specialized for debtors. Some of them were sent in Public Works Prisons or up to 1868, they were transported. They carried sentences of six months or more, a period of time that was considered useful for the reform of criminals, so that they could regret of their crime.

As concerns the prison staff, it consisted of the guards and three already mentioned figures: the governor, the chaplain and the surgeon. Governors were described by felons as cold men, who were as ignorant and immoral as the criminals they had to control. He had to observe the rules and regulations of the prison he conducted. The Rules and Regulations to be observed in the Gaol and House of Correction for the County of Huntingdon in 1863 were strict. The Governor had to be resolute, but at the same time

human, in fact he could not strike prisoners. His duties included the precaution for preventing any escape attempt, inspection of every cell, ward, yard and division of the prison, and examination of material coming from the external world, such as letters, parcels or journals. The Governor also had to control the actions of the Subordinate Officers, he was the responsible for security in prisons, for instance, there was the danger of fire, and he had the responsibility over prisoners. In county prisons, the wife of the governor, called Matron, played an important role, in fact, she was responsible for female prisoners and the prison clothing, bedding and linen. The governor was obliged to see each male prisoner once a day and each female prisoner once every seven days with the Matron, and he was expected to help the guards when a felon became violent. He had to fill in the prison registers and submit all the activities in the Prison Board, with the obligation to always being present in prison.

The presence of the Chaplain, who had the principal duty of assisting prisoners' souls under sentence of death, was made compulsory in 1814. They were clergymen of the Church of England, who had to obtain a license from the bishop to work in prisons. Here, they were expected to preach a sermon in the prison chapel on Sunday, to visit the infirmaries and sick every day and to attend the cells of prisoners who required his spiritual assistance. In necessary, they were also responsible for criminals' education and they taught them reading and writing.

The surgeon was a fundamental figure for Victorian gaols, since medical care for prisoners gradually improved in the nineteenth century. Before 1877, the year of the hiring of Prison Commissioners, hygiene levels in prisons were low, most cells had no heating and bad ventilation and sanitation; therefore, epidemics started spreading infecting both prisoners and staff. The majority of Convict prisons had their own surgeon who lived inside the building, whereas other County small gaols used an appointed surgeon that lived nearby. In both cases, the prison surgeon had to ensure the prisoners health, by keeping them clean and controlled. He had the duty to inspect the prison's provisions and to report the Governor its quality, to ensure prisoners were provided of soap, water and clean sheets. He had to make sure that they had the correct daily amount of fresh air and exercise.

It is important to underline that the activist and reformer Stephen Hobhouse's Complaint (Moran, Houlbrook, Jewkes 2022: 374) against prisons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and

other contemporary debates have pointed to Victorian prisons, hospitals and workhouses as the embodiment of inequalities and hypocrisies of Queen Victoria's reign. In fact, they reflected the already-mentioned ambivalence that existed in society; new discoveries, improvements on industry and science, the imperial power and the façade of puritan and strict values of respectability helped to create the image of a perfect society. This was only a masquerade of the harsh and cruel reality, actually, many problems of society existed, but they were hidden. As previously mentioned, the use of drugs, felonies and prostitution were frequent in the suburbs of big cities like London. The increase of poverty led poor people to live in workhouses, places where they were forced to live in comfortless and harsh conditions in change of some food, a shelter and a job. In this terrible scenario, young children were used to commit small crimes in order to stay alive and many authors focused on their conditions in workhouses and prisons. Among them, one can mention Charles Dickens, with his famous work *Oliver Twist* and the poet Oscar Wilde, who criticized the English prison system and the conditions of prisoners, as he spent two years of his life in jail on charges of homosexuality. In the next chapter, I will analyse some of Oscar Wilde's works connected with crime and punishment, with a focus on his life and the schools of thought that mostly influenced him when he was a student.

## 2. Oscar Wilde and Crime

### *2.1 An Eventful Life: Aestheticism, Homosexuality and the Prison*

Oscar Wilde's life took two opposite directions: on one hand, his ability and talent helped him reaching success and fame in a society extremely fascinated by his ideas and personality; on the other hand, a series of events, such as his homosexuality and his frivolous style of life, gradually brought him to the ruin. The famous Victorian poet, author and playwright Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He grew up in a wealthy middle class family, just think his father, William Robert Wills Wilde, was a prominent surgeon, who owned his own hospital and clinic, and a noted archaeologist and author. He wrote on many subjects, for instance on scientific topics, like surgery, but he was also the author of works on Irish folklore.

His mother, Jane Francesca Wilde, was a writer, who, in addition to stories, poems and fiction, contributed to the Irish revolutionary cause by writing articles for the Irish Nationalist newspaper. It is important to underline that the situation between Ireland and Britain was definitely tense at the time. In the period between 1844 and 1847, the Great Potato Famine, caused by a Potato Blight that infected potatoes, shook Ireland and many people were forced to emigrate to America, Australia and England because of starvation. The situation worsened, when in 1845 the Irish government started asking for Home Rule. Even if, Prime Minister Gladstone, who sided with the Irish, made many efforts to give Ireland independence, the British House of Parliament twice rejected the request.

As concerns Oscar Wilde's education, he attended the Trinity College in Dublin and then won a Scholarship to Magdalen College in Oxford. Many recent biographers, such as Rupert Croft-Cooke, believe that it was in this city that he had his first experiences as a homosexual with the artist Frank Miles (Grinstein 1980: 126). Sexual orientation that was kept hidden by Wilde's marriage in 1884 to Constance Lloyd, with whom he had two children. In the city of Oxford, the Aesthetic movement attracted Wilde and he set himself as a poet.

The Oxford aesthetes were disciples of the writer, art critic and philosopher John Ruskin, whose medieval, Christian and Pre-Raphaelite values contributed to create the

movement. Successively, they started following the decadent values of the English essayist, writer and art critic Walter Pater. In fact, from the mid-1870s, a great number of students misunderstood the conclusion of the first edition of Pater's work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Here he proposed, "Young men should, in the search for aesthetic experience and in pursuit of the all-important heightened sensibility, 'burn always with [a] hard, gem-like flame'" (Pater 1873 quoted by Peter 1997: 35). Therefore, they were exhorted to live their life, as it was a work of art, giving primary importance to passions and sensations in every moment of their existence. This writing had a considerable influence over Wilde's life. Pater professed the motto 'Art for Art's sake', according to which art was positioned extremely far from concepts of good and evil and had a superior position over social rules. The aesthetic movement was based on the principle that art needs no moral justification and that it is detached from moral and social issues. It was an opposite tendency to the works of authors like Charles Dickens, who tried to denounce the injustices of Victorian society. According to the movement, art is superior in its own right and it ends in itself without the purpose of denouncing, educating or having any moral basis. This current of thought increasingly spread in every part of Europe during the last part of the nineteenth century and became a mainstay of British culture in the 1890s.

In 1890, Wilde published his first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which initially came out in a magazine and then in a revised book form. This novel shocked most of the readers and many were enraged by its immorality, which went against the Victorian principles and morals of respectability. The preface, included in the 1891 edition of the work, is thought to represent the aesthetic movement in general: with a series of aphorisms, Wilde aims to "highlight the fact that *Dorian Gray* is a novel about art" and he aims to "defend the work from previous criticism and to pre-empt new attacks on it" (Pudney 2012: 118).

Although he is considered an exponent of this artistic and literary movement, the reality is that Wilde never always adhered strongly to the Aesthete and Decadent doctrine. Concerning his poetry, in the first years of his career, the period before and just after the years in Oxford, Wilde focused on typical Victorian themes characterized by moral, religious and political approaches. In his works, one finds some contradictions due to the tension between his aestheticism and his Victorian sensibility, which are set out in



Norbert Kohl's study, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* (1989). Some of his early poems, written after his travel to Italy in 1875, are principally religious poems in which a sense of attraction to the Roman Catholicism can be observed. For instance, he compares the image of the martyred artist with the image of the crucified Christ, typical of the precedent Romantic poetry. The themes of religion and martyrs were extremely important to him throughout all his life.

Another point of reference and inspiration for Oscar Wilde was the writer, painter, belletrist, forger and murderer, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, who was for Wilde the representative of the Aesthetic and Decadent sensibility of the 1880s and 1890s. Wainewright had the characteristics of a Dandy-aesthete, a personality who cultivated values of perfection and exquisiteness, and applied them in every area of his life, so perfection in dress was as important as perfection in art and intellectuality. The Dandy operated outside conventional canons of morality imposed by society. In various literary self-portraits, written under the false name of Janus Weathercock, Wainewright described himself as the exquisite: "in the most celebrated of these passages he chooses to portray himself stretched languidly upon his 'pomona green morocco chaise-longue', by turns idly browsing through choice impressions of rare engravings plucked from a sumptuous portfolio, or toying with his equally indolent cat." (Peter 1997: 34). It is important to underline that Wainewright's influence on Wilde was so prominent that the Irish poet dedicated a memoir to him. *Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green* was born and it was published for the first time in 1885 and successively in 1891. The title derives from the fact that Wainewright was a murder, more specifically a poisoner, while the subtitle, according to Horst Schroeder (2010), was perhaps inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's detective novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), in which the famous detective Sherlock Holmes appeared for the first time. It is a salient point to analyse also the choice of colour green over other colours. Horst Schroeder underlines Wilde's fascination with the colour green, the only tonality he liked in art. Green was the colour of artists and art lovers; it was the colour of nature and innocence (Schroeder 2010: 33).

In 1891, Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas, whom he called Bosie, and between them a close friendship developed, which then became a love relationship. Alfred's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, tried to end the relationship without succeeding because the two men refused to be intimidated. After an attempt to undermine the opening of Wilde's

play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and various attempts of libel against him, Douglas strongly suggested him to report his father. The author decided to pursue legal action and finally, in 1895, the Marquess was arrested, but he was immediately released on bail.

The prosecution against Wilde due to his homosexuality started. Some passages in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a quite number of letters to Alfred Douglas and testimonies by various men about their homosexual relationship became the perfect evidence to find him guilty. Homosexuality, whether practiced in private or public, was considered a criminal offence at the time and according to Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885), the accused had to suffer a severe punishment. Thereafter, in 1895, he was arrested and spent three weeks in jail pending trial, without the possibility of paying bail. From this moment, his fall began. His debtors started asking for full payment of their accounts, but since he could not pay his debts, the Irish artist was declared bankrupt and all his belongings were sold. After three trials, he was imprisoned with the jury verdict of guilty. He was kept at hard labour for two long years and his sentence could not be reduced. The prison period seemed a nightmare to him, characterized by a sense of alienation and fear that brought him to think a new and more sober view of life. The environment in which he lived inspired two of his major works, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) and *De Profundis* (1897), a long letter to his lover Alfred Douglas about their relationship.

He was released in 1897 but he was an aged and broken man; for this reason, he tried to enter a Roman Catholic retreat for six months but, due to his reputation, he was refused. In the same year, Wilde reached Italy and for a short period, he lived in the city of Naples, with his lover Alfred Douglas. They lived here under false names, until Douglas's mother defunded him because she was against their relationship. For this reason, Wilde decided to leave his lover and he moved to Taormina, in Sicily. In 1898, Wilde left Italy to reach France, where his friends financially supported him. Here, he changed his name and adopted the alias Sebastian Melmoth. His biographers thought he referred to the Christian martyred saint Sebastian and as concerns the surname Melmoth, it came from the hero of his maternal great uncle's novel *Melmoth, the Wanderer* (1820). According to Alexander Grinstein (1980), Wilde could have felt a resemblance to the martyred Sebastian, who did not abandon his Christianity despite the punishment of being

martyred. In the same way, despite the prison and the horrors he saw inside, the poet did not change and he did not leave his homosexual orientation.

Wilde had an eventful life, full of unexpected events and experiences. In this sense, his works reflect his style of life because he experimented various genres. Some of the already mentioned works of Wilde share elements of detective, crime and mystery novels. For instance, the murder is frequent in Wilde's works and it can be observed in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the short tale *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* and the essay *Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green*, on the life of a famous poisoner. Other works reflect Wilde's mature reflection on the pleasures of life and his willingness of denouncing the harshness of prison life, for example *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

## 2. 2 Criminal Implications in Oscar Wilde's Prose and Poetry

In his article *Sexual Politics and the Aesthetic of Crime: Oscar Wilde in the Nineties* (2002) about Wilde's aesthetic of crime, Simon Joyce describes the characteristics of a dangerous criminal, in turn taking up the writing of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man who Was Thursday* (1908). The idea is that "We deny the snobbish English assumption that the uneducated are the dangerous criminals. [...] We say that the dangerous criminal is the educated criminal. We say that the most dangerous criminal now is the entirely lawless modern philosopher. Compared to him, burglars and bigamists are essentially moral men." (Chesterton 1986: 25 quoted by Joyce 2002: 501). It is important to mention that the image of the cultured offender is a fiction, with the purpose of driving away public attention from social problems in Victorian England, such as unemployment, poverty and hypocrisy. It is the fact of presenting crime as a fine art made up of motiveless actions, by eliminating the moral purpose.

In 1827, the essayist and literary critic Thomas De Quincey wrote *On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, an essay which presents the idea that particular crimes in particular situations gain an aesthetic value, for instance, according to De Quincey, murder becomes a worthy act. This can be useful to read Oscar Wilde's case because relatively all criminals in his works of prose and poetry are intellectual and artistic personalities. The first literary work to mention is the already familiar essay *Pen,*

*Pencil and Poison* on the poisoner Thomas Wainewright. Wilde borrows the phrase of the title from Swinburne and lists three characteristics of the murderer's life: pen because he was a writer, pencil because he was a drawer and poison because he was a secret poisoner (O' Brien 2008: 8). At the beginning of the essay, in Wainewright's biographical description, Wilde describes him as a lover of the beautiful and the exquisite, but also as a criminal, forger and murder. He gives us also a progressive list of the multiple victims of the poisoner, including people in the context of finance, his uncle, his sister-in-law, his mother-in-law, and others. Through a particular use of irony, in his essay Wilde wants to demonstrate that Wainewright's genius in criminality makes him a true artist.

Wilde analyses the consideration of Wainewright as a master criminal and denotes that in his fashionable cell in the prison of Newgate he felt isolated. He looked at himself as a respectable gentleman and noticed that also his cellmates thought the same; the fact was that he felt a sense alienation from other criminals. After a period at Newgate, he was sent to the penal colony of Van Diemen's Land in the island of Tasmania, where major forgers spent the rest of their sentence, and here he felt a sense of superiority over the other rustic and uneducated traveling companions. The figure of Wainewright is important to understand Wilde's considerations about Victorian criminals and crime. He argued the existence of two classes of criminals; on one hand, some types of felonies represent particular social conditions of poverty, class oppression and starvation, and on the other hand, wealthy criminals such as Wainewright commit crimes only to ensure capital gain. This class of criminals mirrors the economic values of the Victorian society.

According to Simon Joyce, Wainewright can be observed as the prototype for another lover of beauty and exquisiteness, the imaginary character of Dorian Gray, from Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The life of the main character ranges between the aesthetic pursuit of beauty and a beautiful existence, and criminal actions, such as the use of opium in nasty areas of the city of London and the murder of one of his friends. He embodies the figure of the perfect aesthete and in this role, he has a great success, but the same thing cannot be said for his role as criminal. A succession of events leads to the murder of the painter Basil Hallward, one of Dorian's friends that painted the portrait, around which the plot of the story develops. This act seems poor and undertaken; in a moment of intense hatred, Dorian kills the painter out of resentment and according to the art critic Alan Sinfield (1994: 100 quoted by Joyce 2002: 506), the

murder arises from an act of intemperance and want of self-control, not from a lack of morality or from aestheticism. The crime does not sound artistic because, with the subsequent attempt to hide the body, it remains hidden from the public. It is interesting also to mention Lord Henry Wotton's reaction to Dorian's hypothetical confession and his speculations on crime. He affirms that "All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime. It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true. Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations." (Wilde 1890 quoted by Joyce 2002: 507). With this affirmation the author does not want to intend that in life only extraordinary sensations count, but he wants to underline that the harsh life of working class and their constant search for subsistence rather than pleasure, render poor criminals' actions justified. In the case of Wainewright and Dorian Grey, murder cannot find its justification in being a form of art. Actually, their wealth, intellectuality, pleasures of life and cultural training make it easier to find enjoyment in aesthetic and make life easier. For this reasons, the aristocrat person is not justified when commits a crime, because it is not the effect of suffering or a material need.

According to Ellen O'Brien, "When crime and culture are reconnected, murderers are never entirely unfamiliar; they come to signify ominous expressions of common cultural values, and their actions appear transgressive variations on established cultural practices." (O'Brien 2008:11). It means that crime and culture, the environment in which the crime is perpetrated, are connected because a felony always needs a public response, but it is in turn a response to cultural habits. It is the reason why Wilde "linked murder to other modes of expression" (O'Brien 2008:11), such as art, beauty, morality. Another important theme, which comes out in Wilde's novel, is the Hedonistic and narcissistic behaviour of Dorian, who would do anything to maintain his physical appearance and outer beauty uncorrupted. As the story progresses, these features of his nature strongly emerge and lead him to commit terrible actions: he makes a pact with the devil, drives a girl to suicide and kills his friend. According to Lewis J. Poteet, Dorian Gray is "both artist and work of art; in fact, in Wilde's version of romantic the two are one" (Poteet 1971:246). He is an artist in every area of his life because as a perfect aesthete he searches to transform his life in a real work of art. For instance, his love for Sybil Vane, which is in reality love for

the perfection of her art as an actress; it can be seen, in the end of their relationship when she loses her sense of form because of her love for Dorian. The main character becomes a work of art, when the painter Basil Hallward creates Dorian's portrait. It represents the cause of his later crime and the evidence of the narcissistic trait of his nature. All this is powered also by Lord Henry Wotton's teachings, concerning principles of aestheticism and the vision of artistic possibilities of self-development. Lord Wotton's words have an immense impact on Wilde's personality, as Lewis J. Poteet underlines, "Lord Henry's conquest of Dorian, [...], is described with many hints of the seduction of a younger by an older man" (Poteet 1971:245). The effect is Dorian's exploration of art, travel, music, drugs, sex and finally murder, actions taken to reach new sensations in life.

The connection between art, beauty and crime in Wilde's works can be observed also in his fairy tales, as suggested in particular in the article *Morality's Ugly Implications in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales* (2011). Here, the author Justin T. Jones express the big gap that exists between the appearances of villains in popular beliefs and their aspect in Oscar Wilde's tales. Normally, a character's outer ugliness reflects its inner brutality and vice, while in Wilde's stories ugliness represents the corruption of morality of characters that have always a beautiful appearance (Jones 2011: 883). Wilde's reformation of standards of morality and the paradoxical coexistence of moral repugnance and outer beauty that exist in fairy tales' characters has an impact on the end of almost every story. He chooses to end seven of his nine fairy tales with a main character's death, actually, when they change their style of life, the author rewards their new moral sense and good actions with death. Reality enters in the world of the fairy tale and kills any hope of a happy conclusion. The reason behind this decision is simple, in short stories Wilde uses death ironically as a reward for the morality that his characters have gained over crime and villainy. The concept is that beauty starts to deteriorate in the exact moment that morality touches them and their life (Jones 2011: 888).

A short tale that does not follow this line is *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, written in 1887, which presents the story of a main character, who has committed a murder and some attempted murders. The cold-blooded homicide, which is considered immoral, in the tale is the source of Lord Arthur Savile's happiness with his wife and it gives him a sense of perpetual youth. Here, aesthetic and material happiness remain uncorrupted by reality's ugly implications.

Another important genre that touched the theme of crime was poetry. The crime ballads, for instance, inserted themselves perfectly into the context of previously mentioned Victorian legal reforms and increasing interest in crime and criminology. During the 19th century, as concerns ballad and poetry, two genres of crime ballad circulated in print and song. On one hand, the stories told by a third-person narrator, which became proofs of bloody violence and horrific murders, and on the other hand, the first-person accounts of criminals waiting for their capital sentence. In the same way as journalists and novelists, poets started writing poetry on popular subjects, such as crime and murder. For instance, it is important to mention the poet Robert Browning and his famous monologues “Porphyria’s Lover”, “My Last Duchess”, or “The Laboratory”, a dramatic monologue that reports the mischievous words of a courtesan while preparing herself for the murder of her romantic rival (O’Brien 2008 :141). The first two dramatic monologues also express the connection between murder and beauty, in both cases related to the figure of a woman.

Ballads describing the point of view of third-person narrators assisting trials and capital punishments developed an aesthetic of murder of social transgression. According to Ellen O’Brien in her article "*The Most Beautiful Murder*" (2000: 18), the two main parts of a crime become an art form. On one hand, the account of the crime, establishes the aesthetic of violent murder, while, on the other hand, the account of the crime scene creates a horrific portrait of victims that become a sort of art objects of the murderer’s artistry.

Normally, one can say that Oscar Wilde is known for his attitude towards aestheticism and dandyism, for his eventful and exquisite way of life and also for his period in prison and the subsequent period of bankruptcy and failure. Today, he is well known for his aphorisms and quotations, for his poetry and theatrical pieces. Beyond all this, it is important to underline the fact that Oscar Wilde’s works crawl with elements of crimes and criminality. His last works also focus on the injustices of the Victorian prison system, connected to the harsh life in prison and the unreasonable capital punishment, which was still used to execute felons. During this time in prison, inspired by the horrors he saw, Oscar Wilde wrote a famous ballad on the theme of crime and punishment, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which will be analysed in the next chapter. The Ballad connects the theme of crime, because it starts from the account of an actual murder, with the theme

of justice. Actually, Wilde touches on various important topics, such as the alienation of the prisoner in Victorian jails, the injustice of the capital punishment and the love relationship between man and woman, underlining the role of the woman at the time, perceived as an object-like figure and characterized by passivity.



### 3. Post-prison Writings: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and the Letters

#### 3.1 *Murder and the Jail*

Oscar Wilde wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* when released from the prison of Reading, Berkshire, England, where he was imprisoned with accusations of sodomy. Wilde was transferred from the prison of Wandsworth to Reading Jail on November 23, 1895, from which he was released on May 18, 1897. Only a month later he wrote *The Ballad*, which was finally published in London in February 1898 by Leonard Smithers. In the first publication of the poem, the author's name was not mentioned, but it was substituted by Wilde's cell number C. 3. 3. *The Ballad* has been used for promoting prison reform but also for denouncing the problems of the Victorian prison institution. In fact, the peculiarity of this ballad is the union between aesthetic images and political contents, which helped disclose the controversial issues of unproductive labour, imposed silence and conditions of prisoners, especially of children. The project of this poem was very important for Wilde: it was the account of the repercussions he had to deal with, the horrors and atrocities he saw in prison that changed him forever.

He wrote two documents to express his thoughts on this project. Firstly, the letter to his lover Bosie, *De Profundis* and secondly, his letters to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, in which Wilde records the case of two prisoners, a little boy that had an experience of terror in the jail and a silly man, called Prince, who was constantly flogged by officers. These two are also present in the second section of the fifth part of *The Ballad*, where they are represented as a frightened child and a fool man. *De Profundis* is an autobiographical letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, his lover, which was written while he was already imprisoned in jail. It is a critical work on his life and thoughts, which ranges from the accusations against Douglas of having brought him to bankruptcy, to the need of a possible reconciliation with him.

From a metrical point of view, *The Ballad* is composed of 6 sections and 109 stanzas, each made up of six lines. The rhyme scheme is simple and easy to observe, while the verses are hexameters and tetrameters. With this poem, Wilde experiments a new poetic style for him and he tries to reach a new popular audience. The form of the Ballad

extremely fascinated Wilde due to the tension between romance and realism. It is reported also in one of his letters to Douglas, in which he tries to persuade him to write them (Youngs 1999: 46).

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* begins in medias res, with the much debated and criticized scene of the murder, inspired by an actual crime that Wilde could possibly have read in some newspapers' articles.

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.<sup>1</sup>

On March 29, 1896, Charles Thomas Woolridge, cavalry soldier in the royal guards, killed his young wife Laura Ellen Woolridge with a razor. At the time, it was considered a premeditated crime because Woolridge had waited for her on the street near their house and full of jealousy cut her throat three times. As a result, the Home Secretary rejected the mitigating circumstances on the death penalty and he was sentenced to be hanged in the Reading prison, the jail where he spent his last days of life. With Woolridge's sentence, the scaffold of the Reading prison was used for the second time after its installation many years before. The first stanza, the only one related to the actual crime, invokes "familiar aesthetic and Decadent motifs" (Alkalay-Gut 2005:19), actually, its subject is death and Wilde carries out a stylization process, to make the situation seem more aesthetic. He changes some particulars of the real murder, reported in contemporary newspapers. For instance, he changes in a wise way the location of the crime scene to give to the murder a sense of exquisiteness; in fact, instead of the street, he locates the dead body in the marital bed. Another stylization of the scene can be found in the absence of the soldier's uniform, which represents the theme of passion and jealousy of the men towards his wife. Wilde also changes the colour of the coat; instead of being blue, colour of the uniform of Woolridge's regiment, in the poem the coat becomes scarlet. The

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<sup>1</sup> Wilde, Oscar O'Flahertie Wills. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Smithers, London, 1898.

environment is romanticized by various particulars, such as the connection of blood and wine linked by the fact that both of them are red. In the scene, “the recollection of ‘wine and woman and song’ attempts to make a real murder part of an identifiable literary tradition” (Alkalay-Gut, 2005: 20), another artificial construction because at the time soldiers were meant to drink beer or gin.

For the first time, in this stanza Wilde describes his feelings towards the victim and the murderer, by using the adjective “poor” to describe the woman, but stressing the fact that her murderer loved her. He feels pity for her but at the same time he feels a sense of empathy for the soldier. He is able to understand Woolridge’s thoughts because they share the same experience, in the same prison and he describes Woolridge’s face expressions characterized by a note of melancholy in his eyes. The rest of the Ballad describes Wilde’s own experience in the prison, underlining his feelings of alienation, hope and loneliness. The basis of structure and inner psychology of the work is a claim about love and death (Buckler 1990: 38); it can be observed all over the poem but it is summarized in the stanza about men’s habit of killing what they love. Here, Wilde relates Woolridge’s situation to the life of all men and in a sense, he admires Woolridge because he was brave enough to murder his wife and present himself to the police, so now he dies but he does it without shame and he can spend his last days walking through the prison yard holding his head up. Basically, the idea expressed by Wilde is that:

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! <sup>2</sup>

People kill what they love in different ways. Some of them commit the actual murder with a sword, a knife, and in the case of Woolridge with a razor, but others are crueller and inflict a long-term punishment that does not kill the victim corporally but mentally. It is interesting to mention the vision of murder that Buckler suggests in his article *Oscar*

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<sup>2</sup> Wilde, Oscar O’Flahertie Wills. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Smithers, London, 1898.

*Wilde's "chant de cygne"* (1990: 38). Here, he underlines that Wilde does not want to normalize murder, but he argues the vision of a rigid society that condemns to death those who murder, without giving them the possibility to change. *The Ballad* does not offer a legal alternative to these types of punishment, but invites people to think for themselves. According to Robinson (2015), the choice of these particular words recalls a scene of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), "Bassanio's line to Shylock: 'Do all men kill the things they do not love?' to which he replies: 'Hates any man the thing he would not kill?' Wilde would adapt these, it has been suggested, in his poem's most quoted variation on the proposition that 'each man kills the thing he loves'." (Robinson 2015: 300).

The writing strategy of Wilde includes the use of a poet-like figure for his narrative persona, which allows him to analyse the condemned feelings and live them in a more intense way than Woolridge himself. There are two story lines: on one hand, the plot that describes Woolridge and his actions in the third person and on the other hand, Wilde's poet-like figure in the first person. *The Ballad*, characterized by an abundant use of symbols and images, reaches a metaphorical level: in a first level, we can see the themes of crime and punishment, but with a second look, the reference to the exclusion by society of those who break social standards, laws and religious ordnance is evident. Wilde is referring to criminals, like Woolridge, but also to homosexual people, like himself and Douglas, who were excluded and isolated.

It is important to also mention the many references to religion, a recurring motif in Wilde's work. In the passage of Woolridge's hanging, where "the wild regrets" and "the bloody sweats" are mentioned, Wilde includes himself in the pains suffered by the condemned. With this strategy, the author is able to represent himself as a Christlike figure, with the risk of comparing his crime with the trooper's crime. Here, murder seems to be a less terrible act than it is and many critics have argued this choice of connecting actor and spectator. Another reference to Christianity can be found in the murder scene, actually "the detail of the scarlet coat folds so symbolically into the blood and wine of Christian sacrifice" (Robinson 2015: 304). What's more, the figure of Christ is present throughout the entire poem. It is remarkable, the passage in the fifth part of the poem, where Wilde steps from the contemplation of his condition to a criticism on how men are capable of hurting other men. Wilde proceeds from the assumption that nobody is

innocent and compares prison to a place of shame, built to hide Christ the atrocities that guards do to prisoners. Actually, Wilde describes the punitive actions of the prisons officials as intentionally painful, in order to hurt felons, and he condemns them as more shameful and evil than the felonies committed by inmates.

The style of life that Wilde and other felons experimented in jail reveals a sort of alienation from the external world. This element can be seen in the motif of the passing of time, underlined by the constant repetition of the same actions. Every day in prison is similar to the others, and Wilde expresses the repetition of actions with the recurrence of the verse “Silently we went round and round”. The circle they made by walking round in the prison yard was a way to think to their terrible past. The word “silently”, with which he describes the other prisoners and the guards, refers to the already known Silent System, according to which felons were forced to do repetitive actions and they had to remain in complete silence. It was a failure because it challenged the prisoners’ mental health and led many of them to commit suicide.

### 3.2 *Women (as) Victims*

As Wilde lived in an extremely male oriented society, it is interesting to understand the role of the woman as victim in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. In the Victorian Era, women were expected to marry, stay at home and look after their children, they had to maintain a respectable behaviour in social contexts and only take part in their husbands’ business. They were supposed to wear appropriate clothes, cover their legs in public and they had to follow very strict rules. They were generally seen as passive elements of society, even if the ruler was a Queen.

In *The Ballad*, the victim is the wife of a trooper and she is described as “The poor dead woman whom he loved”. In this verse of the first stanza, Wilde put emphasis on the word “love”, which is followed by the verb “murdered” of the next line, to make murder a natural part of love. The crime scene, the bed, marks the connection between love and murder, which becomes the result of an excess of jealousy and passion. Wilde puts emphasis on the connection between erotic intimacy and crime. The crime seems to be unpremeditated, as if it was committed in an instinctive instant of madness caused by the

excess of wine. In the poem, the dead woman is never mentioned again and Wilde gives no more importance to her, as he concentrates his attention to his own situation and the convict's last days. This means that the victim has no significance, with the result that the crime loses importance and the author starts feeling a sense of compassion for the felon. The real victim in the poem is not the dead woman but her murderer. The fact of changing the actual premeditated crime with an instinctual one, underlines the contrast between the instinctual passion of Woolridge for his victim and the intentional, deliberate coldness of the Victorian penal system. The legal crimes committed by social institutions are present throughout the poem and Wilde indicates these actions as worse than prisoners' crimes.

In the stanza referred to the universally shared behaviour of man, who "kills the thing he loves", in this case the woman, Wilde transforms murder into an exquisite aesthetic form that hurts the murder more than the real victim. It is "presented as a psychologically honest form of (masculine) behaviour" (Alkalay-Gut, 1997:352), actually, also Alexander Grinstein, in his article *Oscar Wilde* (1980), underlines that Wilde's conception of relations between a man and a woman was sadomasochistic. In the poem, the female victim is reduced to an object; in fact, the author refers to her as "the thing", a soul that can be destroyed only because she is loved. She is the embodiment of the typical passivity that characterised women in art and literature during the Victorian Era; in fact, his conception was the effect of the middle-class economic values and the philosophy of utilitarianism.

In *The Poetic Principle* (1850), Edgar Allan Poe argues that poetry preferred dead women instead of any other subject. In the dramatic monologue, they helped the poet connecting conflicting emotions, such as love, longing, regret, and they represented love as a pure feeling because since they were dead they could no more decide for themselves. Therefore, they were silent faithful and respectable (Alkalay-Gut 1997: 353). For this reason, many artists and authors of the time preferred the subject of the passive and dead women. The English poet Robert Browning (1812-1889), for instance, in his dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess* (1842) transforms his beloved and dead woman into a painting, a way to control and hide her from the glances of other men, which were the source of his jealousy. Moreover, in Browning's other dramatic monologue *Porphyria's Lover* (1836), the subject is a man, who strangles the woman he loves, so that she could remain with him forever. This poem is an evident example of the Victorian vision of

women as merely commodities, incapable of choosing for themselves, so the speaker's action is justified. The appearance of the unknown serial killer Jack the Ripper in 1888, who was used to kill women, his confirmed victims were prostitutes, instigated the idea that both the sinful woman and the virtuous one had to die. In fact, the first one was considered a problem for society and the second one was seen as too good for the world (Alkalay-Gut 1997: 353). In *The Ballad*, Wilde denies the victim's identity as a woman through her dehumanization, process that does not point to Wilde as a misogynist, but suggests that the woman becomes the symbol of the other as an object. The victim is the embodiment of the tendency of the Victorian society to negate the other and to see everything according to standards of utility and profit. This tendency can be observed also in *De Profundis*, in Wilde's analysis of his lover Douglas, where he informs him about his narcissism, characteristic shared with all human beings.

Wilde's aesthetics in the poem seems to reflect the Decadent Style, which preferred the artifice to nature. A plant, an animal and a person are of equal value because they take a symbolic significance. According to Karen Alkalay-Gut if murder is not a real experience and does not involve a real victim, but it remains a symbolic event, it can gain an aesthetic meaning. Therefore, "Even crime can be considered as a fine art" (Alkalay-Gut 1997: 354). The connection between Woolridge's crime and Wilde's homosexuality is evident throughout the poem, and starting from this perspective the murder of the woman becomes the mirror of the love of a man for another man. Obviously, these two crimes cannot have the same importance in legal context, but in *The Ballad*, homosexuality and murder seems to be correlated. It is interesting to consider the fact that Wilde chooses Woolridge's murder of his wife instead of other little crimes that are mentioned in the poem, such as the little child and the fool. Those two could appear more similar to Wilde's own crime, because they have murdered no one and their cases are less forensically complicated than the trooper's crime. It is Wilde's awareness of Woolridge's guilt, his act of being able to murder the object of his love and his courage to report himself that makes him a true hero: he has deliberately chosen to become an outcast from society and accepts his own situation. Wilde aims to create a feeling of compassion towards Woolridge and his poor wife. In particular, the criminal that acted for love and passion becomes a heroic figure, compared to the faceless wardens of the prison.

This compassion and pity for the criminal, but also Wilde's self-identification in his crime, can be associated to a new gender attitude that started spreading in the period. By the end of the nineteenth century, readers started feeling pity toward men instead of the heroines of the novels (Alkalay-Gut 1997: 359). Previously, women were seen in relation to their social duties of marriage, domestic suffering and death, as they occupied a weak position in the sentimental popular belief of the middle-class culture. With the arrival of the following century and Wilde's composition of *The Ballad*, the readers' attention moved to the figure of the suffering man, who became the object of compassion of a culture, which increasingly believed in the dominance of men towards women. In the poem, this tendency is evident in the transformation of the death of the beloved wife into a trivial action and the sympathy for a murderer into a positive emotion (Alkalay-Gut 1997: 359).

### *3.3 Death Penalty and the Horrors of Prison Life*

The only post-prison texts by Oscar Wilde are *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, *De Profundis* and two letters to *The Daily Chronicle* in May 1897 and March 1898. As already mentioned, these three works are concerned with the author's experience of prison life and its effects. While in prison, Wilde saw the destruction of his life; firstly, from a material point of view, he was declared bankrupt and all his possessions were sold by auction. Secondly, from a mental point of view, he was scared by the horrors and injustices he saw in the two jails where he was imprisoned. According to Tim Youngs (1999: 41), Wilde is reported to have declared that he died in prison, and after his release, he was no more the same person. His wife Constance Lloyd admitted as well that her husband was changed considerably during the years of prison; actually, "he had fallen from his comfortable middle-class world into what might be accurately described as a hell on earth. British prisons at that time were still run in accordance with the 1865 Prison Act, which mandated harsh treatment of inmates in order to chastise and mortify them (Schnitzer 2005: 64).

In the second letter to *The Daily Chronicle* (1898), Wilde directly addressed the newspaper's director and denounced two circumstances that had strongly touched him: the case of a hungry child and the prison warder that tried to help him, and the case of a



young “silly” man that appeared to be mad. In the fifth part of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, where Wilde describes the everyday life of the inmates: the water they drink, the food they eat, the warders’ behaviour, the smell of the cells and the feelings of his companions, there is also a reference to the two prisoners who grabbed Wilde’s attention.

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 gray.<sup>3</sup>

In the first instance, the Prison Commissioners dismissed Martin, a warder of the Reading Gaol, from service because he was found guilty of having fed a hungry child. According to Wilde, his only blame was being kind and humane with the inmates: “feeding the hungry, nursing the sick” (Wilde, 1898:3). For this reason, he found himself in a condition of poverty, without an employment. Wilde wrote the letter to demonstrate that the Victorian Prison System was cruel and to show that the life in prison was dehumanizing, both for prisoners and for warders; he claimed, “It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons” (Wilde, 1898:11). He partly succeeded because the letters “reinforced the movement toward reform of prison conditions that led to the Prison Act of 1898. Unfortunately this was passed too late to help Wilde, whose health was permanently broken by what he had undergone during his imprisonment” (Schnitzer 2005: 68).

Wilde saw the incriminated scene on the Monday preceding his release, while he was walking to the reception room to see a friend. According to him, there were three children just arrived in the central prison hall, wearing their prison dresses. The youngest was very small and thin, which is a consequence of the condition of poverty that worker-class people and children were forced to live at the time. The little child was crying because of hunger and he was unable to eat his breakfast because of his mental condition. The warder Martin gave the children some biscuits, but as this action went against the regulations of the Prison Board, he was reported by a senior warder and then dismissed. In the letter, Wilde declared that he knew the warder well, as he was under his charge for

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<sup>3</sup> Wilde, Oscar O’Flahertie Wills. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Smithers, London, 1898.

the last few months of his imprisonment. He described Martin as a humane and kind person, “he was always gentle and considerate” (Wilde, 1898:9).

In Wandsworth prison, there was a large number of imprisoned children, subjected to a harsh and cruel treatment. Wilde argued that if the adult person is able to understand and accept the social punishment consequently to a bad action, children cannot understand the punishment inflicted by society because they are used to teachers or parents individual punishments. They are separated from family, brought to a lonely place where they know no body and the effect of this separation is the feeling of terror, which characterizes the entire period of their imprisonment. It is interesting to mention Wilde’s account of a child on remand in the prison of Reading. When he saw the little boy with two warders, he noticed the terror on his appearance: his face was “like a white wedge of sheer terror” and in his eyes, there was “the mute appeal of a hunted animal” (Wilde, 1898:7). The feeling of terror that invaded the jail joined both grown men and children, and the separated system and the silent one extremely reinforced it.

According to Wilde, children suffered mostly for two reasons. On one hand, they were confined to their cells almost the entire day and they could not speak to each other. The paradox that Wilde explains is that if children underwent this treatment at home, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children would blame parents, but in prison, this violence was legalized. Even if many warders were kind with children, the system denied this behaviour and dismissed whoever tried to help them. On the other hand, children suffered from hunger; actually, their breakfast consisted of a piece of prison bread and a tin of water, their lunch consisted of an Indian meal and for dinner they got only another piece of bread and a tin of water. This type of diet was for adult inmates the cause of illnesses, such as the diarrhoea, which was prevented regularly by astringent medicines. Apart from this precaution, the sanitary system in jails was extremely inadequate. If someone was sick, he had to remain in his little cell, oftentimes without the possibility to change the air of the room. Children were forced to eat, despite their mental conditions; actually, Wilde underlined that “a child who has been crying all day long, and perhaps half the night, in a lonely dimly-lit cell, and is preyed upon by terror, simply cannot eat food of this coarse, horrible kind” (Wilde, 1898:9). They were the real victims of a cruel system, which consisted of the governor, the chaplain, the surgeon, the warders and moreover, the isolation, the inadequate sanitation, the unhealthy food. The only humanity

in gaols was the kindness of some warders, but above all the compassion of prisoners for other prisoners. If the prison system and society often neglected poor children, the same thing cannot be said for the inmates; Wilde mentions, for instance, the pity he saw in the eyes of his companions when looking at the three children in Reading Yard (Wilde 1898: 11).

In the second case, Wilde described the condition of a soldier, Prince, a prisoner with a strange and hysterical behaviour. Because of his madness, he was constantly under observation of the warders, so oftentimes he did not take part at general exercise. The few times he reached his companions, he used to cry and laugh in a desperate way; additionally, while in the prison chapel, he used to break the regulations, so his personal guards hit him in order to bring his attention to the prayers. He was frequently punished and the warders did not fully understand him, as they thought he was simulating his madness. In the letter, Wilde remembered the time he heard Prince's screams, while the warders were flogging him, event that inspired his verse of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. This terrible circumstance particularly touched Wilde, who noticed a worsening in his conditions every time the warders punished him. The problem was that prison surgeons were not experienced in mental diseases and they believed in the only existence of physical illnesses. This ignorance and the wrong punishing methods brought to a growing insanity of the prisoner's mental conditions. As Wilde states, "The doctor is fighting for a theory. The man is fighting for his life. I am anxious that the man should win"(Wilde, 1989: 15); for this reason, in the letter Wilde asked to the Editor of *The Daily Chronicle*, if he could examine the case of the soldier in order to learn how to treat prisoners with mental diseases.

Generally, Wilde argued that the cruelty of the Victorian prison system was related to the stupidity of the humankind, because it was the result of a stereotyped society characterized by the centralisation of authority. This type of ruling system is dangerous for both those who manage it and for its subjects. Wilde tries to publicly denounce all the cruelties and injustices he saw while in jail, in order to change things. Another topic on which he focused was capital punishment. In the whole *Ballad*, it is possible to feel Wilde's anxiety towards Woolridge's wait for his sentence. At the time, prisoners used to be hanged inside the walls of the prison, in front of the eyes of the other inmates. Then, they were not buried in proper graves, but in an area of mud and sand, the warders put the

corpse in burning lime. Wilde wanted to denounce the death penalty as a form of excessively cruel punishment and, at the same time, the unjust methods of burying death prisoners, as they did not receive a real funeral even if they were human beings, equal to all other men. This can be observed in the already-mentioned stanza about the reality that every man kills the object of his love. The point is that the coward does not die and does not suffer from the prison's conditions; while the brave man, who has the courage to report his own crime, has to die as a consequence of an unjust social system.

To sum up, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and in all documents written after the period spent in prison, one can see a change in Wilde's attitude towards life. Dandyism, aestheticism and a love for exquisiteness are replaced by pity, sadness and the willingness to denounce a corrupted and merciless system. He started to fight against injustices and to see reality for what it was, without filters. In *The Ballad*, it is possible to see various themes, such as the role of women in the Victorian Era, his condemnation of the prison system, related to the horrors that Wilde saw and experimented in jails, but also his disdain towards capital punishment. In the poem, though, the vision of the woman as an object-like figure is clear and the pity of the poet towards the murderer instead of the victim is an example of it. The horrors of prison life are clearly mentioned in his letter to the daily chronicle, in which he focuses above all on the condition of weak inmates: children and prisoners with mental illnesses. In *The Ballad*, it is possible to notice also the great influence that newspapers, books and letters had on people at the time. Firstly, the well-known homicide case from which the poem takes shape. Actually, Oscar Wilde read about it in a newspaper's article and choose to change some particulars of the crime in order to make it seem more romantic and exquisite. Secondly, in the letters that Wilde wrote to the *Daily Chronicle*, mainly the one that speaks about the condition of children in the prison of Reading, one can clearly notice the requests that the author does to the editor of the newspaper. For instance, in the passage where he tries to denounce the incompetence of the medical prison system towards mental illnesses, "May I ask you to use your influence to have this case examined into, and to see that the lunatic prisoner is properly treated?" (Wilde, 1989:15). As previously mentioned, especially middle class people became avid readers, so articles about catching and sensational topics, such as murder cases and general crimes, increased in order to encourage them to buy and read

more newspapers. Probably, Wilde tried to take advantage of the influence of this increased attention to denounce the problems he noticed during his prison life.



## Conclusions

My thesis was concerned with the issue of crime and justice in England during the Victorian Era, an important period from the point of view of history thanks to the many social reforms and progresses in industry and science, but also from the point of view of literature because of the wide literary production. In my study, I mentioned many writers that contributed to social changes thanks to the criticism in their work and I decided to focus on Oscar Wilde. His experience in prison and the connection between art and crime in some of his works were the perfect mean to analyse prisons, criminal judgments and the subtle relation that existed between crime and beauty during that period.

Firstly, my studies confirmed the ambiguity that existed in the Victorian Era; on one side, in fact, one finds the above-mentioned reforms and discoveries that seemed to have brought a period of wealth and power in England. On the other side, many other problems existed but were ‘wisely’ hidden, such as the rising of poverty and criminality in general (robbery, shoplifting, prostitution, pickpocketing, murder), and the spreading of various diseases. Focusing on the problem of crime, I found out that even if crimes existed there was also a misperception of their increase. The reason for this misunderstanding can be found in Victorian society’s attitude towards books and newspapers. Especially middle class people became avid readers, so editors tried to find interesting and catching articles to make newspapers and books more palatable to wider reading publics.

Continuing the theme of crime and justice in the Victorian society, I find it interesting to analyse what came out from my studies on the Victorian Prison System. Also analysing Wilde’s post-prison letter to the *Daily Chronicle* my thesis confirms that life in prisons at the time was harsh, especially for vulnerable groups of people like children and criminals with mental illnesses. The reason of it can be found in the lack of experience of surgeons and in the cruelty of methods that guards were forced to use on inmates.

Secondly, I focused on the life of Oscar Wilde because some events influenced him and changed his view of life, to name but a few his homosexuality, the school of thinking of aestheticism and finally, the prison sentence. I also tried to demonstrate the connection between art, crime and beauty in some of his works. From the analysis of the main

characters of the two works I took into consideration, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green*, it came out that both of them are narcissistic and vain characters with a common love for art and beautiful things. Both of them were murderers, with the difference that Dorian Gray was an imaginary character, while Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, to whom *Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green* is dedicated, actually existed and killed many people with poison. Another theme that came out from the study on these two works is the relation between art, beauty and morality, which can be observed also in his short tales. It came out that his characters always have a beautiful aspect, but ugliness is an innate characteristic of their personality because it represents the lack of morality of their actions.

Thirdly, Oscar Wilde's work that reflects the link between crime and punishment and better represents my ideas is *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, because it starts from a real murder case and progressively describes the horrors of prison life and capital punishment. The first stanza of *The Ballad* demonstrates once again the connection between art, crime and beauty because Wilde adds and changes some particulars to the actual murder case in order to give the reader a sense of exquisiteness. The usage of particular words reflects the poet's interest in aestheticism, as he tries to render the crime scene as beautiful as possible. The victim is a woman, the wife of the murderer, and this choice is in line with the vision of women of the time. They were described as passive and they were described as object-like figures. This is another fact that demonstrates the injustices and ambiguities of the Victorian Era: in public women had to respect high moral standards in order to maintain the façade of respectability, in private many of them were also victims of their jealous husbands, a condition that unfortunately still exists today. On the other hand, the other stanzas focus on the criticism against the Victorian Prison System and unjust criminal sentences such as the capital punishment. The guards' behaviour, the burial of prisoners' corpse and the imposed silence are all elements of the poem that describe the harsh reality of the prison system. The few works written after the time spent in jail mirror the change of Wilde's attitude towards life.



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