
UNIT 41 OSCAR WILDE: *THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL*

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41.0 OBJECTIVES

The Objectives of this unit is to familiarise the reader with the life, times and works of Oscar Wilde (1856-1900). Coming as it does at the end of the century, the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1896) encapsulates the literary movements and controversies of the age. Dealing as it does with the themes of sin, guilt and redemption it cannot escape comparison with another landmark poem written about a hundred years earlier, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). A extensive comparative analysis of the two poems will be undertaken later in the unit. The attempt will be not only to evoke appreciation for the poem *per se* but to place it in the context of dominant social, political, religious and ideological issues of the day.

41.2 INTRODUCTION

The reader is advised to read the unit from the end first. Begin by reading the text of the poem and see how much you can understand. It is always better to approach a text without any preconceived notions and information. After that come back and read the biographical, historical and contextual discussions provided in the unit. This reading will enhance your appreciation and understanding of the text and provide additional insights to your initial reading of the text.

41.2 HISTORICAL, BIOGRAPHICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Oscar Wilde is difficult to place in literary history since as he himself admitted, he devoted his genius to life rather than to his art. Wilde today survives as a figure of fascinating mythology, where the works inevitably seem secondary to the legend of the man.

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, the son of an eminent surgeon. He attended Trinity College, Dublin and then Magdalene College, Oxford, where in the last years of the seventies he started the cult of Aestheticism, of making an art of life. His first book *Poems* was published in 1881 and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* followed in 1891. His first stage successes came in 1892 with *Lady Windermere's Fan*. More acclaim came with *A Woman of Substance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* and *The*

Importance of Being Ernest both in 1895. *Salome* was refused license in England but was published in France in 1893.

Oscar Wilde



Oscar Wilde

Most of his significant works occupy the last two decades of the nineteenth century. A few words about the times would not be out of place since Wilde's works are inextricably linked with the social and moral atmosphere of the age. It has been said that "the nineties" was not a period but a state of mind – that is, there are many writers who chronologically speaking were most productive in that decade, yet had nothing in common with its supposed spirit. It is therefore difficult to comprehend nineteenth century England on the basis of a single philosophy. Numerous philosophies began to take shape, making it an age of tremendous initiative, upheaval

and contradiction. The general upheaval in society originated from the gap between what man wanted and what he achieved.

Scientific philosophies and fact philosophies emerged from the then dominant empiricist world view. They however failed to provide an adequate alternative for belief, for man to withdraw his faith in God and posit all his hopes on the Benthamite philosophy of utilitarianism.

Men like Coleridge, Mill, Arnold, Carlyle tried to provide adequate solution to the battle between science and religion, God and Mammon, truth and half-truth. They believed that all suffering results from ignorance and hence the need to acquire the right knowledge. Coleridge's philosophy was a reaction to the empiricist ideological framework. The epistemological shift from the visible to the invisible emphasised that the highest truths are those which are beyond the range of empirical experience. Coleridge's doctrine expressed the revolt of the human mind against the mental and physical finites of society. His philosophy is grounded in a conformity to human and religious values and belief in the predominance of the mind for acquiring knowledge.

With time however the Coleridgean principles of integrity, transcendental knowledge and Christian values of love and prayer began to crack under pressure from socio-economic realities. The possibility of ultimate truth and value seemed doubtful and conviction in all kinds of moral, intellectual and social certainties was vanishing. Hence towards the end of the nineteenth century a belief gained ground that art and morality/society were two separate realms and the former was considered completely independent of the latter. Thus art and literature had moved into a new phase, through critics remained divided over how to best describe this phase of cultural history. To refer to it as a homogeneous and uniform decade would be misleading, since many of the essential attitudes of the nineties had their roots in the seventies and eighties: specifically the *Aesthetic Movement* which has often become synonymous with the innovations of the nineties. The word *Decadence* has broader application but suffers from an ambiguity – suggesting sometimes a combination of physical lassitude and psychological and moral perversity, exemplified for example in J-K. Huysman's novel *A Rebours*. The phrase *fin de siècle* is a more useful term for it points to the preoccupations of the last years of the nineteenth century without being limited to a single decade and can also cover particular manifestations such as *decadence* or *aestheticism*.

In so far as *fin de siècle* refers to a serious and consistent cultural attitude it has two essential characteristics: the conviction that all established forms of intellectual and moral certainties are vanishing, and that the new situation requires new attitudes in life and art; and the related belief that art and morality are entirely separate realms and the former must be regarded as wholly autonomous. Hence the doctrine arose of *art for art's sake*. It must however be noted that "the nineties" was a state of mind that originated in Europe. One has to go to French literature to observe the genesis of this psychological phenomena.

If *fin de siècle* tried to establish a break with established Victorian attitudes, then the break was not particularly clean, for in a literary sense there are lines of development that link the *fin de siècle* poets with the Romantics – Keats, Blake and particularly Coleridge.

One writer who absorbed the lessons of the age not wisely but only too well, who achieved a tragic celebrity with relatively slender talents and whose name is still a symbol for the whole *fin de siècle* period and state of mind is Oscar Wilde. Mistrust of theory and system, and a corresponding stress on sensation and impression is perhaps the best description of Oscar Wilde's art.

Exercises

Oscar Wilde

1. Give a brief account of Wilde's life and works.

2. What was the mental and ideological condition of the age in which Wilde was writing?

3. What were the major movements of the age?

41.3 THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL: A DISCUSSION

The Ballad of Reading Gaol was written in 1896. Almost a hundred years earlier, 1798 to be precise, came a poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge which built the foundation on which Wilde was to build a hundred years later. So any exclusive discussion of the former, without putting it in the perspective of the latter will not be unfair to the poem, it will also fail to provide any glimpse of the intellectual movement of the age. *The Rime* was Coleridge's chief contribution to *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798). It is a long poem written in the ballad form and divided into seven sections. The Mariner either out of anger or irritation shoots the albatross: for this heinous crime he is punished by the curse of life in death. However when love gushes from his heart at the sight of the water snakes, the horrible spell breaks and the albatross falls from his neck. To kill the albatross is a sin, therefore, the rest of the action follows with an inexorable fatality. *The Rime* is a tale of guilt, penance and expiation and each section of the poem reveals a new stage of the act of expiation; it is the saga of a guilty soul and the poem marks in clear stages the passage from crime through punishment to such redemption as is possible in this world.

The Rime is essentially a religious poem deeply rooted in Christian ethics. Several kinds of religious feelings are merged as Coleridge deals with sin, remorse, penance, punishment, confession, grace and redemption at successive stages of the narrative. The validity of the gospel is affirmed and re-affirmed vis-à-vis the progress of events. Killing the albatross is a sin and the Mariner is punished for it in myriad ways. However his act of love in admiring the water snakes saves him from the curse and there is a return to the old world after the resolution. However the world to which he returns is a different one, for the Mariner is now an enlightened man, a man with knowledge.

More than physical woes, the Mariner suffers from existential loneliness typical of Romantic heroes. The other members of the crew have rejected him and he suffers alone and in silence. The lack of certitude in the Mariner, his solipsistic fear is understandable keeping in mind the trial he is undergoing. But what is noteworthy is the note of hope – not only does penance deliver him from his torturous physical condition, but also from solitude and ignorance. In fact his suffering is a process of spiritual growth and enlightenment. His expiation is possible only because of his love, again a Christian concept of life. When he can see beauty in the deadly water snakes – he is at once released and he is able to pray, the body of the albatross falls into the sea and he is refreshed with a gentle sleep. The different episodes of the narrative can be seen as components of "something great, something one and

indivisible" - the phenomena of sin, penitence and resolution i.e. the phenomena of life according to Christian philosophy. The suffering of the Mariner becomes meaningless unless it is seen as a part of his penance - "The man hath penance done, and penance more will do". Even his fantasies, dreams and nightmares harmonise to evoke a sense of grace that saves the Mariner.

The heavy religious imperative behind the symbols and images strengthen Coleridge's argument for the validity and adequacy of religious norms. The albatross is a symbol, existing between the literal and the metaphorical. It is supposed to be a harbinger of peace and prosperity and to take away its life is an act of sin which endangers one's own being and that of one's companions. Coleridge in fact suggests a pantheistic oneness with nature as the albatross is a symbol of God's presence for the Mariner. The shooting of the bird becomes significant only in the context of this fact. Coleridge thought of nature as an "eternal language which spoke of God's presence". Drought and a pitiless sun suggest a state of spiritual waste. The "bloody sun" however is later replaced by a gentle light. It is a positive linear movement from death to life, darkness to light, despair to hope, from guilt to explanation, from despair to redemption, from suffering in isolation to a return to the world of men. The Mariner however fails to achieve a final salvation - "I pass, like night from land to land". Yet the discourse moves around the theme of conformity to divine legislation. By shaping the symbols into a consistent whole and subordinating them to a single plan Coleridge communicates a spiritual myth of a dark and despairing crisis in the human soul.

The poem progresses in a symbiotic relation of action as *cause* and the condition of the spirit as *effect*; subsequently the spiritual condition becomes the *cause* and actions the *effect*. There can be separation in Coleridge's philosophy between the moral and the spiritual, no possibility of spiritual regeneration without corresponding growth in understanding human behaviour.

The era which began with the *Lyrical Ballads* came to a close with the Aesthetic Movement of the 80's and the 90's. One of the major writers of the period/movement was Oscar Wilde whose works had strong Romantic undertones conveying messages of love and despair. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1896) is a ballad in six sections. It tells of the hanging of a murderer for killing the woman he loved. Like *The Rime* it is also a tale of crime and punishment. The tale is narrated by a fellow-prisoner whose sympathies are clearly with the condemned man for he is powerfully aware of the arbitrariness of man-made laws. Like life-in-death of *The Rime*, *The Ballad* is a discourse on waiting for death in the presence of palpable and actual death. The first three sections narrate the six weeks spent waiting for death; the fourth describes the execution and its effects on the other prisoners. The next section is devoted to the poet's reflections on execution and the prison as a place for reform and repentance. The concluding part is a kind of an epilogue which reiterates the central theme of the poem - "All men kill the thing they love".

In strict contrast to *The Rime*, Wilde's *The Ballad* suggests loss of faith in Christian ideology and the futility of Christian ethics for the English society. *The Ballad* is a story of crime and punishment but aims at no salvation or redemption. In fact the attempts at setting things right is mocked at and ridiculed. The man has murdered the woman he loves and spends the first three sections waiting "to swing". The agony and despair of the criminal is however shared by his fellow prisoners (unlike in *The Rime*). There is however no movement towards spiritual growth or enlightenment, despite deep mental and physical agony; there is no confession or prayer; he accepts everything stoically.

He did not wring his hands nor weep
 And again
 And strange it was to see him pass
 With a step so light and gay;
 And strange it was to see him look

*So wistfully at the day,
And strange it was to think that he
Had such a debt to pay.*

Oscar Wilde

There is only "Black Despair" and "crooked shapes of Terror" in the Goal. Not only for the condemned, but also for his fellow prisoners hope is dead for they

wondered if each one of us would end the self – same way"

The agony of prison life and the inhuman treatment of the Governor, the prison Wardens, the Doctor and the Chaplain constitute of his suffering. Yet in spite of his penance there is no grace and redemption – he is hanged like a beast and there isn't any requiem for his soul either ... He has no redemption at the end because "he does not win who plays with sin / In the secret House of Shame". In fact at every step Christian ideology fails to save him.

While in *The Rime* love is the means of salvation and redemption, in *The Ballad* it leads to destruction and despair. Love is treated cynically by the poet – "For each man kills the thing he loves / Yet each man does not die" – he kills the woman he loves. Cruelty has three dimensions here – the cruelty of the crime, the strong impression that such cruelty is pervasive and the cruelty of his punishment by an equally guilty society.

Wilde departs from the supernatural world of Coleridge and situates his poem against the nineteenth century English social background. The miserable living conditions in the prison, the stifling overwhelming presence of authority (state) and the inequity of justice are highlighted in the fifth section. The poem shows total cynicism and irrelevance, if not total rejection of institutions – both man-made and divine. The arbitrariness of law is emphasised and hence the possibility of redemption through penance is also bleak. The end of the era mood of despair is reflected in repeated use of such terms as "yellow face of Doom", "Cave of Black Despair", "dead was hope", "Man's grim Justice". A society perched on the edge of corruption and despair finds graphic illustration. Unlike *The Rime* which abounds in supernatural elements, *The Ballad* has a predominantly gothic touch – the macabre details of the grave, quicklime dissolving the body, religion too takes on a gothic face. The prison is a place of horror and shame where man mistreats man – Christ would have been ashamed to see the actions of his children.

The effective use of symbols is as much strategy in Wilde as it is in Coleridge. While in *The Rime* symbols are used to establish the validity and efficacy of the Christian world view, in *The Ballad* they become symbols of the inefficacy of Christianity. Nature and religion become symbols of fear, despair and dissolution. That is how the profound and the sublime are made profane in *The Ballad* – "God's dreadful dawn", the Chaplain symbolise the utter irrelevance of the divine. The central issue of destruction is reiterated repeatedly through the system of symbols.

*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!*

A morbid preoccupation with death and destruction is noticeable in the poem – beginning with capital punishment, the graphic details of the execution, to the horror of the corpse in the grave. *The Ballad* is nearly an anarchist's poem where even a noble emotion like love is treated with violence, and a deep undertone of faithlessness and cynicism permeates everything. The narrative of *The Ballad* moves

in an opposite direction to that of *The Rime* – a movement from life to death, light to darkness, hope to despair.

The human condition in the two poems have been dealt with differently. Yet the crux of the problem is the same in both the poems – the problem of the essential loneliness of man, though again the nature of the loneliness is different. The Mariner kills an albatross which is an act of sin and has grave cosmological effect – death, starvation and havoc on the seas. Yet the same act also leads to salvation. Unlike the killing of the bird, the murder of the woman in *The Ballad* is not an act of sin and the poet almost sympathises with the murderer, defending the criminal's act – every man kills the things he loves, yet every man does not die. But behind this statement is a philosophy – that man is by nature cruel and destructive, and his act of love is also an act of destruction. This murder has no cosmological implication. The prison conditions continue to be as inhuman as before, he also suffers the fruit of his actions, though his fellow prisoners offer him silent sympathy. The Christian apparatus is overwhelmed by the socio-political apparatus. The poem alternates between an elegy on the human condition and a protest against the inhumanity of man-made laws. Wilde's prison house is a micro-cosmic version of the doomed finality of the larger world. Wilde expresses serious reservations about theories and systems – the law fails to distinguish between the guilty and the innocence and hence to deliver justice. *The Rime* on the other hand progresses through a belief in systems and rules. Conformity to order enables man to easily distinguish between right and wrong. And it is this belief in a system which makes it easier to categorise the killing of the bird as sin for which the fellow prisoners curse the Mariner. But in *The Ballad* the fellow prisoners are lost without any philosophy of life and have no choice but to sympathise with the criminal and sail in the same boat. If we assume that by sympathising with the criminal they identify with him, then the murder acquires a collective dimension. *The Ballad* explores the perplexities of these moral desperation – things have fallen apart and the centre cannot hold.

The poem under discussion is a ballad which has a forceful and direct effect. Emphasis is achieved by repetition of words, phrases, sentences and stanzas though at places these repetitions become both tiresome and puerile. An atmosphere of despair and gloom is established by repeated use of words like "alone", "terror", "impotent despair", "Pale anguish", "degraded" etc. The total effect of this poem of 660 lines is one of 'death' which is essentially the theme of the poem. While *The Rime* has four line stanzas, *The Ballad* progresses through six line stanzas.

Endnotes:

1. Basil Willey. *Nineteenth Century Studies* – Essays on Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
2. *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* - Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
3. *Ibid.*

Exercises

1. What are the points of similarity between *The Rime* and *The Ballad*?

2. What are the points of difference between *The Rime* and *The Ballad*?

3. Mention some stylistic and structural features of *The Ballad of Lucy Deane*.

Oscar Wilde

41.4 SUMMING UP

Wilde achieved his effect by appealing directly to the emotions of his audience. He put art over nature – this was his proclaimed aim in literature. He believed in the power of the sensations and impressions and believed in perfection and sensibility.

The change from *The Rime* to *The Ballad* may be summed up in terms of religion, philosophy, human conditions and technique. Coleridge is a convinced religious man and believed that redemption is possible even in this ugly world. The main cause of which is ignorance. His technique is more symbolic and narrative.

Wilde on the contrary is more sceptical and shows a complete indifference towards all institutions – human and divine. He is an aesthete who believes only in aesthetic values. The ultimate (spiritual) values of the world are his creative world, keeping in mind the contemporary socio-political conditions. His solution to the ugliness of life is the acquisition of aesthetic/sensory pleasure. Nevertheless he like Coleridge aims at greater human happiness and a cure of the ugliness of life.

41.5 SUGGESTED READING

- 1) Bower, C.M. *The Romantic Imagination* (Oxford, 1969)
Studies of major Romantic poets underlining the socio-political conditions and the play of language in the early Romantic Age.
- 2) Pollard, Arthur. *The Victorians* (Barrie & Jenkins 1970)
Essays on major Victorian writers and on the major socio-political conditions of the age.
- 3) Trevelyan, G.M. *English Social History* (Macmillan 1977)
History of English Literature against the backdrop of history of English literature from Chaucer to Victorians.
- 4) Willey, Basil. *Nineteenth Century Studies* (Cambridge University press, 1969)
Essays on major Victorian writers.
- 5) Ellman Richard, *Oscar Wilde* (Hamish Hamilton, 1985)
Life and Works of Oscar Wilde.