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Author: Oscar Wilde

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THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

By Oscar Wilde

In Memoriam

C.T.W.

**Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards.
Obit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire,**

July 7th, 1896

Presented by Project Gutenberg on the 99th Anniversary.

VERSION ONE

I. He did not wear his scarlet coat, For blood and wine are red,
When they found him with the dead, The poor dead woman whom he loved,
And murdered in her bed. He walked amongst the Trial Men
In a suit of shabby grey; A cricket cap was on his head,
And his step seemed light and gay; But I never saw a man
who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw a man
who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky, And at every drifting cloud that went
With sails of silver by. I walked, with other souls in pain,
Within another ring, And was wondering if the man had done
A great or little thing, When a voice behind me whispered low,
"That fellow's got to swing." Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel, And the sky above my head became
Like a casque of scorching steel; And, though I was a soul in pain,
My pain I could not feel. I only knew what hunted thought
Quickened his step, and why He looked upon the garish day
With such a wistful eye; had killed the thing he loved
And so he had to die. Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By this he lets his brother know, And says to his brother
"The coward does it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword!
Some love when they are young, And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust, the hands of Gold:
The kindest use a knife, because The dead so soon grow cold.
Some love some too long, Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears, And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves, Yet each man kills the thing he
does not die. He does not die a death of shame On a day of dark disgrace,
Nor have a neck, Nor a cloth upon his face, Nor drop feet foremost
through the floor Into an empty place He does not sit with silent men
Who watch him night and space. He does not sit with silent men
Who watch him when he tries to weep, And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him when he tries to weep, he tries to pray;
Who watch him lest himself should rob The prison of its prey.
He does not wake at dawn to see Dread figures through his room,
The shivering Chaplain robed in white, The Sheriff stern with gloom,
And the Governor all in shiny black, With the yellow face of Doom.
He does not rise in piteous haste To put on convict-clothes,
While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes Each new and nerve-
twitched pose, Fingering a watch whose little ticks Each new and nerve-
twitched pose, Fingering a watch Are like horrible hammer-blows.
He does not know that sickening thirst That sands one's throat,
before The hangman with his gardener's gloves Slips one's throat,
before The hangman with his gardener's leathern thongs,
That the throat may thirst no more. He does not bend his head to hear
The Burial Office read, Nor, while the anguish of is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves Into the hideous shed. He does
not stare upon the air Through a little roof of glass; He does not pray
with lips of clay For his agony to pass; Nor feel upon his shuddering
cheek The kiss of Caiaphas. II. Six weeks our guardsman walked the yard,
In a suit of shabby grey: His step seemed light and gay,
But I never saw a man who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw a man
who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky, And at every ravelled fleeces by.
He did not wring his hands, as do Those witless men who dare
To try to rear the changeling Hope In the cave of black Despair:
He did not wring his hands nor weep, Nor did he peek or pine,
But he healthful anodyne; With open mouth he drank the sun
As though it had been wine! And I and all the souls in pain,
Who tramped the other ring, Forgot if we it had been wine!
And I and all the souls in pain, ourselves had done
A great or little thing, And watched with gaze of dull amaze
The man who had to swing. And strange it was to see him pass
With a gaze of dull amaze The man who had to swing. For
step so light and gay, And strange it was to see him look
So wistfully at the day, And strange it was to see him look
So think that he Had such a debt to pay. For oak and wistfully
at the day, And strange it was to think

VERSION TWO

elm have pleasant leaves That in the spring-time that he Had such a debt to pay. The oak and elm have shoot: But grim to see is the gallows-tree, With its pleasant leaves That in the spring-time shoot: But adder-bitten root, And, green or dry, a man must die grim to see is the gallows-tree, With its alder-Before it bears its fruit! The loftiest place is bitten root, And, green or dry, a man must die that seat of grace For which all worldlings try: But Before it bears its fruit! The loftiest place is the who would stand in hempen band Upon a scaffold high, seat of grace For which all worldlings try: But who And through a murderer's collar take His last look would stand in hempen band Upon a scaffold high, And at the sky? It is sweet to dance to violins When through a murderer's collar take His last look at Love and Life are fair: To dance to flutes, to dance the sky? It is sweet to dance to violins When Love to lutes Is delicate and rare: But it is not sweet and Life are fair: To dance to flutes, to dance to with nimble feet To dance upon the air! So with lutes Is delicate and rare: But it is not sweet with curious eyes and sick surmise We watched him day by nimble feet To dance upon the air! So with curious day, And wondered if each one of us Would end the eyes and sick surmise We watched him day by day, And self-same way, For none can tell to what red Hell wondered if each one of us Would end the self-same His sightless soul may stray. At last the dead man way, For none can tell to what red Hell His walked no more Amongst the Trial Men, And I knew sightless soul may stray. At last the dead man that he was standing up In the black dock's dreadful walked no more Amongst the Trial Men, And I knew pen, And that never would I see his face In God's that he was standing up In the black dock's dreadful sweet world again. Like two doomed ships that pass pen, And that never would I see his face For weal or in storm We had crossed each other's way: But we woe again. Like two doomed ships that pass in storm made no sign, we said no word, We had no word to We had crossed each other's way: But we made no say; For we did not meet in the holy night, But in sign, we said no word, We had no word to say; For we the shameful day. A prison wall was round us both, did not meet in the holy night, But in the shameful Two outcast men were we: The world had thrust us day. A prison wall was round us both, Two outcast from its heart, And God from out His care: And the men we were: The world had thrust us from its heart, iron gin that waits for Sin Had caught us in its And God from out His care: And the iron gin that snare. III In Debtors' Yard the stones are hard, And waits for Sin Had caught us in its snare. III In the dripping wall is high, So it was there he took Debtors' Yard the stones are hard, And the dripping the air Beneath the leaden sky, And by each side a wall is high, So it was there he took the air Warder walked, For fear the man might die. Or else Beneath the leaden sky, And by each side a warder he sat with those who watched His anguish night and walked, For fear the man might die. Or else he sat day; Who watched him when he rose to weep, And when with those who watched His anguish night and day; he crouched to pray; Who watched him lest himself Who watched him when he rose to weep, And when he should rob Their scaffold of its prey. The Governor crouched to pray; Who watched him lest himself was strong upon The Regulations Act: The Doctor said should rob Their scaffold of its prey. The Governor that Death was but A scientific fact: And twice a was strong upon The Regulations Act: The Doctor said day the Chaplain called And left a little tract. And that Death was but A scientific fact: And twice a twice a day he smoked his pipe, And drank his quart day the Chaplain called, And left a little tract. of beer: His soul was resolute, and held No hiding- And twice a day he smoked his pipe, And drank his place for fear; He often said that he was glad The quart of beer: His soul was resolute, and held No hangman's hands were near. But why he said so hiding-place for fear; He often said that he was strange a thing No Warder dared to ask: For he to glad The hangman's day was near. But why he said so whom a watcher's doom Is given as his task, Must set strange a thing No warder dared to ask: For he to a lock upon his lips, And make his face a mask. Or whom a watcher's doom Is given as his task, Must set else he might be moved, and try To comfort ora lock upon his lips, And make his face a mask. Or console: And what should Human Pity do Pent up in else he might be moved, and try To comfort or Murderers' Hole? What word of grace in such a place console: And what should Human Pity do Pent up in Could help a brother's soul? With slouch and swing Murderers' Hole? What word of grace in such a place around the ring We trod the Fool's Parade! We did Could help a brother's soul? With slouch and swing not care: we knew we were The Devil's Own Brigade: around the ring We trod the Fools' Parade! We did And shaven head and feet of lead Make a merry not care: we knew we were The Devils' Own Brigade: masquerade. We tore the tarry rope to shreds With And shaven head and feet of lead Make a merry blunt and bleeding nails; We rubbed the doors, and masquerade. We tore the tarry rope to shreds With scrubbed the floors, And cleaned the shining rails: blunt and bleeding nails; We rubbed the doors, and And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank, And scrubbed the floors, And cleaned the shining rails: clattered with the pails. We sewed the sacks, we And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank, And broke the stones, We turned the dusty drill: We clattered with the pails. We sewed the sacks, we banged the tins, and bawled the hymns, And sweated broke the stones, We turned the dusty drill: We on the mill: But in the heart of every man Terror banged the tins, and bawled the hymns, And sweated was lying still. So still it lay that every day on the mill: But in the heart of every man Terror Crawled like a weed-clogged wave: And we forgot the was lying still. So still it lay that every day bitter lot That waits for fool and knave, Till once, Crawled like a weed-clogged wave: And we forgot the as we tramped in from work, We passed an open grave. bitter lot That waits for fool and knave, Till once, With yawning mouth the yellow hole Gaped for a as we tramped in from work, We passed an open grave. living thing; The very mud cried out for blood To With yawning mouth the horrid hole Gaped for a the thirsty asphalt ring: And we knew that ere one living thing; The very mud cried out for blood To dawn grew fair Some prisoner had to swing. Right in the thirsty asphalt ring: And we knew that ere one we went, with soul intent On Death and Dread and dawn grew fair The fellow had to swing. Right in we Doom: The hangman, with his little bag, Went went, with soul intent On Death and Dread and Doom: shuffling through the gloom And each man trembled as The hangman, with his little bag, Went shuffling he crept Into his numbered tomb. That night the through the gloom: And I trembled as I groped my way empty corridors Were full of forms of Fear, And up Into my numbered tomb. That night the empty and down the iron town Stole feet we could not hear, corridors Were full of forms of Fear, And up and And through the bars that hide the stars White faces down the iron town Stole feet we could not hear, And seemed to peer. He lay as one who lies and dreams In through the bars that hide the stars White faces a pleasant meadow-land, The watcher watched him as seemed to peer. He lay as one who lies and dreams In he slept, And could not understand How one could a pleasant meadow-land, The watchers watched him as sleep so sweet a sleep With a hangman close at hand? he slept, And could not understand How one could But there is no sleep when men must weep Who never sleep so sweet a sleep With a hangman close at hand. yet have wept: So we—the fool, the fraud, the knave— But there is no sleep when men must weep Who never That endless vigil kept, And through each brain on yet have wept: So we—the fool, the fraud, the hands of pain Another's terror crept. Alas! it is a knave— That endless vigil kept, And through each fearful thing To feel another's guilt! For, right brain on hands of pain Another's terror crept. Alas! within, the sword of Sin Pierced to its poisoned it is a fearful thing To feel another's guilt! For, hilt, And as molten lead were the tears we shed For right within, the sword of Sin Pierced to its the blood we had not spilt. The Warders with their poisoned hilt, And as molten lead were the tears we

shoes of felt Crept by each padlocked door, And shed For the blood we had not spilt. The warders peeped and saw, with eyes of awe, Grey figures onwith their shoes of felt Crept by each padlocked the floor, And wondered why men knelt to pray Who door, And peeped and saw, with eyes of awe, Gray never prayed before. All through the night we knelt figures on the floor, And wondered why men knelt to and prayed, Mad mourners of a corpse! The troubled pray Who never prayed before. All through the night plumes of midnight were The plumes upon a hearse: we knelt and prayed, Mad mourners of a corse! The And bitter wine upon a sponge Was the savior of troubled plumes of midnight shook Like the plumes Remorse. The cock crew, the red cock crew, But never upon a hearse: And as bitter wine upon a sponge Was came the day: And crooked shape of Terror crouched, the savour of Remorse. The gray cock crew, the red In the corners where we lay: And each evil sprite cock crew, But never came the day: And crooked that walks by night Before us seemed to play. They shapes of Terror crouched, In the corners where we glided past, they glided fast, Like travelers lay: And each evil sprite that walks by night Before through a mist: They mocked the moon in a rigadoun us seemed to play. They glided past, the glided Of delicate turn and twist, And with formal pace and fast, Like travellers through a mist: They mocked loathsome grace The phantoms kept their tryst. With the moon in a rigadoun Of delicate turn and twist, mop and mow, we saw them go, Slim shadows hand in And with formal pace and loathsome grace The hand: About, about, in ghostly rout They trod a phantoms kept their tryst. With mop and mow, we saw saraband: And the damned grotesques made arabesques, them go, Slim shadows hand in hand: About, about, in Like the wind upon the sand! With the pirouettes of ghostly rout They trod a saraband: And the damned marionettes, They tripped on pointed tread: But with grotesques made arabesques, Like the wind upon the flutes of Fear they filled the ear, As their grisly sand! With the pirouettes of marionettes, They masque they led, And loud they sang, and loud they tripped on pointed tread: But with flutes of Fear sang, For they sang to wake the dead. "Oho!" they they filled the ear, As their grisly masque they cried, "The world is wide, But fettered limbs goled, And loud they sang, and long they sang, For lame! And once, or twice, to throw the dice Is a they sang to wake the dead. "Oho!" they cried, "the gentlemanly game, But he does not win who plays with world is wide, But fettered limbs go lame! And once, Sin In the secret House of Shame." No things of air or twice, to throw the dice Is a gentlemanly game, these antics were That frolicked with such glee: To But he does not win who plays with Sin In the secret men whose lives were held in gyves, And whose feet House of Shame." No things of air these antics were, might not go free, Ah! wounds of Christ! they were That frolicked with such glee: To men whose lives living things, Most terrible to see. Around, around, were held in gyves, And whose feet might not go they waltzed and wound; Some wheeled in smirking free, Ah! wounds of Christ! they were living things, pairs: With the mincing step of demirep Some sidled Most terrible to see. Around, around, they waltzed up the stairs: And with subtle sneer, and fawning and wound; Some wheeled in smirking pairs; With the leer, Each helped us at our prayers. The morning mincing step of a demirep Some sidled up the stairs: wind began to moan, But still the night went on: And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer, Each helped Through its giant loom the web of gloom Crept till us at our prayers. The morning wind began to moan, each thread was spun: And, as we prayed, we grew But still the night went on: Through its giant loom afraid Of the Justice of the Sun. The moaning wind the web of gloom Crept till each thread was spun: went wandering round The weeping prison-wall: Till And, as we prayed, we grew afraid Of the Justice of like a wheel of turning-steel We felt the minutes the Sun. The moaning wind went wandering round The crawl: O moaning wind! what had we done To have such weeping prison wall: Till like a wheel of turning a seneschal? At last I saw the shadowed bars Like a steel We felt the minutes crawl: O moaning wind! lattice wrought in lead, Move right across the what had we done To have such a seneschal? At last I whitewashed wall That faced my three-plank bed, And saw the shadowed bars, Like a lattice wrought in I knew that somewhere in the world God's dreadful lead, Move right across the whitewashed wall That dawn was red. At six o'clock we cleaned our cells, faced my three-plank bed, And I knew that somewhere At seven all was still, But the sough and swing of a in the world God's dreadful dawn was red. At six mighty wing The prison seemed to fill, For the Lord o'clock we cleaned our cells, At seven all was of Death with icy breath Had entered in to kill. He still, But the sough and swing of a mighty wing The did not pass in purple pomp, Nor ride a moon-white prison seemed to fill, For the Lord of Death with steed. Three yards of cord and a sliding board Are icy breath Had entered in to kill. He did not pass all the gallows' need: So with rope of shame the in purple pomp, Nor ride a moon-white steed. Three Herald came To do the secret deed. We were as men yards of cord and a sliding board Are all the who through a fen Of filthy darkness grope: We did gallows' need: So with rope of shame the Herald came not dare to breathe a prayer, Or give our anguish To do the secret deed. We were as men who through a scope: Something was dead in each of us, And what fen Of filthy darkness grope: We did not dare to was dead was Hope. For Man's grim Justice goes its breathe a prayer, Or to give our anguish scope: way, And will not swerve aside: It slays the weak, Something was dead in each of us, And what was dead it slays the strong, It has a deadly stride: With was Hope. For Man's grim Justice goes its way And iron heel it slays the strong, The monstrous will not swerve aside: It slays the weak, it slays parricide! We waited for the stroke of eight: Each the strong, It has a deadly stride: With iron heel tongue was thick with thirst: For the stroke of it slays the strong The monstrous parricide! We eight is the stroke of Fate That makes a man waited for the stroke of eight: Each tongue was accursed, And Fate will use a running noose For the thick with thirst: For the stroke of eight is the best man and the worst. We had no other thing to do, stroke of Fate That makes a man accursed, And Fate Save to wait for the sign to come: So, like things will use a running noose For the best man and the of stone in a valley lone, Quiet we sat and dumb: worst. We had no other thing to do, Save to wait for But each man's heart beat thick and quick Like a the sign to come: So, like things of stone in a madman on a drum! With sudden shock the prison-clock valley lone, Quiet we sat and dumb: But each man's Smote on the shivering air, And from all the gaol heart beat thick and quick, Like a madman on a drum! rose up a wail Of impotent despair, Like the sound With sudden shock the prison-clock Smote on the that frightened marshes hear From a leper in his shivering air, And from all the gaol rose up a wail lair. And as one sees most fearful things In the Of impotent despair, Like the sound the frightened crystal of a dream, We saw the greasy hempen rope marshes hear From some leper in his lair. And as one Hooked to the blackened beam, And heard the prayer sees most fearful things In the crystal of a dream, the hangman's snare Strangled into a scream. And all We saw the greasy hempen rope Hooked to the the woe that moved him so That he gave that bitter blackened beam, And heard the prayer the hangman's cry, And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats, snare Strangled into a scream. And all the woe that None knew so well as I: For he who live more lives moved him so That he gave that bitter cry, And the than one More deaths than one must die. IV. There is wild regrets, and the bloody sweats, None knew so no chapel on the day On which they hang a man: The well as I: For he who lives more lives than one More Chaplain's heart is far too sick, Or his face is far deaths that one must die. IV There is no chapel on to wan, Or there is that written in his eyes Which the day On which they hang a man: The Chaplain's none should look upon. So they kept us close till heart is far too sick, Or his face is far too wan, nigh on noon, And then they rang the bell, And the Or there is that written in his eyes Which none

Warders with their jingling keys Opened each should look upon. So they kept us close till nigh on listening cell, And down the iron stair we tramped, noon, And then they rang the bell, And the warders Each from his separate Hell. Out into God's sweet with their jingling keys Opened each listening cell, air we went, But not in wonted way, For this man's And down the iron stair we tramped, Each from his face was white with fear, And that man's face was separate Hell. Out into God's sweet air we went, But grey, And I never saw sad men who looked So not in wonted way, For this man's face was white wistfully at the day. I never saw sad men who looked with fear, And that man's face was gray, And I never With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of saw sad men who looked So wistfully at the day. I blue We prisoners called the sky, And at every never saw sad men who looked With such a wistful eye careless cloud that passed In happy freedom by. But Upon that little tent of blue We prisoners called there were those amongst us all Who walked with the sky, And at every happy cloud that passed In downcast head, And knew that, had each got his due, such strange freedom by. But there were those They should have died instead: He had but killed a amongst us all Who walked with downcast head, And thing that lived Whilst they had killed the dead. knew that, had each got his due, They should have For he who sins a second time Wakes a dead soul to died instead: He had but killed a thing that lived, pain, And draws it from its spotted shroud, And Whilst they had killed the dead. For he who sins a makes it bleed again, And makes it bleed great gouts second time Wakes a dead soul to pain, And draws it of blood And makes it bleed in vain! Like ape or from its spotted shroud And makes it bleed again, clown, in monstrous garb With crooked arrows And makes it bleed great gouts of blood, And makes starred, Silently we went round and round The it bleed in vain! Like ape or clown, in monstrous slippery asphalte yard; Silently we went round and garb With crooked arrows starred, Silently we went round, And no man spoke a word. Silently we went round and round The slippery asphalte yard; Silently round and round, And through each hollow mind The we went round and round, And no man spoke a word. memory of dreadful things Rushed like a dreadful Silently we went round and round, And through each wind, An Horror stalked before each man, And terror hollow mind The Memory of dreadful things Rushed crept behind. The Warders strutted up and down, And like a dreadful wind, And Horror stalked before each kept their herd of brutes, Their uniforms were spick man, And Terror crept behind. The warders strutted and span, And they wore their Sunday suits, But we up and down, And watched their herd of brutes, Their knew the work they had been at By the quicklime on uniforms were spick and span, And they wore their their boots. For where a grave had opened wide, Sunday suits, But we knew the work they had been at, There was no grave at all: Only a stretch of mud and By the quicklime on their boots. For where a grave sand By the hideous prison-wall, And a little heap had opened wide, There was no grave at all: Only a of burning lime, That the man should have his pall. stretch of mud and sand By the hideous prison-wall, For he has a pall, this wretched man, Such as few And a little heap of burning lime, That the man men can claim: Deep down below a prison-yard, Naked should have his pall. For he has a pall, this for greater shame, He lies, with fetters on each wretched man, Such as few men can claim: Deep down foot, Wrapt in a sheet of flame! And all the while below a prison-yard, Naked, for greater shame, He the burning lime Eats flesh and bone away, It eats lies, with fetters on each foot, Wrapt in a sheet of the brittle bone by night, And the soft flesh by the flame! And all the while the burning lime Eats flesh day, It eats the flesh and bones by turns, But it and bone away, It eats the brittle bones by night, eats the heart away. For three long years they will And the soft flesh by day, It eats the flesh and not sow Or root or seedling there: For three long bone by turns, But it eats the heart away. For years the unblessed spot Will sterile be and bare, three long years they will not sow Or root or And look upon the wondering sky With unreprouchful seedling there: For three long years the unblessed stare. They think a murderer's heart would taint spot Will sterile be and bare, And look upon the Each simple seed they sow. It is not true! God's wondering sky With unreprouchful stare. They think a kindly earth Is kindlier than men know, And the red murderer's heart would taint Each simple seed they rose would but blow more red, The white rose whiter sow. It is not true! God's kindly earth Is kindlier blow. Out of his mouth a red, red rose! Out of his than men know, And the red rose would but glow more heart a white! For who can say by what strange way, red, The white rose whiter blow. Out of his mouth a Christ brings his will to light, Since the barren red, red rose! Out of his heart a white! For who can staff the pilgrim bore Bloomed in the great Pope's say by what strange way, Christ brings His will to sight? But neither milk-white rose nor red May bloom light, Since the barren staff the pilgrim bore in prison air; The shard, the pebble, and the flint, Bloomed in the great Pope's sight? But neither milk- Are what they give us there: For flowers have been white rose nor red May bloom in prison air; The known to heal A common man's despair. So never will shard, the pebble, and the flint, Are what they give wine-red rose or white, Petal by petal, fall On that us there: For flowers have been known to heal A stretch of mud and sand that lies By the hideous common man's despair. So never will wine-red rose or prison-wall, To tell the men who tramp the yard That white, Petal by petal, fall On that stretch of mud God's Son died for all. Yet though the hideous and sand that lies By the hideous prison-wall, To prison-wall Still hems him round and round, And a tell the men who tramp the yard That God's Son died spirit may not walk by night That is with fetters for all. Yet though the hideous prison-wall Still bound, And a spirit may but weep that lies In such hems him round and round, And a spirit may not walk unholy ground, He is at peace—this wretched man— At by night That is with fetters bound, And a spirit peace, or will be soon: There is no thing to make may but weep that lies In such unholy ground, He is him mad, Nor does Terror walk at noon, For the at peace- this wretched man- At peace, or will be lampless Earth in which he lies Has neither Sun nor soon: There is no thing to make him mad, Nor does Moon. They hanged him as a beast is hanged: They did Terror walk at noon, For the lampless Earth in which not even toll A requiem that might have brought Rest he lies Has neither Sun nor Moon. They hanged him as to his startled soul, But hurriedly they took him a beast is hanged: They did not even toll A requiem out, And hid him in a hole. They stripped him of his that might have brought Rest to his startled soul, canvas clothes, And gave him to the flies; They But hurriedly they took him out, And hid him in a mocked the swollen purple throat And the stark and hole. The warders stripped him of his clothes, And staring eyes: And with laughter loud they heaped the gave him to the flies: They mocked the swollen shroud In which their convict lies. The Chaplain purple throat, And the stark and staring eyes: And would not kneel to pray By his dishonored grave: Nor with laughter loud they heaped the shroud In which mark it with that blessed Cross That Christ for the convict lies. The Chaplain would not kneel to sinners gave, Because the man was one of those Whom pray By his dishonoured grave: Nor mark it with that Christ came down to save. Yet all is well; he has blessed Cross That Christ for sinners gave, Because but passed To Life's appointed bourne: And alien the man was one of those Whom Christ came down to tears will fill for him Pity's long-broken urn, For save. Yet all is well; he has but passed To Life's his mourner will be outcast men, And outcasts always appointed bourne: And alien tears will fill for him mourn. V. I know not whether Laws be right, Or Pity's long-broken urn, For his mourners be outcast whether Laws be wrong; All that we know who lie in men, And outcasts always mourn. V I know not whether gaol Is that the wall is strong; And that each day Laws be right, Or whether Laws be wrong; All that we is like a year, A year whose days are long. But this know who lie in gaol Is that the wall is strong; And

I know, that every Law That men have made for Man, that each day is like a year, A year whose days are Since first Man took his brother's life, And the sad long. But this I know, that every Law That men have world began, But straws the wheat and saves the made for Man, Since first Man took His brother's chaff With a most evil fan. This too I know—and wise life, And the sad world began, But straws the wheat it were If each could know the same— That every and saves the chaff With a most evil fan. This too I prison that men build Is built with bricks of shame, know- and wise it were If each could know the same— And bound with bars lest Christ should see How men That every prison that men build Is built with their brothers maim. With bars they blur the bricks of shame, And bound with bars lest Christ gracious moon, And blind the goodly sun: And they do should see How men their brothers maim. With bars well to hide their Hell, For in it things are done they blur the gracious moon, And blind the goodly That Son of God nor son of Man Ever should look sun: And they do well to hide their Hell, For in it upon! The vilest deeds like poison weeds Bloom well things are done That Son of God nor son of Man Ever in prison-air: It is only what is good in Man That should look upon! The vilest deeds like poison weeds wastes and withers there: Pale Anguish keeps the Bloom well in prison-air: It is only what is good in heavy gate, And the Warder is Despair For they Man That wastes and withers there: Pale Anguish starve the little frightened child Till it weeps keeps the heavy gate, And the warder is Despair. For both night and day: And they scourge the weak, and they starve the little frightened child Till it flog the fool, And gibe the old and grey, And some weeps both night and day: And they scourge the weak, grow mad, and all grow bad, And none a word may say. and flog the fool, And gibe the old and gray, And Each narrow cell in which we dwell Is a foul and some grow mad, and all grow bad, And none a word may dark latrine, And the fetid breath of living Death say. Each narrow cell in which we dwell Is a foul Chokes up each grated screen, And all, but Lust, is and dark latrine, And the fetid breath of living turned to dust In Humanity's machine. The brackish Death Chokes up each grated screen, And all, but water that we drink Creeps with a loathsome slime, Lust, is turned to dust In Humanity's machine. The And the bitter bread they weigh in scales Is full of brackish water that we drink Creeps with a loathsome chalk and lime, And Sleep will not lie down, but slime, And the bitter bread they weigh in scales Is walks Wild-eyed and cries to Time. But though lean full of chalk and lime, And Sleep will not lie down, Hunger and green Thirst Like asp with adder fight, but walks Wild-eyed, and cries to Time. But though We have little care of prison fare, For what chills lean Hunger and green Thirst Like asp with adder and kills outright Is that every stone one lifts by fight, We have little care of prison fare, For what day Becomes one's heart by night. With midnight chills and kills outright Is that every stone one always in one's heart, And twilight in one's cell, lifts by day Becomes one's heart by night. With We turn the crank, or tear the rope, Each in his midnight always in one's heart, And twilight in separate Hell, And the silence is more awful far one's cell, We turn the crank, or tear the rope, Than the sound of a brazen bell. And never a human Each in his separate Hell, And the silence is more voice comes near To speak a gentle word: And the eye awful far Than the sound of a brazen bell. And never that watches through the door Is pitiless and hard: a human voice comes near To speak a gentle word: And And by all forgot, we rot and rot, With soul and the eye that watches through the door Is pitiless body marred. And thus we rust Life's iron chain and hard: And by all forgot, we rot and rot, With Degraded and alone: And some men curse, and some men soul and body marred. And thus we rust Life's iron weep, And some men make no moan: But God's eternal chain Degraded and alone: And some men curse, and Laws are kind And break the heart of stone. And some men weep, And some men make no moan: But God's every human heart that breaks, In prison-cell or eternal Laws are kind And break the heart of stone. yard, Is as that broken box that gave Its treasure And every human heart that breaks, In prison-cell or to the Lord, And filled the unclean leper's house yard, Is as that broken box that gave Its treasure With the scent of costliest nard. Ah! happy day they to the Lord, And filled the unclean leper's house whose hearts can break And peace of pardon win! How With the scent of costliest nard. Ah! happy they else may man make straight his plan And cleanse his whose hearts can break And peace of pardon win! How soul from Sin? How else but through a broken heart else may man make straight his plan And cleanse his May Lord Christ enter in? And he of the swollen soul from Sin? How else but through a broken heart purple throat. And the stark and staring eyes, Waits May Lord Christ enter in? And he of the swollen for the holy hands that took The Thief to Paradise; purple throat, And the stark and staring eyes, Waits And a broken and a contrite heart The Lord will not for the holy hands that took The Thief to Paradise; despise. The man in red who reads the Law Gave him And a broken and a contrite heart The Lord will not three weeks of life, Three little weeks in which to despise. The man in red who reads the Law Gave him heal His soul of his soul's strife, And cleanse from three weeks of life, Three little weeks in which to every blot of blood The hand that held the knife. heal His soul of his soul's strife, And cleanse from And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand, The every blot of blood The hand that held the knife. hand that held the steel: For only blood can wipe And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand, The out blood, And only tears can heal: And the crimson hand that held the steel: For only blood can wipe stain that was of Cain Became Christ's snow-white out blood, And only tears can heal: And the crimson seal. VI. In Reading gaol by Reading town There is a stain that was of Cain Became Christ's snow-white pit of shame, And in it lies a wretched man Eaten by seal. VI In Reading gaol by Reading town There is a teeth of flame, In burning winding-sheet he lies, pit of shame, And in it lies a wretched man Eaten by And his grave has got no name. And there, till teeth of flame, In a burning winding-sheet he lies, Christ call forth the dead, In silence let him lie: And his grave has got no name. And there, till No need to waste the foolish tear, Or heave the Christ call forth the dead, In silence let him lie: windy sigh: The man had killed the thing he loved, No need to waste the foolish tear, Or heave the And so he had to die. And all men kill the thing windy sigh: The man had killed the thing he loved, they love, By all let this be heard, Some do it with And so he had to die. And all men kill the thing a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The they love, By all let this be heard, Some do it with coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword!

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He does not bend his head to hear The Burial Office read, Nor, while the terror of his soul Tells him he is not dead, Cross his own coffin, as he moves Into the hideous shed. He does not stare upon the air Through a little roof of glass; He does not pray with lips of clay For his agony to pass; Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek The kiss of Caiaphas.Â With sudden shock the prison-clock Smote on the shivering air, And from all the gaol rose up a wail Of impotent despair, Like the sound that frightened marshes hear From a leper in his lair. And as one sees most fearful things In the crystal of a dream, We saw the greasy hempen rope Hooked to the blackened beam, And heard the prayer the hangman's snare Strangled into a scream. Literary Devices in The Ballad of Reading Gaol. Wilde makes use of several literary devices in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."™ These include but are not limited to alliteration, enjambment, and repetition. The latter is one of the most important in the poem.Â The only thoughts he knows are those of Wooldridge. Wilde is able to, through their shared experiences in Reading Gaol, understand a good portion of what he is going through. Wilde comprehends the fact that this man is "wistful" because he knows he deserves to die. He had "killed the thing he loved / And so he had to die." He does not bend his head to hear The Burial Office read, Nor, while the terror of his soul Tells him he is not dead, Cross his own coffin, as he moves Into the hideous shed. He does not stare upon the air Through a little roof of glass; He does not pray with lips of clay For his agony to pass; Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek The kiss of Caiaphas.Â We had no other thing to do, Save to wait for the sign to come: So, like things of stone in a valley lone, Quiet we sat and dumb: But each man's heart beat thick and quick Like a madman on a drum! With sudden shock the prison-clock Smote on the shivering air, And from all the gaol rose up a wail Of impotent despair, Like the sound that frightened marshes hear From a leper in his lair. E 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. He walked amongst the Trial Men In a suit of shabby gray; A cricket cap was on his head, And his step seemed light and gay; But I never saw a man who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw a man who looked With such a wistful eye.