



The Ballad of Reading Gaol

Oscar Wilde

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The Ballad of Reading Gaol is a poem by Oscar Wilde, written in exile either in Berneval-le-Grand or in Dieppe, France, after his release from Reading Gaol in 1897. Wilde had been incarcerated in Reading after being convicted of homosexual offences in 1895. During his imprisonment, a hanging took place. Charles Thomas Wooldridge had been a trooper in the Royal Horse Guards. He was convicted of cutting the throat of his wife, Laura Ellen. He was aged 30 when executed. Wilde spent mid-1897 with Robert Ross in Berneval-le-Grand, where he wrote The Ballad of Reading Gaol. The poem narrates the execution of Wooldridge. No attempt is made to assess the justice of the laws which convicted them, but rather the poem highlights the brutalisation of the punishment that all convicts share. The poem consists of 109 stanzas of 6 lines. A version with only 63 of the stanzas, and allegedly based on the original draft, was included in the posthumous editions of Wilde's poetry edited by Robert Ross, "for the benefit of reciters and their audiences who have found the entire poem too long for declamation." Both versions are included here.

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James Brown:

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