

# From Victim to Ethical Agent: Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as Post-Traumatic Writing

Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein

**Abstract**—Faced with a sudden, unexpected, and overwhelming event, the individual's normal cognitive processing may cease to function, trapping the psyche in "speechless terror", while images, feelings and sensations are experienced with emotional intensity. Unable to master such situation, the individual becomes a trauma victim who will be susceptible to traumatic recollections like intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and repetitive re-living of the primal event in a way that blurs the distinction between past and present, and forecloses the future. Trauma is timeless, repetitious, and contagious; a trauma observer could fall prey to "secondary victimhood". Central to the process of healing the psychic wounds in the aftermath of trauma is verbalizing the traumatic experience (i.e., putting it into words) – an act which provides a chance for assimilation, testimony, and reevaluation. In light of this paradigm, this paper proposes a reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written shortly after his release from prison, as a post-traumatic text which traces the disruptive effects of the traumatic experience of Wilde's imprisonment for homosexual offences and the ensuing reversal of fortune he endured. Post-traumatic writing demonstrates the process of "working through" a trauma which may lead to the possibility of ethical agency in the form of a "survivor mission". This paper draws on fundamental concepts and key insights in literary trauma theory which is characterized by interdisciplinarity, combining the perspectives of different fields like critical theory, psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, history, and social studies. Of particular relevance to this paper are the concepts of "vicarious traumatization" and "survivor mission", as *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was written in response to Wilde's own prison trauma and the indirect traumatization he experienced as a result of witnessing the execution of a fellow prisoner whose story forms the narrative base of the poem. The *Ballad* displays Wilde's sense of mission which leads him to recognize the social as well as ethical implications of personal tragedy. Through a close textual analysis of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* within the framework of literary trauma theory, the paper aims to: (a) demonstrate how the poem's thematic concerns, structure and rhetorical figures reflect the structure of trauma; (b) highlight Wilde's attempts to come to terms with the effects of the cataclysmic experience which transformed him into a social outcast; and (c) show how Wilde manages to transcend the victim status and assumes the role of ethical agent to voice a critique of the Victorian penal system and the standards of morality underlying the cruelties practiced against wrong doers and to solicit social action.

**Keywords**—*Ballad of Reading Gaol*, post-traumatic writing, trauma theory, Wilde.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN 1895, Oscar Wilde was convicted of sodomy—an offence which Victorian society considered immoral and punishable by law. He was sentenced to two years of hard labor in prison.

Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein is with The Department of English, Faculty of Education at Ain Shams University, Egypt (phone: (002) 01005086100; e-mail: mona.shakral@yahoo.com).

Wilde was first held in Pentonville and was later removed to Wandsworth, two prisons located in London, before he was finally sent to Reading jail where he served the remainder of his prison term. During his imprisonment a hanging was carried out in Reading prison in 1896: the Royal Horse Guards Trooper Charles Wooldridge was executed at the age of 30 for murdering his own wife. Witnessing the death by hanging of an inmate was a horrific experience that deeply offended Wilde's sensibilities. Upon his release in 1897, he immigrated to France where he lived under an assumed name until his death in 1900. In France he started writing his final masterpiece, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (henceforth referred to as *The Ballad*), which was published in 1898 under the name C.3.3—Wilde's cell number in prison. The notoriety that forced Wilde to live in exile obliged him to use his prison identification on the poem's title page instead of his name. *The Ballad* was a great success and the seventh edition, in 1899, revealed the author's identity.

*The Ballad* was inspired by Wilde's prison ordeal and the story of Wooldridge's execution forms the poem's narrative base. Wilde is not the focus of attention in the poem; the physical, mental, and psychological hardships he personally experienced in prison are subsumed into the grueling deprivations and agony endured by all prisoners at Reading prison and meticulously described in the poem. Evading the accusation of self-pity and using individual fate as a springboard for social criticism, the poet assumes the voice of an unnamed prisoner who chronicles the narrative which builds toward the execution and then moves away from this climax to recount the miseries inflicted on all prisoners, drawing contrasts between divine sympathy and the inhumanity of the prison regime.

## II. WILDE'S PRISON CRISIS

As [1, p. 457] notes, "Wilde's two-year imprisonment in solitary confinement caused him profound moral, emotional and physical shock." Imprisonment for "gross indecency" was a cataclysmic event that befell Wilde in his heyday and robbed him of his freedom, fame, and family. When he went to trial, two of his dramas (*The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*) were being performed concurrently in London in 1895. Married with two sons, enjoying fame and success as one of London's most famous playwrights, accustomed to a flamboyant lifestyle, and devoted to the pursuit of beauty and pleasure, Wilde was not prepared for prison. And within the context of the Victorian society with its high moral ideals, he knew that society's punishment would continue after his release. "I know that on the day of my release I shall be

merely passing from one prison into another, and there are times when the whole world seems to me no larger than my cell, and as full of terror for me," remarked Wilde [2, p. vi].

*De Profundis* (Wilde's last work in prose written near the end of his prison term and cast in the form of a letter addressed to his lover and the cause of his downfall Lord Alfred Douglas) evinces the overwhelming impact of the tragedy on his life [2]. "[T]he two great turning points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison," laments Wilde [2, p. 21]. His sense of utter devastation was aggravated by the knowledge that he "stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture" of his time. "Few men," Wilde observes, "hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged." With him it was different: "I felt it myself, and made others feel it" [2, pp. 9-10]. In great pain over the disgrace he brought upon his name, he says: "I have come...from a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy" [2, p. 28].

For lay persons prison is a misfortune in man's life, something that may call for sympathy in others, but for iconic figures it is a harrowing ordeal which may cause damage to identity, reputation, and social relations. Similarly, the damage done to Wilde was multiply disruptive: "With us, prison makes a man a pariah. I, and such as I am, have hardly any right to air and sun. Our presence taints the pleasure of others. We are unwelcome when we reappear" [2, p. 8]. His mother died while he was in prison. Shocked and shamed, he wrote: "Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured.... I had disgraced that name eternally" [2, p. 3]. Upon imprisonment, his children were taken away from him and he was "doomed to be solitary, while [his] sons still live." He was also forced to declare bankruptcy, and he became "completely penniless, and absolutely homeless" [2, pp. 9, 15]. The pain inflicted upon his psyche was extreme; more agonizing was the inability to put sorrow into words in the immediate aftermath of the crisis:

I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud; misery that could find no voice; sorrow that was dumb. [2, p. 12]

Imprisonment was an extreme experience and an overwhelming crisis that possessed Wilde and reshaped his life; it entailed emotional, cognitive and psychological responses that testify to its traumatic nature. This paper is based on the premise that *The Ballad* may properly be read as post-traumatic writing, as it was written in the aftermath of Wilde's prison crisis. Literary trauma theory is best suited to such reading; major concepts and key insights in the trans-disciplinary field of trauma studies are utilized to demonstrate how Wilde moves beyond the crisis and grapples with its ethical implications. However, *The Ballad* and *De Profundis* are thematically linked as they both explore facets of the tragedy that inspired their composition, hence the fore-

mentioned citations which show that Wilde's imprisonment qualifies as a traumatic experience. To understand Wilde's representation of his own traumatic experience, it is important to shed light on the enigmatic nature of the notion of trauma.

### III. TRAUMA: HISTORY AND DEFINING FEATURES

"Trauma" derives from the Greek word for wound. In English it was first used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in medicine to denote a bodily injury caused by an external agent. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term "trauma" started drifting from the physical to the mental realm. Currently, the term still refers to a bodily injury in medicine, but the predominant popular connotations of "trauma" now "circle around metaphors of psychic scars and mental wounds" [3, p. 3]. Psychiatrist Lenore Terr states that "psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside" [qtd. in 4, p. 2]. Trauma can cause damage to both the body and the psyche of the individual, but the severity of traumatic impacts is specified by the unique way in which the individual's body or mind reacts to extreme experience along with the unique response of the individual's social group.

The attempt to understand world-historical events like the Holocaust inaugurated trauma studies, but this burgeoning field of cultural and literary criticism has extended beyond that determining catastrophe to include the after-effects of untoward personal, social, and historical experiences. According to [5], trauma studies comprises a number of theoretical approaches: on the one hand, approaches concerned with psychic events are informed, especially early on, by Freudian psychoanalysis; on the other hand, approaches focusing on domestic and sexual violence are inspired and sustained by a feminist and gender studies critique [5, p. 209].

Trauma could be experienced on an individual as well as on a collective level; both types of traumatic experience intersect. Collective traumas are also individual traumas and individual traumas are always determined by socio-cultural factors [6, pp. 5-6]. Similarly, the external source causing trauma may be an individual perpetrator or a collective social practice.

The relationship between an external violent event and an extreme response, which might be termed a traumatic experience, was first recognized by Freud. *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), by Freud and Josef Breuer, is generally referred to as the inaugural work on trauma. The book relates hysterical symptoms to childhood sexual trauma. Freud formulated a theory of trauma in two later works on which contemporary trauma theorists would draw on for an understanding of the story of traumatic experiences. Cathy Caruth, a pioneering trauma theorist, contends that the centrality and complexity of trauma in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was first most profoundly addressed by Freud in two important works: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, written during the events surrounding World War I, and dealing, respectively, with individual trauma and historical trauma [7, p. 58]. In [7] Caruth articulates the basic framework of the dominant literary trauma theory.

Recognition of the two types of traumatic experience led to

a further development in trauma theory. By the 1970s two strands of research in trauma were recognizable: the first strand developed in psychology and investigated intensely personal trauma such as incest, physical and mental abuse, domestic violence and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); the second focused on world historical events such as war, genocide, environmental catastrophe, and other natural and human calamities [5, p. 209].

In the 1970s, the psychological studies of war veterans culminated in the official diagnosis of a psychic disorder termed post-traumatic stress disorder, which was included in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III* in 1980. Individuals confronted with extreme experiences or prolonged stress are diagnosed with PTSD if they present certain cluster of symptoms which include: disruption of memory, dissociation of identity, repetitive re-living of the traumatizing event in dreams and flashbacks, persistent avoidance of the stimuli reminiscent of that event, and hyper-arousal [3, p. 1]. Knowledge of PTSD helped to consolidate "a trauma paradigm" and fostered understanding of how people's biology, identities, and assumptions about the world are intertwined as well as shaped by experience.

The women's movement of the 1970s exposed to the public the extent and severity of the domestic physical and sexual abuse inflicted on women and children. When distinct characteristics of trauma became more familiar after 1980, trauma researchers found similarities between rape and abuse trauma syndrome and war trauma symptoms. Reference [8] shows that while earlier research on trauma focused on single types of victims and situations, this newly discovered comparison prompted 1980s and 1990s overviews of the literature on traumatic stress with a view to developing a unified theory of trauma as a distinct emotional state. The result was a vast interdisciplinary work on trauma which began to challenge the medical conception of trauma as individual pathology and "linked trauma to sociopolitical agendas and expectations" [8, p. 18]. Trauma began to be reconsidered as a generalized and socialized phenomenon without overlooking the unique situations inducing traumatic responses. Thus, trauma moved beyond the boundaries of the medical establishment; understanding of its psychological consequences percolated into many varied contexts and theorization of trauma involved a wide range of expertise. The dominant literary and cultural trauma theory emerged in the 1990s in the work of such theoreticians as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, psychotherapists Dori Laub and Judith Herman, Kali Tal, and Dominick LaCapra. Trauma studies as represented in their work was informed by insights from Freudian psychoanalysis, psychology, deconstructionist theory, as well as cultural and literary criticism. Trauma studies is "a hermeneutic enterprise that seeks to build self-understanding and inter-subjective connection" [5, p. 216]. In its social-scientific side, trauma studies aims at fostering understanding, removing stigmas and isolation, and illustrating the intersection of the social and the psychological in traumatic experiences. In its cultural-literary

side, it is concerned with literary as well as testimonial representations of extreme responses to overwhelming events and incomprehensible experiences. It is a mode of reading that demands listening to the suffering of others—on both individual and national/collective levels—and awakens us to wrong behaviors with the aim of producing an impact on reality and eliciting social/political action.

The present paper's reading of Wilde's *The Ballad* as a post-traumatic text is guided by trauma theory's classical model which is best articulated in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) [7]. Given that individuals respond to trauma differently, the poem is also approached through the lens of alternative models of managing trauma as exemplified by Judith Herman (a psychotherapist) and Dominick LaCapra (historian and theorist).

In its most general definition, trauma "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" [7, p. 11]. In addition to the emotional suffering it involves, trauma is characterized by unexpectedness, intensity, disruptiveness, incomprehensibility, and belatedness. Trauma has a haunting effect; there is a gap between experience and understanding. Traumatic events are "so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption" [8, p. ix]. Trauma impacts the entire person: "the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people, and the way we make sense of the world are all profoundly altered by traumatic experience" [4, p. 2]. A key feature of traumatic experiences is the individual's inability to master the situation or to avoid impending danger. The victim is helpless; this helplessness poses a problem for human beings and it may render a situation traumatic: "As a species, we cannot tolerate helplessness—it goes against our instinct for survival" [4, p. 3].

#### IV. RELEVANCE TO WILDE'S PRISON TRAGEDY

If trauma is defined by the event's unexpectedness and the victim's unpreparedness, these are hallmarks of Wilde's prison experience. Wilde was an exceptional case in Reading prison, not in terms of his offence and sentence, but with regard to his class, educational background, and lifestyle. According to [1], the Reading jail archives show that he was "very probably the only upper-middle class, university-educated person in the prison." Most of the prisoners knew intense physical and psychological hardships before imprisonment, some of them seem even to have chosen prison as a break from the penury of their 'free' lives. "Wilde, as a consequence of his privilege, was potentially more bereft, more isolated and traumatized by prison, than they were" [1, p. 474].

To be traumatized is to be possessed by a shocking event or a horrific image. Trauma involves a "breach in the mind's experience of time" [7, p. 4]. It distorts the individual's perception of time with its normal division into past, present, and future. Because the mind is taken over by the memory of

one particular event, the individual's ability to appreciate the present and to think of the future is impaired. "This experience of timelessness can erase the present and foreclose the future, overtaking one's world view" [5, p. 211]. Wilde suffered this tormenting fixation on the past; after his release he wrote virtually about nothing other than his prison experiences and the cruelties of prison life. Apart from his petitions for release and a letter submitted to the prison Governor on July 2, 1896 concerning the appalling conditions of imprisonment, the only offspring of Wilde's prodigious literary talent were *De Profundis* and *The Ballad*—both tackled his prison tragedy. A year after his release, he also wrote two letters to *The Daily Chronicle* newspaper publisher concerning the inhuman prison conditions and suggesting measures for reform.

The classical trauma paradigm emphasizes its "unsayable quality" [5, p. 209]. A "traumatized person is cut off from language, deprived of the power of words, trapped in speechless terror" [4, p.11]. Wilde experienced this speechlessness in the immediate aftermath of his prison crisis: "What I suffered then, and still suffer, is not for pen to write or paper to record" [2, p. 4]. He started giving words and meaning to his trauma only near the end of his prison term, in *De Profundis*, and after his release, in *The Ballad*.

Trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later" [7, p. 4]. The event that was not fully grasped becomes a missed experience which demands theoretical analysis; the repetitive and obsessive return of the experience reflects the victim's attempts to master the situation. In light of these features of the trauma paradigm, *The Ballad* can be read as an attempt by Wilde to make sense of what was done to him. He declared his intention to encounter and analyze the shattering experience he endured: "The important thing, the thing that lies before me ... is to absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance. ... Whatever is realized is right" [2, p. 22].

A question arises here: if trauma is both "unsayable" and incomprehensible, as the classical model suggests, how can a literary text be read as a representation of and an attempt at coming to terms with a traumatic experience? To account for the varied responses to and the range of literary encounters with traumatic experiences, contemporary literary trauma theory has started to embrace a pluralistic approach informed by a view of trauma as "multiply configured with diverse representations in literature and far reaching effects in culture" [9, p. 10]. Based on the premise that extreme experiences cultivate multiple responses and values, contemporary pluralistic approaches in literary trauma theory, informed by a variety of theoretical models and critical practices, "are more likely to acknowledge both the neurobiological and social contexts of the experience, response, and narrative, as well as the possibilities that language can convey the variable meanings of trauma" [9, p. 7]. This expansive theoretical position is adopted in the examination of *The Ballad* conducted in this paper, as it not only acknowledges the

possibility of literary depictions of trauma but also highlights the chances for assimilation, testimony and ethical agency on the part of the survivor without disregarding the shattering impact of trauma.

#### V. WRITING TRAUMA: THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

Comprising 109 six-line stanzas, *The Ballad* is divided into six untitled, but numbered, sections of 16, 13, 37, 23, 17, and three stanzas, respectively. Further subdivisions within four of the main sections are indicated by asterisks, with the exception of Sections II and VI, which have no subdivision. The poem's speaker is one of the prison inmates and he lives through the same experiences as the other prisoners, but in some parts he tries to acquire a critical distance that allows him to voice more generalized reflections.

The first section introduces the inmate awaiting trial for murdering the woman he loves. The man is sentenced to death by hanging—a fact which distresses the speaker and leads him to voice the recurrent motif that sin is universal but sinners do not all have to suffer the cruelties found in Reading prison. Section II describes the condemned inmate's behavior during his six weeks on death row, and then moves to the whole group of prisoners who have mixed feelings of pity and terror as they watch him. Two stanzas bringing together the speaker and the condemned inmate round off the section. Events leading to the execution are recounted in Section III, and then follows a depiction of the appalling prison conditions endured by the speaker along with the whole group of prisoners. After a nightmarish night, dawn breaks and the prisoners know that the man was hanged. Shocked and silenced by the horrific event, the prisoners experience complete identification with the executed inmate in Section IV. The cruelty of the death penalty and the disrespectful treatment of the inmate's dead body urge the speaker to lash out at human law and the justice system for disregarding the teachings of Christ. Section V concerns the prison system which is proved to be wrong and then returns to the condemned inmate who has atoned for his sin. The final section wraps up the poem's argument by reasserting two central ideas: first, the inmate's doom shames the whole penal system and its representative authorities; second, all men are likely to commit sins.

At the heart of a traumatic experience is the phenomenon Freud termed "repetition compulsion" which emerges as "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" [7, p. 2]. The psyche returns repeatedly to scenes of displeasure because, "by restaging the traumatic moment over and over again, it hope[s] belatedly to process the unassimilable material, to find ways of mastering the trauma retroactively" [3, p. 9]. Traumatic repetition is not a re-telling of the experience but a re-living of the violent event with all its painful emotions. This literal return of the past in the victim's waking thoughts and dreams "defines the shape of individual lives" [7, p. 59].

Intrusion of the traumatic memories is central to the trauma trap. An important stage in the pathway to recovery is "reconstructing the trauma story" [10, p. 2]. Reference [4] emphasizes the significance of verbal representation of

trauma: "For healing to occur, we know that people often need to put the experience into a narrative, give it words, and share it with themselves and others" [4, p. 6]. The process of acting out (i.e. compulsive re-living of the event) should give way to the process of working-through (i.e. selective analytic interpretation of the traumatic experience). These two are interacting processes of memory. But in "the working-through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. ... it's via the working-through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical agent" [11, pp. 2-3].

Post-traumatic writings are forms "which are coming to terms with the trauma that called them into existence in different ways." Such writings "involve both acting-out and working-through" and "explore post-traumatic effects" [11, p. 32]. Seen as a post-traumatic text, *The Ballad* visualizes the workings of trauma, tries to work through the past, and actualizes the possibility of agency.

The speaker in *The Ballad*, who can be identified as Wilde himself on account of the poem's circumstances of composition, uses the past tense in the opening six stanzas which revolve around the inmate who "murdered" the "woman whom he loved." The narrative is selective, focusing on details which intrigued Wilde in the original experience. The inmate's look of pensive sadness, which conveys a profound sense of regret at a tragic event that could have been avoided, is foregrounded: "I never saw a man who looked / With such a wistful eye / Upon that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky" [12, p. 840]. The part of the sky prisoners can see is reduced by the prison walls and buildings to the size of a small tent; this image underscores the sense of suffocating confinement the prisoners endure. Under the 'separate system', established by the Prison Act of 1865, prisoners were isolated not only from society but also from one another; it nearly forbade all human contact. Prisoners spent most of the day and all night alone in their cells, and when they were together during exercise and at chapel any communication, even eye contact, would be severely punished [13, p. 7]. During exercise in the yard, prisoners walked silently in separate rings. Memory of this prison routine is engraved in Wilde's mind. He repeats this same line three times in two consecutive stanzas: "Silently we went round and round" [12, p. 850]. Separate exercise rings are also referred to in sections I and II of the poem [12, pp. 840, 843]. Repetitive seeing of traumatic memories is thus reflected in this repeated reference to this stressful aspect of prison life.

Trauma may engender a particular kind of community when experienced on a collective level. Even when creating disruption, collective trauma can also enable social solidarity [9, p. 9]. Concerned about his fellow inmate's fate, the speaker "was wondering if the man had done / A great or little thing." The doom awaiting the man was slyly disclosed to Wilde: "a voice behind me whispered low / 'That fellow's got to swing' " [12, p. 840]. As [10, p. 126] notes, a recuperative trauma narrative should recite the facts and the accompanying emotions. Wilde recounts not only what happened but also how he felt. Both affect and effect are not wanting in Wilde's

recollection:

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. [12, p. 840]

*The Ballad* displays the rhythms of and the varied responses to traumatic experiences as endured on both individual and collective levels; it represents the personal traumas of Wilde and Wooldridge as well as the collective trauma of the whole group of prisoners at Reading jail. Wilde's encounter with the condemned inmate's extreme experience positioned him in an ethical dilemma: his pain was not entirely overshadowed by the inmate's pain, but the cruelty of the punishment urged him to implicate readers in the traumatic experiences externalized in the poem and to bear witness to oppressive social institutions in order to prevent further victimizations. Literary representations of trauma help readers access traumatic experiences. Trauma narratives, as [8, p. 3] points out, "enact the directing outward of an inward, silent process to other witnesses;" such forms are also "directed towards readers, engaging them in a meditation on individual distress, collective responsibilities, and communal healing in relation to trauma." Affective states and levels of consciousness involved in traumatic experiences are highlighted to help readers comprehend trauma and sympathize with victims. In *The Ballad*, knowledge of the inmate's impending doom explained his behavior for the poem's speaker: "I only knew what hunted thought / Quickened his step" [12, p. 840]. The imagery conveys the grievousness of the inmate's situation: the crime he committed and the reparations he has to make are preying on his mind, chasing his thought like a beast of prey from which he tries hard to escape.

In *The Ballad*'s opening stanza the inmate's crime is defined in specific terms: he murdered the woman he loved. In the sixth stanza the crime is redefined in more general terms: "The man had killed the thing he loved, / And so he had to die" [12, p. 840]. Though "killed" and "murdered" are synonymous, the word 'kill' could also mean 'to destroy' or 'to cause extreme pain and discomfort to'. A 'thing' may refer to 'an object', 'an entity' or 'a creature'. The broader terms mark the shift to a wider perspective: the poet will capitalize on the trauma of an individual inmate to engage readers in important social issues and to allow them to see some cultural institutions in a more critical light. In this way *The Ballad* partakes in trauma narratives which, as [8, p. 4] observes, "are often concerned with human-made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of the ways social, economic, and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma."

After the six opening stanzas in section I, the poet starts a subdivision incorporating generalized reflections on sin and legal punishment:

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! [12, p. 841]

Wilde contends that humans offend against one another and make mistakes that could cost them things they value most; they commit offences for varied motivations; and while some wrongdoers are regretful about their misbehaviors (like the inmate who always "looked upon the garish day" with "a wistful eye"), others do the deed "without a sigh". Human sinfulness may be motivated by "Lust" or "Gold", but it may also be encouraged by a human agent: "Some sell, and others buy" [12, p. 841]. The human capacity for sin and evil is universal and undoubted, albeit for differing reasons and varying contexts. Although all men, including the prison authorities as the poem will show, are liable to commit some kind of offence, they do not all have to repay such a heavy debt as a death sentence: "For each man kills the thing he loves, / Yet each man does not die" [12, p. 841]. Wilde goes on to describe the horrible details of the death penalty awaiting his fellow inmate but evaded by other sinners both inside and outside the prison walls. The events leading to the inmate's execution are presented as happening in the present rather than as past events: "He does not feel that sickening thirst / That sands one's throat, before / The hangman with his gardener's gloves / Comes through the padded door," to give one example of the events described as if they are timeless [12, p. 842]. The poem thus exhibits the peculiar temporality of trauma.

As an observer of a fellow inmate's ordeal, Wilde seems to have fallen victim to "vicarious traumatization" or "secondary victimhood"—a problem often endured by persons indirectly involved in a traumatic experience like witnesses, bystanders, rescue workers, relatives and therapists [3, pp.1, 3]. As [10, p. 99] points out, this phenomenon is also termed "traumatic counter transference" in psychiatry and it proves that trauma is "contagious", as therapists who listen to material pertaining to atrocities suffered by their patients may experience the same distressful emotions as the patients. Trauma is transmissible not only between patients and doctors, via the process of transference or suggestion, but also between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy [3, p. 3].

Wilde depicts the emotions of terror, agony, and betrayal which must have been suffered by the condemned inmate during the period leading to execution with accuracy and immediacy. For instance, he refers to the sense of "dark disgrace" for having to die "a death of shame;" the ghastly pain of "bend[ing] his head to hear" his own "Burial Office read;" the "anguish of his soul" as he "Cross[es] his own coffin;" and the bitterness of "feel[ing] upon his shuddering cheek / The kiss of Caiaphas" [12, pp. 841-842]. The allusion to Caiaphas designates the sense of betrayal because Caiaphas is the high priest who is said to have organized the plot to kill Jesus. An inherent part of man-made trauma is a feeling of betrayal: the individual is confronted with a situation in which the social order or the other persons that are supposed to be a source of protection become a source of harm.

Wilde's description betrays his empathic identification with

Wooldridge. Furthermore, his representation of facts and affects bears resemblance to the process of acting out traumatic experiences. As [11, p. 2] shows, this process leads people who undergo trauma to "relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it." In addition to his own personal trauma, Wilde was vicariously traumatized through his role as witness to the trauma of a fellow inmate. His status as both primary and secondary trauma victim demands a process of working-through. The act of writing out his trauma story facilitates this process, as it serves a healing function (in the form of self-catharsis) and an analytic function (via the attempt to understand what has been registered on the consciousness without full assimilation). Thus *The Ballad* exhibits a central feature of trauma literature which, as noted in [8, p. 8], performs "ethical and healing functions."

According to [8, p. 29], trauma texts incorporate different narrative techniques which represent traumatic conflicts as well as varied levels of awareness. Narrative strategies identified by trauma theorists include: de-contextualized memory fragments; transference episodes in which current life experiences are influenced and distorted by earlier traumas; "overpowering" narratives, where the victim describes the past experience but continues to feel buried in it; and "witnessed narrative," wherein the narrator maintains an observant distance and perspective while describing the overpowering events. As victim, witness, and narrator, Wilde embraces some of these techniques and positions in *The Ballad*.

Assuming the position of observer and witness, Wilde returns to the condemned inmate at the beginning of section II and describes the inmate's bewildering behavior during his six weeks before execution. Although the inmate was going through an appalling experience that might derange any person, he "only looked upon the sun / And drank the morning air." The inmate's diminished affect was incomprehensible for the observant witness:

He did not wring his hands nor weep,  
Nor did he peek or pine,  
But he drank the air as though it held  
Some healthful anodyne;  
With open mouth he drank the sun  
As though it had been wine! [12, p. 842]

The poem's speaker along with the other prisoners watched the inmate "with gaze of dull amaze;" they could not grasp his "strange" response as he seemed to be cut off from the experience. However, psychiatry can provide the answer for his diminished emotional interaction. In extreme cases of unendurable trauma, the individual may stop consciousness by going into a state of dissociation defined as "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment" [4, p. 7]. Further explanation is provided by [10, p. 31]: sometimes extreme situations may paradoxically evoke a state of detached calm in which the normally expected emotions of terror, rage, and pain dissolve. Events continue to register in awareness, but it is as if these events have been disconnected from their ordinary meanings. Thus, the condemned inmate's passivity, complete

surrender, and mental paralysis testify to the extremely traumatizing impact of the "debt" he had "to pay" [12, p. 843]. The "witnessed narrative" Wilde presented sheds light on a unique way of responding to trauma, which evokes different responses from different people.

Beyond the prison walls Wilde's life experiences continued to be colored by the trauma of witnessing the execution of a fellow human. *The Ballad* exhibits this response through three consecutive stanzas in section II which exemplify "transference episodes". The poet shifts from the witness viewpoint and reveals, maybe unwittingly, how his perception of ordinary scenes and life events was distorted by traumatic memories. The pleasure of looking at the "oak and elm [which] have pleasant leaves" is interrupted by the intrusive memory of "the gallows-tree" that is "grim to see." The sweetness of "danc[ing] to violins" and "to flutes" when "Love and Life are fair" is compared to the horrific scene of hanging: "But it is not sweet with nimble feet / To dance upon the air" [12, p. 843]. Again Wilde's mode of writing testifies to the traumatic nature of what he witnessed. In the situation of trauma, as [8, pp. 11-12] notes, "the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present."

Trauma created a relational bond between the poem's speaker and the condemned inmate: they "crossed each other's way" like "two doomed ships that pass in storm." They "said no word", but shared the emotions of shame, doubt, guilt, and diminished sense of self concurrent with traumatic experiences [12, p. 844]. In the aftermath of traumas, as survivors review and judge their conduct, feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal [10, p. 38]. Trauma may damage the basic structure of the self as it may cost the victim his status, validity, and social status—elements which are essential to personal identity. *The Ballad* proves that Wilde suffered such tormenting affections. Being a public figure aggravated his sense of shame; this is conveyed through his statement: "For we did not meet in the holy night, / But in the shameful day" [12, p. 844]. "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life" [10, p. 37]. Wilde translates this sense of abandonment and isolation typical of traumatic experiences in his depiction of the outcast state he shared with his fellow inmate:

A prison wall was round us both,  
Two outcast men we were:  
The world had thrust us from its heart,  
And God from His care:  
And the iron gin that waits for Sin  
Had caught us in its snare. [12, p. 844]

*The Ballad* displays Wilde's attempt at working through his trauma—a process which can have ethical implications if the individual goes beyond the limits of his personal life and acquires a critical distance to scrutinize the public dimension of personal experiences. Writing out the trauma story and representing the process of working-through may not lead to full transcendence of the past, but they enable testimony and agency. Transforming a shattering tragedy into something

helpful for both the individual and the community constitutes what [10, p. 149] calls "a survivor mission". Thus a personal misfortune becomes the basis for social action. Before he started writing *The Ballad*, Wilde declared his intention to undertake a "survivor mission" by making his prison experience a source for public awareness. This is done through exposing the paradoxical effects of incarceration and the faulty methods of rehabilitation that England used with its miscreant citizens. Reflecting on his tragedy, he writes in *De Profundis*:

Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me. ...I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. [2, pp. 19-20]

A work of art inspired by suffering cannot compensate for atrocity, but it can save others by raising awareness. So Wilde declares his intention to transform the "plank bed", the "oakum" picking, the "loathsome food", the "silence", the "shame", and the "solitude" into "a spiritual experience" [2, pp. 20-21]. Attempting to make his trauma the basis for a survivor mission, Wilde takes it upon himself to show the incongruity between the philosophy of the Victorian penal system and the actual inhumane impact it has on the prisoners. Reference [1, p. 477] rightly argues that *The Ballad* "was written in part to campaign against the cruelty of the prison regime." Worth noting is also the fact that a survivor mission is usually intertwined with the "ethical desire to witness" which is "unique to the literature of trauma" [5, p. 215]. In addition to his role as victim, healer, and witness, Wilde also serves the role of ethical agent who tries to raise public awareness with regard to the faulty prison system. The choice of the ballad form was probably inspired by the poet's intention to ensure wider circulation for the poem's message among audience as the ballad is a populist form that has always been closer to oral/popular culture.

If irony denotes "a difference between what is asserted and what is actually the case" [14, p. 89], the prison system is ironic in that it claims to instill virtue and discipline in the inmates but in reality it destroys everything that is good in them, as the poem's section III shows. At the beginning of this section, Wilde uses sarcasm, which is one of the techniques of irony, to demonstrate the ironic attitude of the jailers towards the inmate awaiting execution. The inmate was allowed to take his daily regular walks in the prison yard. During these allotted minutes, he was not left alone: "And by each side aWarder walked, / For fear the man might die." The prison authorities lacked sympathy towards the inmate. They "watched / His anguish night and day" with insensitivity. Ironically, they kept a close eye on him "lest himself should rob / Their scaffold of its prey" [12, p. 844]. This absence of feelings of compassion, sympathy, and fellow feeling on the part of the prison staff troubled Wilde. In [2, p. 52], he speaks of "sympathy" as Christ's unique quality which aligns Him "with the poets". He also quotes Christ's famous saying "Let

him of you who has never sinned be the first to throw the stone at her" to show that His sympathy did not exclude sinners [2, p. 58].

Wilde's readers are introduced to prison as a place entirely devoid of sentiments where jailers do their jobs with emotionless efficiency:

The Governor was strong upon  
The Regulations Act:  
The Doctor said that Death was but  
A scientific fact:  
And twice a day the Chaplain called,  
And left a little tract. [12, p. 844]

Entities pertinent to prison life are bestowed with more significance than the imprisoned human beings who are debased and degraded. Wilde's description of the passionless treatment of prisoners evokes a feeling of shock and repulsion; this is intended to awaken the Victorian society to the inhumanity of the prison system.

The poem's speaker returns to the condemned inmate who "often said that he was glad / The hangman's day was near"—an attitude that was inexplicable to the prison warders. However, the speaker informs us that "No Warder dared to ask" because he only fills the function of "a watcher" who "[m]ust set a lock upon his lips / And make his face a mask" [12, p. 844]. Aside from admonishment to the prisoners and enforcing compliance with the prison regulations, a warder was not allowed to have conversation with prisoners for fear that "he might be moved and try / To comfort or console" [12, p. 845]. Wilde exposes the penal system's ability to rob humans of their humanity and to grind all emotions of kindness in any individual in charge of an aspect of prison life, augmenting the emotional suffering the prisoners endured.

The sense of confinement and suffocation the prisoners suffered is also highlighted through the reiterated reference to the part of the sky the prisoners could see during their 45 minutes of exercise in the yard as the "little tent of blue" [12, pp. 840, 842, 850]. On knowing that a "fellow's got to swing," the poem's speaker shows that the prison atmosphere became more stifling and the hardness typical of prison life is rendered stronger: the "little tent of blue" turned into "a casque of scorching steel" [12, p. 840]. The very negative perception of place is also highlighted throughout the poem. Prison is described as an "iron town" where each prisoner is confined in "his separate hell." To be imprisoned is to experience a state of death-in-life which is metonymically represented by the speaker's description of his separate cell as a "numbered tomb" [12, pp. 846, 849, 845]. The penitentiary was meant to "impose discipline" upon its captives and "to save their souls by force," as [13, p. 4] points out. But in reality, the prisoners' souls are crushed rather than saved. "For prison life with its endless privations and restrictions makes one rebellious ...it turns one's heart to stone," remarks Wilde [2, p. 44].

Prison life hardens hearts. But Wilde's indictment of the prison system is directed against hard hearts as well as the hard labor, hard fare, and the hard living conditions imposed upon prisoners. He describes in some detail these grueling hardships like picking oakum (i.e. using finger nails to

separate fibers of old rope): "We tore the tarry rope to shreds / With blunt and bleeding nails;" cleaning the cells: "We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors, / And cleaned the shining rails;" doing exhausting tedious work, and walking pointlessly on the tread mill: "We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones, / We turned the dusty drill: / We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns, / And sweated on the mill" [12, p. 845]. More tormenting was the silence of the exercise hour: "Silently we went round and round, / And no man spoke a word" [12, p. 850]. In addition to the emotional deprivation and physical exhaustion, the prisoners also suffered from inadequate sanitation: "Each narrow cell in which we dwell / Is a foul and dark latrine," and the poor quality of food and water as well as sleeplessness. The water they drink is "brackish" with "a loathsome slime;" the "bitter bread" they eat is "full of chalk and lime;" and at night time "Sleep will not lie down, but walks / Wild-eyed, and cries to Time" [12, p. 853].

The Victorian penal system was based on a particular view of the causes and cures of crime: society branded miscreants as inherently vicious and saw their crimes as an outcome of their shortcomings; the harshness of the prison system was intended to reform individuals and to rehabilitate them for society. Reference [13, p. 9] sheds further light on the theory of the penitentiary: "Crime was a contagion; the prison was a quarantine. Crime was caused by individual vice; the prison would instill virtue. Physical deprivations would teach the prisoners to control their sensual impulses; hard labour would cure them of their laziness." Thus degrading austerity, forced labor, mandatory worship, and strict regulations were intended to train the prisoners for the habits of self-control, obedience, patience, and hard work.

As regards the source of criminal behavior, Wilde had a different viewpoint which did not exempt society from responsibility. In *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), Wilde wrote: "For what are called criminals nowadays are not criminals at all. Starvation and, and not sin, is the parent of modern crime. ...They are merely what ordinary respectable, commonplace people would be if they had not got enough to eat" [qtd. in 13, p. 12]. In *The Ballad*, Wilde makes it clear that the human "Law" behind the prison system produces the effect of "a most evil fan" which "straws the wheat and saves the chaff" [12, p. 853].

The winnowing metaphor is meant to signify the contrast between the desired effect of the prison system and its actual impact on inmates. The laws behind the system disregard questions of sympathy and forgiveness and impose nefarious punishments and unbearable suffering on sinners who are deprived of the chances for redemption. Instead of inculcating virtue and agreeable qualities on inmates, the cruelties of prison life produce just the reverse effect. Wilde restates this view:

The vilest deeds like poison weeds,  
Bloom well in prison-air;  
It is only what is good in Man  
That wastes and withers there:  
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,  
And the Warder is Despair. [12, p. 853]



Prison is a place of shame where "men their brothers maim;" it is a trauma inducing institution wherein "some grow mad, and all grow bad" [12, p. 853].

Defined as "language which seems harsh, rough, and unmusical," cacophony is a kind of dissonance produced by "the aggregate effect of difficulty in pronunciation, sense, and sound" [14, p. 57]. Cacophony seems to be deliberate and functional in the following lines which describe punishments meted out to prisoners:

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 grey, [12, p. 853]

The disquieting language is supposed to have a disturbing influence on readers and agitate social action towards prison reform.

To call out readers' attention, the two subdivisions in section V exploring the inhumanity of the prison regulations are marked off by asterisks, which also show the transition to another facet of the prison experience. Having described the physical hardships and sickening prison fare, Wilde moves to dwell on the mental and emotional damage inflicted on the prisoners. Typical of prison life is the sensation of heaviness of heart: "every stone one lifts by day / Becomes one's heart by night." Prisoners are afflicted with despondency: "With midnight always in one's heart," intensified by the dim illumination: "And twilight in one's cell," and the solitary confinement: "And never a human voice comes near / To speak a gentle word." Thus the prisoners are not redeemed; they are ground down by prison life. Their souls are systematically mortified, their bodies continually debilitated: "And by all forgot, we rot and rot, / With soul and body marred" [12, p. 854]. Readers of *The Ballad* are persistently oriented towards the conviction that the aims of the penal system are entirely reversed.

The prison institution degrades and dehumanizes the inmates; Wilde re-humanizes them by showing their capacity for sympathy and remorse. He aligns himself with the group of prisoners and traces their feelings during the night preceding the execution of their fellow inmate. Unlike the pitiless and unsympathetic jailers, the prisoners enter into a state of empathic identification with the condemned inmate which shows their sad concern for his misfortune and their understanding of the fact that wrong-doing may be the outcome of misguided or erroneous decisions rather than of inherent wickedness. What is worth noting here is that Wooldridge murdered his wife in a rage at her unfaithfulness. His crime was, as [13] notes, a "crime of passion." Wilde's choice for the story of Wooldridge's crime and execution as the narrative base of his poem was not determined by proximity only; it was "a smart choice" on Wilde's part because Wooldridge had become a figure of public sympathy and agitation. Petitions were made for his clemency, but the authorities refused to alleviate the punishment [13, p. 25].

Knowing that "ere one dawn grew fair / Some prisoner had to swing" [12, p. 845], the prisoners spend a sleepless night grieving the fate of their fellow inmate and experiencing the

sorrow, terror, and sense of guilt he is expected to live through. The emotional intensity of the experience of complete identification with a fellow victim is thus rendered:

Alas! It is a fearful thing  
To feel another's guilt!  
For, right, within, the Sword of Sin  
Pierced to its poisoned hilt,  
And as molten lead were the tears we shed  
For the blood we had not spilt. [12, p.846]

Wilde is not vindicating the prisoners; he is rather trying to reclaim the humanity of which they have been robbed by oppressive social institutions. More important, he is demanding readers' sympathy for the prisoners and encouraging them to revise their assumptions regarding the penal system which fails to reintegrate those individuals. As a writer of a post-traumatic text, he is fulfilling the survivor mission he repeatedly announced: "The prison style is absolutely and entirely wrong. I would give anything to be able to alter it when I go out. I intend to try" [2, p. 98].

Trauma theorists contend that trauma literature forces readers to face difficult human issues like personal agency, bearing witness to horrific events, and taking sides between victims and perpetrators [8, p. 18-19]. Observers of trauma are caught in the conflict between victim and victimizer; trauma writers help them resolve this conflict. From the moral point of view, it is impossible to maintain a neutral stance in relation to such conflict. Writers of trauma are burdened with a sense of responsibility. As [10, p. 4] points out, it is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator who asks the bystander to do nothing, appealing to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil, while the victim demands action, and engagement. This confrontational aspect of post-traumatic writing is reflected in *The Ballad*: Wilde illuminates readers to help them see the penal system in a new light; he urges them to take the side of the prisoners who suffer the humiliation and brutality of the prison regime.

Utilizing synecdoche, which is a class of metonymy that uses a part of something to signify the whole, Wilde repeatedly refers to prisoners as "souls in pain." Recalling the exercise hour, the poem's speaker says: "I walked, with other souls in pain, / Within another ring." Again the prisoners are spoken of as "souls in pain" when the speaker shows how they were numb with shock when they knew that their fellow inmate would be hanged; they even forgot if they "had done / A great or little thing" [12, p. 843]. Characterizing the prisoners as "souls" foregrounds the spiritual part of their personalities that is capable of redemption from the power of sin through divine grace. Unlike the unyielding human law, divine forgiveness will not disfavor sinners, and repentant souls are accepted by God: "And a broken and a contrite heart / The Lord will not despise" [12, p. 854].

The prisoners' sympathy for the condemned inmate is contrasted with the hard-heartedness of the jailers who continue to inflict degrading punishments on the inmate, whom they "hanged as a beast is hanged," even after his death. Mistreatment of the dead body is thus described:

The warders stripped him of his clothes,

And gave him to the flies:  
 They mocked the swollen purple throat,  
 And the stark and staring eyes:  
 And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud  
 In which the convict lies. [12, p. 852]

Even the prison chaplain overlooked the teachings of Christ, who sacrificed His life for the salvation of all mankind, as he did not "kneel to pray" by the inmate's "dishonoured grave" and refused to "mark it with that blessed Cross / That Christ for sinners gave" [12, p. 852]. By visualizing these scenes and contrasts, the poem agitates powerfully for taking the side of the prisoners who show remorse for their crimes and compassion towards a fellow human in distress, unlike the unsympathetic, hard-hearted, and self-righteous gaolers.

Wilde relies on a number of literary devices that help create an emotional effect on the readers. Central to these devices is the use of repetition on the level of lines as well as larger textual units. Post-traumatic texts demand remembering on the readers' part; repetition is a vital mnemonic aid which assists readers to remember the trauma writer's witnessings and reinforces the new sympathies those readers are prompted to form. Moreover, as a post-traumatic text, *The Ballad* reflects the repetitive structure of traumatic situations in which the primal violent event repeatedly intrudes upon the individual's consciousness.

The poem's first section is replete with examples of anaphora, defined in [15, p. A57] as "the repetition of words or groups of words at the beginning of consecutive sentences, clauses, or phrases." Seven consecutive stanzas (10 – 16) in the first section have this same beginning: "He does not," which emphasizes the poet's assumption that each man is prone to sinfulness, yet most sinners are spared the cruelties inflicted on the inmate sentenced to death by hanging. Having argued that "each man kills the thing he loves, / Yet each man does not die," the speaker reiterates the same motif to heighten its emotional impact on the readers: "He does not die a death of shame / On a day of dark disgrace;" "He does not sit with silent men / Who watch him night and day;" "He does not wake at dawn to see / Dread figures throng his room," to give but a few examples [12, p. 841].

The literary device known as chiasmus or chiasm, which presents a sequence of words and then repeats it in reverse order, is also employed to reinforce the poem's message. The term is derived from the Greek letter 'chi' which looks like the English letter 'x'. In its general sense, "chiasmus involves inverted parallelism between two or more (synonymously or antithetically) corresponding words, phrases, or units of thought," but in a more technical sense, "chiasmus always involves a balanced multi-unit inverted parallelism which leads to and then moves away from a distinct central component" [16, p. 2]. Chiasmus can be represented by the structure A B B' A'. The two corresponding components of a chiasmus may revolve around a central affirmation or focal point that is represented by an 'x', forming the structure A B X B' A'. These subunits are "thematic twins which specify, intensify, or complete one another" [16, p. 11].

*The Ballad* exhibits examples of simple chiasmus on the

level of a sentence, and lengthy chiasmus that spans the entire poem. For instance, the poem's speaker describes the way he shares the "woe" and "wild regrets" of the executed inmate saying: "For he who lives more lives than one / More deaths than one must die" [12, p. 849]. This chiasmus pinpoints the speaker's sympathetic identification with his fellow inmate and emphasizes the sense of closure, as the execution has already been carried out. Concentrating attention on a central point, drawing meaningful contrasts, aiding in memorization, or emphasizing the feeling of closure upon the conclusion of a lengthy repetition are the functions that a chiasm usually fulfills [17, p. 5]. The concluding stanza of Section IV provides another example in the lines describing how the prisoners will lament the inmate's death: "For his mourners will be outcast men, / And outcasts always mourn" [12, p. 852]. The outcast state of the prisoners is emphasized. Written in this memorable and attention-catching form, the chiasmic lines urge readers to reconsider the penal system which casts out wrong-doers instead of reforming them. If the correlation between the corresponding words is diagrammed (by drawing a line that connects "mourners" with "mourn" and a line relating "outcast" with "outcasts"), it forms the shape of an 'x'—the mark used to signify something as wrong. This is another subtle way of saying that the prisoners' status of rejection and abandonment is incorrect and needs to be changed.

Chiasmus is also employed as a structuring device in the entire poem. According to [16, p. 1], as a structural device chiasmus is "commonly found in ancient literature and oratory, both secular and sacred." Wilde appears to have employed the chiasmic pattern to invest the poem with the kind of formality and weightiness associated with ancient texts as well as to display artistic virtuosity after the traumatic experience of imprisonment which negatively impacted his fame as a writer. As [17, p. 7] states, chiasmic structures revolve around major incidents, unique phrases, or focal words as distinguished from insignificant parts of speech. In addition to highlighting the central ideas and the important contrasts in the poem, chiasmus is an apt device for conveying the sense of reversal at the heart of the poem's message. As noted in [17, p. 5], "no better literary device can be imagined to convey the sense of conversion ...than does chiasmus."

A chiasmic text begins and ends similarly; the beginning and end "combine to create a strong sense of return and completion" [17, p. 9]. The opening six stanzas of *The Ballad* form an introductory section that is separated from the following stanzas in Section I by an asterisk. Thus the seventh stanza, in which the poet declares the hypothesis that "each man" is likely to do something wrong, marks the actual beginning of the poem. This stanza is reduplicated almost word for word at the poem's very end. The only change is that the poet's statement is applied to "all men" in place of "each man":

And all men kill the thing they love,  
 By all let this be heard,  
 Some do it with a better look,  
 Some with a flattering word,

The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword! [12, p. 855]

This return at the end to the poem's point of departure reasserts a vital message in the poem and enhances the sense of closure—no further justification could be given to account for the brutality and inhumanity of the prison system.

The units of a chiasmic pattern revolve around a climactic pivotal point, or "centerpiece" as [17, p. 8] calls it, which marks a turning point or change in the trend of thought. The inmate's execution is the central action and climactic point in *The Ballad*; it is centrally placed in the poem. Near the end of Section III, the speaker describes the prisoners as they are "wait[ing] for the sign to come," in the early morning of the day of execution. They "felt the minutes crawl," and sat "dumb", but "each man's heart beat thick and quick, / Like a madman on a drum." "With sudden shock the prison clock" declared that the "monstrous parricide" took place [12, p. 848-849]. As the penultimate stanza of Section III demonstrates, the prisoners did not actually watch the execution; they saw it with their minds' eyes:

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. [12, p. 849]

Wilde's detailed description of the way he behaved and felt, along with the other prisoners, during the short time before and after the hanging took place testifies to the fact that this violent event was a traumatic experience par excellence. The horrific moments are acted out and re-lived and the agonizing sensations are re-experienced. It had the strongest negative impact on his sensibilities. Reference [13, p. 25] cites the following remark by one of the Reading guards who witnessed Wilde's actual reaction to the event: "Wilde, of course, never saw the murderer after his condemnation, but he heard the bell tolling for the execution, and it made a terrible impression on his mind. ...Wilde told me that those moments when the bell rang out, and his imagination conjured up the execution scene, were the most awful of a time rich in horrors."

A new course of argument is introduced in the following sections, with one exception: the inhumanity of the prison regime persists after the inmate's capital punishment in the ignoble treatment of the corpse. But his story is brought to a closure; his soul is now liberated: "He is at peace – this wretched man - / At peace, or will be soon" [12, p. 852]. The execution marks a shift of focus from the condemned prisoner to the whole group of prisoners, and then from the convicts to the denunciation of the cruel system that irrevocably convicted them and the refutation of its ability to turn offenders into good citizens.

In a chiasmic structure the units on both sides of the focal turning point are parallel in their thematic concerns. For example, before the execution the speaker comments on human laws saying: "For Man's grim Justice goes its way, / And will not swerve aside: / It slays the weak, it slays the strong, / It has a deadly stride." After the execution, the poem

goes back to the question of law and justice to present the counter statement: "But God's eternal Laws are kind / And break the heart of stone" [12, p. 848, p. 854]. The "shame" motif the poem presented repeatedly as a feeling shared by prisoners is attributed, in the second half of the poem after the execution, to the system that oppresses and victimizes them. In Section V, the poem's speaker argues that "every prison that men build / Is built with bricks of shame;" and in Section VI he describes the "grave [which] has got no name" wherein the executed inmate is buried as "a pit of shame" (i.e. the inmate's capital punishment and the cruelty of the manner of the execution shame the penal system). With the help of such rhetorical devices as chiasm, Wilde completes the process of knowing; the crisis is transformed into revelation.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Inspired by an extreme experience that qualifies as trauma and that exposes the violence perpetrated by some social institutions against individuals who went astray as well as the failure of such institutions to achieve their intended objectives, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* demonstrates the healing and ethical properties typical of trauma literature. The distressing emotions and painful memories concomitant with trauma are given expression in an enduring work of art, achieving an important step in the process of healing and redeeming some of the self-confidence and literary acclaim shattered by the prison trauma the poet went through. As a post-traumatic text, also registers the poet's attempt at transcending his trauma and exploring its ethical implications, producing in the audience the consciousness and agitation necessary to change the situations that are likely to be sources of trauma.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Peter Stoneley. "'Looking at the others': Oscar Wilde and the Reading Gaol Archive." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19:4 (2014), pp. 457 – 480.
- [2] Oscar Wilde. *De Profundis*. New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1905.  
<http://www.archive.org/details/deprofundisowild00wildiala#pages/n15/mode/2up>.
- [3] Roger Luckhurst. Introduction. In *The Trauma Question*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008, pp.1- 15.
- [4] Sandra L. Bloom. "Trauma Theory Abbreviated." Community Works, 1999. [www.sanctuaryweb.com](http://www.sanctuaryweb.com).
- [5] Gregory Castle. Trauma Studies. In *The Literary Theory Handbook*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013, pp. 209 – 217.
- [6] Olu Jenzen. "Haunting Poetry: Trauma, Otherness and Textuality in Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*." *Otherness: Essays and Studies*. 1. 1 (October 2010), pp.1- 22.
- [7] Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- [8] Laurie Vickroy. "Representing Trauma." In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia press, 2002, pp. 1 – 35.
- [9] Michelle Balaev. "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered." In *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*. Ed. M. Balaev. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 1- 14.
- [10] Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- [11] Dominick LaCapra. "An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra." Cornell University, June 9, 1998, Jerusalem. Interviewer: Amos Goldberg. Shoah Resource Center, The International School for Holocaust Studies. [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org). 1- 33.
- [12] Oscar Wilde. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." In *The Complete Illustrated Works of Oscar Wilde*. London: Bounty Books, 2004, pp. 840 – 855.
- [13] Kristian Williams. "A Criminal with a Noble Face": Oscar Wilde's

- Encounters with the Victorian Gael. Perspectives (2009).  
<http://anarchiststudies.mayfirst.org/node/335>.
- [14] M. H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981.
- [15] Stephen Greenblatt. Ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Vol. 1. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.
- [16] Brad McCoy. "Chiasmus: An Important Structural Device Commonly Found in Biblical Literature." *CTS* (Chafer Theological Seminary) journal 9, (2003). [www.chafer.edu/journal/back\\_issues/Vol%209-2%20ar2.pdf](http://www.chafer.edu/journal/back_issues/Vol%209-2%20ar2.pdf).
- [17] John W. Welch. "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 4:No. 2, Article 1 (1995). <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol4/iss2/1>.