

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

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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 of reading, post-traumatic writing, trauma theory, Wilde

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