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The Art of Imprisonment: A Study of Oscar Wilde's Carceral Works and the Theme of Confinement in *De Profundis* (1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898)

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of imprisonment in Oscar Wilde's carceral works, focusing on *De Profundis* (1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). Written during and after his incarceration, these works reveal Wilde's profound reflections on suffering, confinement, and human nature. In *De Profundis*, Wilde grapples with personal loss, redemption, and the transformative power of suffering, presenting imprisonment as both a physical and spiritual ordeal. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* shifts focus to the collective experience of prisoners, highlighting the dehumanizing effects of the penal system and critiquing societal injustices. This research examines how Wilde's incarceration shaped his writing, highlighting the complex interplay between art, morality, and confinement. By exploring themes of isolation, justice, and redemption, this study offers deeper insight into Wilde's carceral literature and its lasting significance in discussions of the human condition and penal reform.

Keywords: Imprisonment, Confinement, Transformation, Spiritual Redemption, Moral Reflection

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was one of the most influential literary figures of the late 19th century. His success as a playwright and novelist secured him widespread recognition in both Britain and America. He is best known for his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), as well as his celebrated comedies, including *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). At the height of his career, while *The Importance of Being Earnest* was still being performed in London, Wilde became embroiled in a scandal. The Marquess of Queensberry, father of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, publicly accused him of sodomy, leading to a highly publicized trial. Following a conviction for 'gross indecency' (Smith, 1976), Wilde was sentenced on May 25, 1895, to two years of hard labor—the maximum penalty under British law. His imprisonment effectively ended his literary career, cutting short his fame and financial stability.

Being held in detention in Newgate Prison for processing first, then moved to Pentonville Prison followed by Wandsworth Prison, and then finally transferred to Reading Gaol on 23 November 1895, Oscar Wilde underwent two years of hard labour for committing the act of 'Gross indecency with other men', according to Criminal Law Amendment Act, Section 11, (1885). It was at this time in prison between 1895 and 1897, that he began to write the posthumously-published work *De Profundis* (1905) - a somewhat 'love letter' addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas. Upon his release on 19th May 1897, he fled to France,

leaving behind England and that society which had been so cruel and hostile towards him and never returned to Ireland or Britain. There he wrote his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), a long poem reflecting the harsh rhythms of prison life. Prison, it might be fair to say, demanded this sort of writing from Wilde to make him feel compelled to change out the voice of a snobbish aesthete for that of a survivor, that of a sufferer, that of a jilted lover and that of a prophet. According to Wilde, his imprisonment transformed not only his personal outlook but also his artistic and philosophical perspective. In De Profundis, he reflects on this shift in a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, stating, "You came to me to learn the Pleasure of Life and the Pleasure of Art" (Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 114). He then adds, "Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty" (Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 114), emphasizing the profound impact of suffering on his understanding of life and art.

Oscar Wilde's literary output is often seen as undergoing a profound transformation following his imprisonment in Reading Gaol from 1895 to 1897. While critics such as Richard Ellmann (1988) and Isobel Murray (2008) emphasize the radical shift in Wilde's tone and themes, others, including Regenia Gagnier, argue that his carceral writings retain many of the aesthetic and ideological concerns present in his earlier works (Gagnier, 1986). In other words, His works prior to incarceration, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, celebrated wit, beauty, and decadence. However, Wilde's imprisonment forced him to confront the harsh realities of human suffering, isolation, and moral reflection, themes that dominate his later writings. Two of Wilde's most significant post-imprisonment works, *De Profundis* (1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), stand as literary testaments to his experience of confinement and provide powerful critiques of the penal system and society's moral hypocrisies.

In *De Profundis* (1905), Wilde reflects on his personal suffering, offering a deeply introspective meditation on love, loss, and redemption. It is a spiritual letter that reveals Wilde's evolving understanding of his own identity and the impact of imprisonment on his soul. In contrast, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) presents a broader societal critique, focusing on the shared suffering of prisoners and condemning the dehumanizing nature of the carceral system. Together, these works form the foundation of Wilde's carceral literature, providing insight into his shift from aestheticism to a more philosophical and humanistic approach to art and life.

This study explores how Wilde's experiences of confinement informed these works and the ways in which he uses the theme of imprisonment to examine broader questions of morality, justice, and redemption. Through an analysis of *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, this paper aims to uncover Wilde's critique of societal values and his redefinition of suffering as a form of artistic and spiritual liberation. Wilde's incarceration acts as the backdrop for a deep interrogation of Victorian moral hypocrisy, systemic injustice, and the punitive nature of society. At the same time, his carceral works divulge a marked shift in his artistic philosophy, where suffering ceases to be merely punitive and is instead remodeled as a passage to deeper self-awareness/self-discover and creative expression.

In *De Profundis* (1905), Wilde critiques the norms of a society that strongly condemns individuality and punishes nonconformity, particularly pertinent to his own experience of persecution for his homosexuality. The letter transcends personal grievance to underscore the wider moral failures of a society obsessed with superficial virtue. In this fashion, Declan Kiberd describes *De Profundis* as Wilde's "counterattack against Victorian hypocrisy," wherein he shows the cruelty of a moral system that values punishment over redemption. Wilde reclaims his suffering, transforming it into a spiritual journey (identity transformation) where humility and introspection become forms of resistance against societal dehumanization and inhumane conditions (Kiberd, 1996).

In a similar vein, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) remodels suffering as a universal condition that equalizes all people, irrespective of their walks of life. Wilde exploits the harsh realities of prison life to critique a penal system devoid of compassion and humanity. The repeated refrain— "Yet each man kills the thing he loves"—serves as both an indictment of societal atrocities and a mirror on the shared human capacity for error and remorse. In this light, William E. Buckler holds the opinion that Wilde's poetic approach to suffering allows him to "redeem the unredeemable," turning the dehumanization of prison into an exploration for artistic transcendence and universal connection (Buckler, 1990). By examining his carceral writings, we see how he not only condemns a system that prioritizes punishment over rehabilitation but also redefines suffering as a means of artistic and spiritual growth. This transformation underscores the resilience of the creative spirit and reinforces the idea that art can serve as both a form of resistance and a pathway to personal and philosophical liberation. Through suffering, Wilde discovers a deep-seated voice that both deals with societal oppression and re-elaborates the role of the artist as one who transcends pain to create enduring meaning.

2. Literature Review

Oscar Wilde's post-imprisonment works, *De Profundis* (1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), have drawn significant scholarly attention for their raw portrayal of suffering, confinement, and redemption. These texts mark a pivotal shift in Wilde's literary evolution, where aestheticism gives way to a profound exploration of the human condition, shaped by his incarceration. Scholarship on Wilde's carceral writings frequently examines themes of suffering, redemption, and the dehumanizing effects of the Victorian penal system. This review highlights key scholarly perspectives on Wilde's portrayal of both physical and psychological confinement, as well as the literary significance of his prison writings.

One of the earliest critical analyses of Wilde's prison works comes from Richard Ellmann[1] in his seminal biography *Oscar Wilde* (1988). Ellmann explores how Wilde's imprisonment altered both his public persona and literary voice, emphasizing the

interplay between personal suffering and artistic creation. He interprets *De Profundis* as a deeply personal reckoning in which Wilde reflects on his fall from grace and his tumultuous relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. According to Ellmann, the text serves as an intimate spiritual confession, marking Wilde's transition from aesthetic flamboyance to introspective humility (Ellmann, 1988).

Expanding on these insights, Isobel Murray in *Oscar Wilde's De Profundis: A Study* (2008) examines the theological and philosophical dimensions of Wilde's reflections, suggesting that his engagement with suffering and redemption parallels Christian narratives of spiritual awakening. She presents Wilde as a martyr-like figure who discovers beauty and meaning even within the confines of prison. However, while Wilde engages with Christian themes, his reflections are far from orthodox. Rather than fully embracing Christian morality, he reframes suffering as an artistic experience—one that grants him a renewed perspective on life, love, and human frailty (Murray, 2008). In a similar vein, Declan Kiberd builds on this interpretation, viewing *De Profundis* as Wilde's counter-narrative to Victorian conventional morality. Kiberd argues that Wilde reclaims his suffering as a means of self-redefinition, rejecting societal condemnation while embracing a deeper understanding of humility and grace. He suggests that Wilde's reflections reveal the transformative potential of confinement, where physical captivity becomes a catalyst for spiritual liberation (Kiberd, 1996).

Recent scholarship has also approached Wilde's prison writings through the lens of trauma studies. In *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend* (2011), Joseph Bristow examines how Wilde's incarceration created a traumatic rupture in his life, reflected in the fragmented and sorrowful tone of *De Profundis*. Bristow argues that Wilde's post-prison writings reveal a deeply wounded psyche, grappling with the loss of freedom, public respect, and self-worth. He links this alienation to Wilde's deeper engagement with themes of guilt, shame, and redemption. However, Wilde's trauma does not solely manifest as grief; rather, it sharpens his critique of Victorian morality, exposing how the legal and penal systems functioned as instruments of social oppression.

Together, these scholarly perspectives illuminate the complexity of Wilde's prison writings, illustrating how *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* serve as powerful critiques of both personal and societal failures. They trace Wilde's transformation from a proponent of aestheticism to a moralist grappling with profound questions of justice, suffering, and human dignity. This review informs the present study's exploration of how imprisonment shaped Wilde's later works, underscoring the need for a deeper analysis of his carceral themes within the broader socio-political and literary contexts of late Victorian Britain.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research paper employs a qualitative literary analysis to examine Oscar Wilde's carceral works, *De Profundis* (1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). The study applies close reading techniques to analyze how Wilde utilizes language, symbolism, and narrative structure to explore the theme of confinement. This framework situates Wilde's prison writings within the broader discourse of carceral theory, aesthetic philosophy, and religious discourse, demonstrating how incarceration functions as both a site of punishment and creative transformation. My scholarly approach highlights Wilde's unique negotiation between art, punishment, and identity, positioning his carceral works as both deeply personal and universally resonant critiques of oppressive social structures.

At the heart of this analysis is the physical and psychological dimensions of imprisonment, particularly how Wilde expresses isolation, suffering, and the search for redemption. Wilde's incarceration was not merely a personal downfall but a critical moment in his artistic evolution, leading him to reconceptualize his relationship with art, morality, and society. Through a thematic analysis, I will identify key motifs such as punishment, guilt, societal critique, and spiritual rebirth. Additionally, this study will incorporate historical contextualization, drawing on biographical sources and the socio-political environment of late Victorian England, particularly the criminalization of homosexuality under the 1885 Labouchere Amendment.

Therefore, by integrating carceral theory, aesthetic philosophy, and religious discourse, this research paper offers a comprehensive approach to understanding Wilde's prison writings. More importantly, it underscores my argument that Wilde's experience of confinement did not silence him but instead reshaped his literary legacy. Through *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde transforms imprisonment into a site of profound artistic and philosophical inquiry, challenging conventional narratives of punishment, identity, and redemption. These works, far from being mere reflections of despair, emerge as radical interventions in the broader discussions of justice, suffering, and the resilience of the artistic spirit.

4. Discussion

4.1. Physical/Psychological and Emotional Confinement

When Oscar Wilde began documenting his harsh and sobering experiences in prison between 1895 and 1897, he produced a deeply personal account that was later published posthumously as *De Profundis* (1905). Written during his imprisonment at Reading Gaol, the work reflects how Wilde was profoundly transformed by the intense humiliation and physical suffering he endured as punishment for "Gross Indecency." This charge, stemming from his homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, led to his conviction under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885—commonly known as the Labouchere Amendment[2]—and resulted in the maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment with hard labor (Smith, 1976).

In other words, Wilde's direct experience of incarceration is deeply embedded in both texts. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898)*, the imagery of confinement is tangible: “I never saw a man who looked / With such a wistful eye / Upon that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky" (Wilde, 1999, p. 117). Here, Wilde evokes the claustrophobic atmosphere of the prison and the stark contrast between the yearning for freedom and the oppressive limitations of prison life. This confinement, however, extends beyond physical incarceration into realms of psychological and moral constraint.

About five months after Wilde arrived at Reading Gaol, Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, was brought to Reading to await his trial for murdering his wife on 29 March 1896; on 17 June Wooldridge was sentenced to death and returned to Reading for his execution, which took place on Tuesday, 7 July 1896 – the first hanging at Reading in 18 years. From Wooldridge's hanging, Wilde later wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), published as C.3.3 (Wilde's number in Reading Gaol, his cell being the third on the third floor of Block C), according to British Library (1973). Wilde’s immortal poetic rendering of the “Hell” of prison, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1898), is written to Wooldridge’s memory, and about his hanging. Its dedication frontispiece reads, as Executed Today (2018) notes:

In memoriam
C.T.W.
Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards.
Obiit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire,
July 7th, 1896

In fact, the poem received acclaim for its social realism, crafted in the style of a folk ballad. However, the speaker is not a typical street balladeer but rather a fellow prisoner of the condemned man. In its concluding stanzas, including the well-known line "And all men kill the thing they love," (Wilde, 1999, p. 118) the ballad transcends mere social protest, highlighting a universal human contradiction. The final lines, which anticipate Christ's Second Coming, suggest a perspective that goes beyond social reform, pointing to judgment in another world.

Wilde’s incarceration profoundly altered his perspective, shifting his focus from wit and aestheticism to social critique. No longer merely a playwright who entertains or an essayist who provokes discussion, he emerged from prison as an agitator, determined to expose the appalling conditions of the convict system. As Richard Ellmann observes, “He knew that it must fall between poetry and propaganda and that the strength of the poem lay in its ballad narrative” (Ellmann, 1988). His biographer and friend Robert Sherard similarly notes, “I think that one of the few serious purposes he had in life when he left prison was to try to do something to reform the English prison system” (Sherard, 2019, p. 395). This transformation is evident in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), where Wilde channels his experiences into verse that is both poignant and politically charged. The poem opens with the stark reality of a murder: “He did not wear his scarlet coat/For blood and wine are red/And blood and wine were on his hands/When they found him with the dead/The poor dead woman whom he loved/And murdered in her bed” (Wilde, 1999, p. 117). In fact, Wilde’s literary style evolves from dazzling epigrams and drawing-room satire to the raw, haunting simplicity of a ballad. The shift underscores his new role—not just as a writer but as a reformer, using poetry to demand change.

The poem was inspired by inmate Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who was executed for the murder of his wife. While it addresses broader issues related to the death penalty and the penal system, its themes are deeply intertwined with Wilde’s own personal experiences of imprisonment and suffering. One of the lines that is particularly interesting is where he writes, “For each man kills the thing he loves” (Wilde, 1999, p. 118), Which is undoubtedly powerful when it stands alone in the poem but when we consider the underlying meaning, it expresses even more emotion than it does upon a first glance. But assuredly, it is clear within the poem that Wilde was affected greatly by the execution of Charles as he questions human morality and the sympathy of mankind throughout. As it says: “They hanged him as a beast is hanged/They did not even toll/A requiem that might have brought/Rest to his startled soul/But hurriedly they took him out/And hid him in a hole.” (Wilde, 1999, p. 134)

Wilde also seems to highlight the hypocrisy of the penal system, as the poem suggests the dehumanizing effect of reducing a person to merely a prisoner. He emphasizes how prison destroys individuals rather than reforming them, as intended. Whether guilty or wrongly accused, the brutal, inhumane conditions and routines of prison life break a person down rather than guiding them toward a reformed, forgiving existence. Additionally, Wilde’s structuring of the poem evokes the emotional torment of prison life for the reader. In the first section, he reflects on the condemned man's overwhelming sense of guilt. He then shifts to observing the prisoner (Charles) savoring his final moments with nature, such as the sunlight and morning air, before describing the pre-execution rituals and the events leading up to the execution itself. “He is at peace—this wretched man—/At peace, or will be soon:/There is no thing to make him mad/Nor does Terror walk at noon/For the lampless Earth in which he lies/Has neither Sun nor Moon.” (Wilde, 1999, p. 134) Moreover, the poem is Wilde’s way of expressing the corruption of the prison system and society. As William E. Buckler in his article, “*Oscar Wilde's "chant de cygne": "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" in Contextual Perspective*” (1990) states:

> *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is a poetic lament over what “man has made of man,” and its subject is the cruelty that is unintentionally released when society substitutes for individuals with professional expertise, humane feelings, and common sense a stereotyped system of hard-and-fast rule. (Buckler, 1990, p. 33)

In a sense, Wilde conveys the idea that it is not the prisoners who should feel shame for being in jail, but rather the society that placed them there. He implies that prisoners are simply the result of societal flaws, and that anyone could potentially face the same fate within prison walls. Wilde also suggests that the public is largely unaware of the realities of prison life and calls for improvements in the conditions of prisoners in one way or another: “With bars they blur the gracious moon/And blind the

goodly sun:/And they do well to hide their Hell/For in it things are done/That Son of God nor son of Man/Ever should look upon! (Wilde, 1999, p. 135).

Nonetheless, this raises the question of why *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) was written in the first place. Peter Stoneley, in "*Looking at the Others: Oscar Wilde and the Reading Gaol Archive*" (2014), argues that The Ballad is "the most important example of Wilde responding to his own instruction to look at 'the others'" (Stoneley, 2014, p. 477). Rather than focusing on himself, Wilde shifts his attention to the other inmates, bringing their stories to the forefront for the Victorian public. Stoneley notes that Wilde showed a "friendly and sympathetic awareness of other prisoners" and acknowledged his debt to them. William E. Buckler contends that The Ballad is Wilde's "conversion of that experience into language" (Buckler, 1990). Since Wilde wrote this after leaving prison, it is understandable that he would reflect more on his observations than on his personal feelings. An example of this observational focus can be seen in the 13th stanza of The Ballad, where Wilde may be projecting his own emotions onto those he observes. "He does not rise in piteous haste/To put on convict-clothes,/While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes/Each new and nerve-twitched pose,/Fingering a watch whose little ticks/Are like horrible hammer-blows." (Wilde, 1999, p. 119) While this passage offers a visceral depiction of a prisoner's suffering, it is important to consider whether Wilde's framing distorts reality for artistic effect. His emphasis on psychological torment aligns with his broader literary style, blending realism with dramatic intensity. Given the purpose of The Ballad—to expose the brutalities of the prison system—such alterations may be justified as part of a larger poetic and rhetorical strategy. Rather than a strictly factual account, Wilde crafts a work that is as much about emotional truth as it is about social critique.

One critique of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is that the poem does not present a strictly factual account of events but rather a modified version of the truth. Peter Stoneley argues that Wilde 'changed the soldier's story to fit the aesthetic and emotional requirements of his poem,' shaping the narrative to align with his artistic vision rather than historical accuracy." (Stoneley, 2014, p. 474), suggesting that Wilde may have exaggerated certain events to make the poem more dramatic and portray prison life as more extreme than it actually was. However, it is generally believed that Wilde intended *The Ballad* to serve as his testimony of "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth":

> Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to sorrow. There are times when sorrow seems to me to be the only truth. (Wilde, 1999, p. 65)

In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), Oscar Wilde employs a distinct form of language to critique the Victorian penal system. He highlights the brutal conditions endured by himself and other inmates in English prisons, as well as the monotonous hard labor imposed on them by what he describes as a "foolish and inhuman code" of punishment, enforced under the 1885 Amendment Act. The harsh realities of this system are vividly captured in The Ballad. "We tore the tarry rope to shreds/With blunt and bleeding nails;/We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors, /And cleaned the shining rails:/And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank, /And clattered with the pails. /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:/But in the heart of every man/Terror was lying still." (Wilde, 1999, p. 124) With this end in view, this significantly broadens my understanding that Wilde endured not only strenuous and grueling labor but also truly appalling conditions during his imprisonment. These experiences likely had a profound impact on his worldview and deeply influenced his writing.

On the other hand, Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* (1905); is a long, shocking letter written to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, whose relationship became dysfunctional after being tried and imprisonment from 1895–97. '*De Profundis'* is Latin for 'from the depths', decided by Robert Ross,[3] coming from the first line of Psalm 130 of the penitential Psalms: 'Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord'. The writer E. V. Lucas (1868–1938) claimed to have suggested the title; Wilde had suggested '*Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis'*, meaning 'Letter: In Prison and in Chains'.

In *De Profundis*, to put it into perspective, Wilde reflects on the emotional and spiritual suffering he endured during his imprisonment. The letter, addressed to his former lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, reveals the emotional turmoil that compounded Wilde's physical imprisonment. Wilde writes: "Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle its return" (Wilde, 1999, p. 3). This idea of time stretching endlessly is a key aspect of the psychological confinement Wilde experienced. It shows the internal imprisonment of Wilde's mind, which struggled to process his guilt, shame, and societal rejection.

During Wilde's time at Reading Gaol, there was a transition in prison leadership from Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Isaacson (1842–1915) to Major James Nelson (1859–1914). Under Nelson's administration, Wilde was granted greater access to books and writing materials, leading Wilde to refer to Nelson as "the most Christlike man I ever met" (Brandreth, 2013). This newfound opportunity enabled Wilde to produce a prison genre work in the form of a lengthy confessional letter, *De Profundis*, written between December and March 1897. The letter was composed on regulation blue-stamped prison foolscap paper (Figure 1), which was given to Wilde one page at a time.

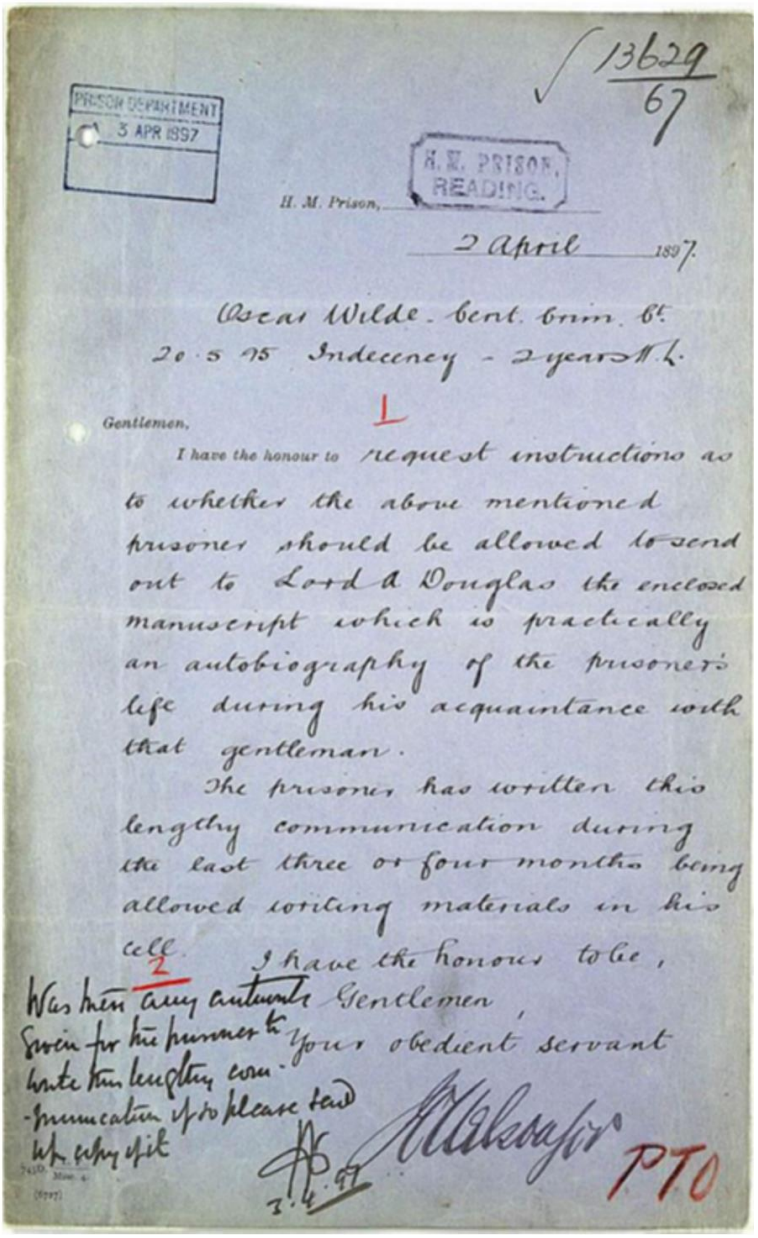

Figure 1. Covering Letter by Major Nelson, Showing the Type of Blue Foolscap Paper Used by Wilde for the Epistola Manuscript. (© National Archives)

However, prison authorities prohibited him from sending the completed letter directly to his former lover, Lord Alfred Douglas:

> 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. (Wilde, 1999, p. 12)

The book *De Profundis* (1905) stands apart from any other works written by Oscar Wilde and bears little resemblance to the pieces that brought him fame. Unlike his previous publications, this text was not created for commercial sale nor is it a reflection of Wilde's aesthetic theories (Grewar, 2005). Instead, it tells the story of a man profoundly changed by his imprisonment, grappling with suffering, and ultimately learning the importance of pragmatic acceptance over conflict. In *De Profundis*, Wilde writes: "One of the many lessons that one learns in prison is that things are what they are and will be what they will be" (Wilde, 1999, p. 25).

Deprived of his social standing, family, material possessions, and eventually abandoned by Douglas, Wilde was forced to rebuild a new and resilient sense of identity (Howell, 2008). He expresses the anguish he felt upon discovering that the law had stripped him of his parental rights, severing his last tie to social connection: "We are doomed to be solitary, while our sons still live". In prison, he gained insight into the complexities of human nature. Wilde acknowledges this, stating: "…during the last few months I have, after terrible difficulties and struggles, been able to comprehend some of the lessons hidden in the heart of pain". As a prisoner, and more broadly as someone enduring suffering, Wilde was stripped of the pleasures that fulfill personal desires. He expressed his feelings about prison life, stating, "A Day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which

one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy". This offers a glimpse into Wilde's mental state during his time in gaol. Over time, he found strength in the universality of human existence, transforming the sorrowful "music of humanity." In a world devoid of hope and filled with despair, he began to understand suffering more deeply. "There is not a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relation to the very secret of life," Wilde observes, adding, "For the secret of life is suffering" (Wilde, 1999, p. 39)

Wilde does not acknowledge any guilt under the unjust laws that led to his imprisonment, stating, "I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws" (Wilde, 1999, p. 18). Instead of succumbing to his suffering, he uses the extreme experiences to rebuild his life and identity, referring to it as his 'Vita Nuova'. This transformation and self-realization began through the lessons of 'Humility' and 'Suffering'. The opening of the edited text, "…Suffering is one very long moment," establishes the somber tone of Wilde's emotions while in prison. He further conveys his prison experience by stating, "A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy" (Wilde, 1999, p. 106), offering deep insight into his mental state during incarceration. In essence, this confessional style of writing reflects Wilde's personal experience of imprisonment, showing how the pressures of the Victorian society and 19th-century judicial system weighed heavily on him (Jarrin, 2008). According to Wilde:

> Society takes upon itself the right to inflict appalling punishments on the individual, but it also has the supreme vice of shallowness, and fails to realize what it has done ... The two great turning−points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison. (Wilde, 1999, p. 26)

This prompts us to consider the true intention behind the text. Guy and Small ask, "What kind of 'life' of himself does Wilde present to us?" in *De Profundis* (1905), as it primarily explores Wilde's emotions as a "common prisoner in a common gaol" (Guy & Small, 2006). Wilde reflects on his social status, both before and after his imprisonment, and shares these dual experiences with the reader. This is evident in his observation: "Everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style; our very dress makes us grotesque." (Wilde, 1999, p. 105) Another question arises: why was this letter written, and to whom was it addressed? It seems likely that the letter was intended for public readership, written in a melancholic tone as a form of propaganda against the harsh conditions of 19th-century prisons, aiming to highlight the torment and hardship of the system and the need for reform. In *De Profundis* (1905), Wilde expresses his intent to push for prison reform, describing the penal system's shortcomings: "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" (Howell, 2008). The text, therefore, appears to have been written with the goal of reforming the penal system while Wilde was incarcerated. Throughout the work, Wilde discusses other prisoners in paradoxical terms, at times speaking positively and negatively about prison life, suggesting he grappled with both the harshness and potential humanity of the system, as reflected in the following quotes: "Oscar Wilde, I pity you because you must be suffering more than we. No, my friend, we are all suffering equally" (Gide, 2012). This conversation led to both Wilde and the prisoner being sent to the punishment cell for two weeks, surviving on bread and water, as neither would admit who initiated the conversation. But why did Oscar Wilde seem to suffer more than the other inmates?

In retrospect, Wilde, sentenced to two years of hard labor in 1895 for "gross indecency" (a euphemism for sodomy), faced particularly harsh conditions. At the time of his conviction, Wilde was at the height of his fame, celebrated for *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and his public speaking. According to The Old Bailey Online, most men convicted of the same offense were typically sentenced to six months to a year. Wilde, however, was sentenced to two years of hard labor on May 20, 1895—double or more the usual sentence. It is believed that the judge and jury exploited Wilde's fame, using him as an example to deter others guilty of the same crime, whether they had been caught or not. As Wilde reflects in *De Profundis* (1905), this public humiliation and harsh sentence seemed disproportionately aimed at him:

> Of course I know that from one point of view things will be made different for me than for others; must indeed, by the very nature of the case, be made so. The poor thieves and outcasts who are imprisoned here with me are in many respects more fortunate than I am. (Wilde, 1999, p. 16)

Why was Oscar Wilde subjected to such victimization? Being "different" often becomes a societal label, one that can profoundly affect how someone is treated, regardless of their accomplishments or actions. Society places pressure on those who are "different," often leaving them isolated with only the desire to fit in. Wilde did not need to use the word "homosexual" in *De Profundis* to convey the emotions and motivations behind his actions. The term "homosexual" itself carries a stereotype, serving as a label that would have further influenced the already prejudiced attitudes of Victorian society. Wilde subtly addresses society's negative perceptions with the line: "Well, now I am really beginning to feel more regret for the people who laughed than for myself. Of course, when they saw me I was not on my pedestal, I was in the pillory" (Wilde, 1999, p. 107). Focusing on the label of homosexuality would have shifted the tone of the letter, making it less spiritual and more about societal condemnation. It would have been harder for the average person to grasp the universal themes of love and suffering that Wilde presents, and how individuals who are marginalized—like Wilde—also experience deep emotional connections and are shaped by their suffering:

> …That little, lovely, silent act of love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity: made the desert blossom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world. (Wilde, 1999, p. 7)

The author's words lead the reader to question why any act rooted in love should be ridiculed. The focus is not on homosexuality itself, but rather on society's reaction to anything that doesn't conform, anything it fears, and anything it seeks to suppress. Soon after, Oscar Wilde became infamous as one of the most well-known homosexuals of the nineteenth century

under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. In Victorian society, people did not understand homosexuality and viewed it merely as a "gross indecency" between two individuals of the same sex. Wilde's works, though controversial in his time, gained significant popularity in the late 20th century as his legacy was reinterpreted. His trials played a key role in fostering society's understanding of homosexuality, leading to gradual acceptance during the 20th and 21st centuries. In the end, Wilde maintained hope of regaining his "creative faculty" to challenge the penal system of Victorian society, as he expressed in his writings:

> 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. I have got to make both of these things just and right to me. (Wilde, 1999, p. 19-20)

Nevertheless, Oscar Wilde's evolving legacy underscores not only the shifting societal perceptions of homosexuality but also the tension between art and morality in Victorian England. His trials marked a turning point in public discourse on same-sex relationships, highlighting the rigid moral codes that governed Victorian society. Wilde's writings—particularly *De Profundis*—reflect both his personal suffering and his broader critiques of Victorian morality, offering a profound meditation on justice, individualism, and artistic integrity.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde moves beyond the flamboyant wit of his earlier works to engage in a deeply personal and philosophical reflection. Writing from prison, he critiques the injustice of his sentence and the oppressive moralism of the legal system, while also contemplating themes of suffering, redemption, and personal transformation. His assertion that he must make both the unjust laws and the penal system "just and right" to him reveals his attempt to reconcile personal suffering with a broader vision of justice. This transition—from the carefree advocate of aestheticism to the introspective critic of Victorian hypocrisy—demonstrates Wilde's intellectual and emotional evolution.

4.2. Spiritual Redemption and Moral Reflection

Wilde's carceral works are also infused with themes of spiritual redemption and reflection. *De Profundis* (1905) is essentially a meditation on the nature of suffering and its potential to lead to personal growth and self-understanding. Wilde views his suffering as a necessary crucible for his moral and spiritual evolution, declaring that "where there is sorrow there is holy ground" (Wilde, 1999, p. 5). The theme of redemption is more implicit in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), particularly in the poet's empathy toward the condemned man, expressing a more humane vision of justice.

To explore how religion is portrayed in *De Profundis* (1905), an examination of Wilde's personal religious beliefs and his engagement with religion throughout his life will provide valuable context. Analyzing *De Profundis* in depth allows for a clearer understanding of religious themes and Biblical imagery, shedding light on how they are represented in the work Wilde wrote during his time in Reading Gaol. In addition to *De Profundis*, other sources will be consulted to determine whether Wilde critiques organized religion in the Victorian era, enriching the analysis with broader perspectives.

Oscar Wilde was raised as an Anglican Christian, having been baptized at St. Mark's Church in Dublin in the year of his birth. However, when Wilde was around four or five years old, his mother secretly had him baptized into the Catholic Church. This introduced a lifelong conflict between Anglicanism and Catholicism for Wilde. At age 23, during a visit to Rome in 1877, Wilde had an audience with Pope Pius IX, which left a profound impression on him, and he began reading the works of Blessed John Henry Newman. Wilde once remarked that the Catholic Church was "for saints and sinners alone – for respectable people, the Anglican Church will do". In 1878, Wilde became close friends with a priest and even set a date to be formally received into the Catholic Church. However, his family strongly opposed the idea, with his father threatening to cut off financial support if he converted, leading Wilde to change his mind at the last moment. Despite this, Wilde remained a devoted Christian throughout his life, writing that Christianity enabled humanity to "grasp at the skirts of the Infinite" and that Christ had awakened a "dead world" (Tucker, 2001). In fact, Wilde's ongoing desire to join the Catholic Church is also reflected in his literature, particularly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), where the protagonist's internal conflict mirrors Wilde's own spiritual struggle. Although vanity and immorality led him astray, Wilde ultimately converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, fulfilling his long-held desire. As he once told a journalist, "I intend to be received into the Catholic Church before long".

During his two-year imprisonment at Reading Gaol for homosexual offenses in 1895, Wilde, like other inmates, had access to religious materials such as the Bible and hymn books. However, opportunities for prayer were strictly limited, as prisoners were only permitted to pray in solitary confinement, contradicting the communal nature of worship. After his release, Wilde argued that prisoners should have access to a broader range of literature, contending that religious texts alone were insufficient for intellectual and emotional sustenance. This critique was particularly bold given the strong religious emphasis of the time and the prison system's reliance on spiritual rehabilitation (Quintus, 1991). As Wilde himself states in *De Profundis* (1905):

> The paralysing immobility of a life every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink and lie down and pray, or kneel at least for prayer, according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula. (Wilde, 1999, p. 1)

Although rigid religious doctrines may have contributed to Oscar Wilde's downfall, prison ultimately became a place of profound truths, spiritual healing, and renewal for him. Wilde reflects this by noting, "I see a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist", and "Wherever there is a romantic movement in art there somehow, and under some form, is Christ, or the soul of Christ" (Wilde, 1999, p. 72). Wilde's style *in De Profundis* (1905) mirrors biblical language, aligning his personal spiritual journey with the structure and tone of the Bible. The theme of Christianity permeates the work, as Wilde subtly portrays himself as a Christ-like figure in the very different context of a prison. As the letter progresses, it evolves from being addressed to Alfred Douglas into a more intimate, confessional writing where

Wilde expresses thoughts and feelings, he might have otherwise kept hidden. This shift suggests that *De Profundis* was written as a form of personal vindication, absolving himself of guilt rather than addressing Douglas alone (Ramos Gay, 2007). Wilde even acknowledges his responsibility for his downfall: "I must say to myself that neither you nor your father, multiplied a thousand times over, could possibly have ruined a man like me: that I ruined myself" (Wilde, 1999, p. 9). The biblical imagery in *De Profundis* serves as a vehicle for Wilde to not only rescue his sense of self but also rejuvenate it by attaining a kind of divine status. According to Wilde, God represents the ultimate expression of uniqueness (Ramos Gay, 2007), and he writes, "The fact that God loves man shows us that in the divine order of ideal things it is written that eternal love is to be given to what is eternally unworthy" (Wilde, 1999, p. 81).

As the letter progresses, a noticeable transformation unfolds. It begins with the inmate's personal revelations to his lover and gradually transitions into a profound exploration of morals and ethics. Neil Sammells, in *Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde* (2000), observes this shift as the letter moves from intimate reflections to deeper philosophical contemplation:

> The letter is not simple 'truth-telling' or penitent confessional. It is a strategy for survival in which Wilde tells more stories about himself, takes on new roles, summons his resources, in the hope of climbing from the depths and of moving forward. (Sammells, 2014, p. 1-2)

Interestingly, Wilde's attitude towards the Bible is both paradoxical and controversial. His interpretation of the 'Word of God' does not stem from the devotion of a traditional believer, but rather from a deeply personal engagement with its narratives—seeking meaning, beauty, and comfort in its themes of suffering, redemption, and divine love amid his own despair. Wilde writes, "And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith. It has sown its martyrs, it should reap its saints, and praise God daily for having hidden Himself from man" (Wilde, 1999, p. 81). Furthermore, this creates a misunderstanding between Wilde's words and the Bible's teachings, leading to potentially blasphemous associations between Wilde's ideas and the sacred text. By attempting to align himself with divinity through the assumption of Christ's discourse, Wilde seeks to replicate Christ's words rather than those of His followers. He borrows sayings and epigrams from the Bible to establish religious concepts like good and evil, as seen in his statement: "The supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realised is right" (Wilde, 1999, p. 22). Despite these religious overtones, Wilde continually rejected religious retreat, believing that religion was a man-made construct—one specifically of his own creation:

> Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. My Gods dwell in temples made with hands, and within the circle of actual experience is my creed made perfect and complete. (Wilde, 1999, p. 18)

While in prison, Wilde developed a deep admiration for Jesus Christ, whom he regarded as the ultimate individualist:

> And above all, Christ is the most supreme of individualists. Humility, like the artistic, acceptance of all experiences, is merely a mode of manifestation. It is man's soul that Christ is always looking for. He calls it «God's Kingdom, » and finds it in every one. (Wilde, 1999, p. 61)

Ultimately, in *De Profundis* (1905), Wilde reflects on how the hardships of prison can be transformed into "a spiritual experience" and "a spiritualizing of the soul." His autobiographical letter represents the culmination of his lifelong artistic endeavors and conveys his final connection to the biblical passion of Christ. The reimagining of biblical imagery serves as a way for him to recreate Christ within himself and embody the essence of his myth (Guy & Small, 2006).

4.3. Identity Transformation

During and after his imprisonment, Oscar Wilde became increasingly critical of the penal system, particularly its harsh living conditions and the treatment of inmates. These criticisms are vividly portrayed in his poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). One example is his reference to the "iron gin," a trap traditionally used to capture wild animals, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for prisoners being ensnared or as a representation of the iron bars confining them like animals in a cage. This imagery underscores Wilde's condemnation of the dehumanizing nature of incarceration. As Wilde himself writes: A prison wall was round us both, /Two outcast men we were:/The world had thrust us from its heart, /And God from out His care:/And the iron gin that waits for Sin/Had caught us in its snare (Wilde, 1999, p. 122).

Another example lies in Wilde's use of the word "Gyves," which Anthony Stokes, in *Pit of Shame: The Real Ballad of Reading Gaol* (2007), describes as "a portable form of torture through physical incapacitation, forcing the body into 'impossible' positions" (Stokes, 2007). This imagery is reflected in the poem, as Wilde writes: No things of air these antics were, /That frolicked with such glee:/To men whose lives were held in gyves,/And whose feet might not go free,/Ah! wounds of Christ! they were living things,/Most terrible to see (Wilde, 1999, p. 127). In a similar vein, the conditions endured by prisoners were dehumanizing and cruel, characterized by unjust punishments, brutality, and systemic corruption. As Jarrin elaborates that:

> Although Wilde's eulogistic *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, dedicated to fellow inmate Charles Thomas Wooldridge, 22 staged a contemporaneous critique of the inhumanities of internment within the British system, his prison and post-prison letters engaged most directly with the movement for penal reform. (Jarrin, 2008, p. 94-5)

In other terms, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), Wilde portrays the inhumanity of the penal system and advocates for reform. Through this poem, he conveys his critique of the deeply flawed penal system and its unjust laws. The fifth and most polemical section of the poem opens with: I know not whether Laws be right, /Or whether Laws be wrong;/All that we know who lie in gaol/Is that the wall is strong;/And that each day is like a year, /A year whose days are long; (Wilde, 1999, p. 135).

Wilde was profoundly affected and transformed by his time in prison, with his writing becoming increasingly critical of the politics and injustices of the British penal system in the late Victorian era. There is little doubt that *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was intended as a form of political intervention. Notably, Wilde does not primarily criticize the laws that led to his imprisonment

but rather condemns the corruption of the penal system and the concentration of power in the hands of those who enforce punishment—reflecting his broader opposition to authority. This perspective is supported by William E. Buckler in *Oscar Wilde's "chant de cygnet": "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"* (1990), where he writes:

> The poem suggests that the fact that society has not defined those other kinds of deadly offences and fixed punishments for them should make thoughtful people less self-righteous, rigid and relentless…in putting down offenders against the rules society happens at a given moment to have formulated. (Buckler, 1990, p. 33)

The analysis highlights Wilde's evolving political consciousness, particularly in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, where his critique extends beyond personal suffering to a broader condemnation of systemic injustice. Unlike *De Profundis*, which is more introspective, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* engages directly with institutionalized brutality, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of punishment and the hypocrisy of a society that criminalizes certain acts while ignoring other, arguably greater, moral failings.

In fact, Buckler's interpretation reinforces this view by arguing that Wilde's poem challenges society's selective moral outrage. Rather than simply denouncing the laws that condemned him, Wilde exposes the broader flaws in a system that metes out punishment based on transient social norms rather than any consistent ethical framework. His emphasis on the dehumanization of prisoners, regardless of their crimes, serves as a powerful critique of how justice is administered.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper underscores how Wilde's imprisonment deeply influenced his literary work, fostering a more profound critique of societal norms and the prison system, while also revealing themes of suffering, redemption, and self-realization. *De Profundis* (1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) stand as powerful reflections of his physical confinement and intellectual awakening. *De Profundis* not only captures Wilde's personal downfall but also serves as a philosophical meditation on suffering as a means of spiritual transformation. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in turn, critiques the dehumanizing aspects of the Victorian penal system while connecting personal suffering to broader social issues. Together, both works illustrate Wilde's belief in the redemptive potential of suffering and the power of art to transcend personal tragedy, ultimately reaffirming his legacy as a figure who used his suffering to challenge societal structures and explore the complexities of the human experience.

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Endnotes

[1] Richard Ellmann, in full Richard David Ellmann (born March 15, 1918, Highland Park, Michigan, U.S.—died May 13, 1987, Oxford, Oxfordshire, England), American literary critic and scholar, an expert on the life and works of James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Oscar Wilde, and other modern British and Irish writers.

[2] In 1885, homosexuality was only illegal in regards to the act of buggery, for which the punishment was to be kept in penal servitude for life. This changed when Henry Labouchere, Liberal MP for Northampton and strong opponent of homosexuality, introduced Section 11 of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act which made all homosexual acts of 'gross indecency' illegal. The bill was primarily concerned with the protection of women and girls by increasing the age of consent and yet this small section in the Act was a pivotal change in homosexual legislation. Unusually, this section was passed during a late night debate in the House of Commons with only a few MPs present. It was under this Act that Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing, among many others, were convicted and punished for committing homosexual acts.

[3] Robert ('Robbie') Baldwin Ross (1869-1918), Journalist and art critic; literary executor of Oscar Wilde; manager of the Carfax gallery