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**Dalila De Marinis Mezzapesa**

**“Murder Ballads: Crime and Society in Victorian Literature”**

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**Abstract:** The Victorian age is a period known not only for its rich literary tradition, but also for the high number of crimes, specifically homicides, registered in England in those years. As well as in real life, crime was one of the main issues in poetic and fictional writings. The aim of this paper is to analyse the ways in which the theme of murder in literature reflects moral changes in Victorian society, and to what extent this extreme criminal act represents a response to stifling restrictions imposed in that period. First, I will provide a broad view of the panorama in which those crimes took place and try to establish the introduction of this theme in literature with the social background of Victorian culture. I will then explore the psychological aspect of criminals as described in the dramatic monologue *Porphyria's Lover* by Robert Browning, in the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, and in the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* by Oscar Wilde. The three literary works will be approached individually in each of the sections of this essay, in order to demonstrate the influence of the social background of the era upon the distorted psychology of the characters of these works

**Keywords:** Murder Ballads, Victorian society, crime, Robert Browning, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde.

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## Dalila DE MARINIS MEZZAPESA

### Murder Ballads: Crime and Society in Victorian Literature

#### O. Introduction

Arguably, the fascination that murder exerts over reading audiences has never been more topical than during the Victorian era, defined by George Orwell as "our great period in murder, our Elizabethan period, so to speak." (*Decline of the English Murder*) The reasons for this peculiar interest in a time in which it was particularly condemned and prosecuted are varied. Many critics have identified the source of this uncanny attraction in a desire for escaping from boredom (Altick 67; Flanders 75), whereas others considered it as a reaction against the restrained social morality of the time (Foucault 2001: 16; O'Brien 321). In spite of the fact that "the unconcealed pleasure with which the Victorians welcomed a new murder sensation was, of course, one of the most disturbing facts in the whole situation," (Altick 297) it is undeniable that crimes, and murder in particular, still lure the attention of a great portion of the reading audience, which is simultaneously shocked and attracted by the inexplicable and mysterious nature of those actions.

The essayist Thomas De Quincey was one of the first authors to deal with murder from a mere aesthetic point of view. He even coined the expression "the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder" to refer to the group of "Murder-Fanciers" (5) who were showing a growing interest in the subject during the first half of the nineteenth century. Even though De Quincey ironically criticises this new source of enthusiasm for being slightly morbid, he was in favour of an aesthetic rather than moral approach to it. "Murder, for instance, may be laid hold off by its moral handle, (as is generally in the pulpit) and *that*, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated *aesthetically*, as the Germans call it, that is, in relation to good taste." (7) De Quincey's words may seem surprising, but they represent a singular approach to crime—from the point of view of literature—at that time. According to Richard Altick, this approach simply proposes murder as a new form of entertainment, since it "deliciously stirred the sensibilities of readers who had fed too long on the bland diet of the domestic novel, the polite essay, and the generally placid effusion." (67) Moreover, the spread of cheaper and more effective printing techniques allowed these stories to be "delivered to their firesides by broadsheets, newspapers," and, thus, they "gave the Victorians something to think about, something for their emotions to respond to in however a crude a fashion. Their typical response was, if one can make the distinction, a delicious *frisson* rather than a shudder." (10)

Oddly enough, crime is able to create a sense of safety in the reader, since "murder is very pleasant to think about in the abstract: it is like hearing blustery rain on the window-pane when sitting indoors." (Flanders 73) Nevertheless, the fascination for ruthless crimes was due to far more than pure entertainment both for writers and readers. In this paper, I will analyse three works in which murder plays a leading thematic role. The first one is a dramatic monologue by Robert Browning, *Porphyria's Lover*, in which the inexplicable killing of a woman by her lover challenges all the previous stereotypes about romantic love and discloses a faint criticism of the social rules of the time. The second text, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, presents quite a different sort of wrongdoer: an apparently vulnerable woman betrayed by society, who decides to conduct her last act of rebellion by killing the masculine source of her life-long problems. Finally, the autobiographical poem by Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, focuses on the experience of convicts in nineteenth-century jails and questions the validity of justice of that period. The analysis will be developed in two fronts, first taking into account the most entertaining aspect of these three pieces of literature. I will then try to establish the connection between their writing and the social environment that they presented to their contemporary audience. My aim is to illustrate how they rather represented a response to the social and moral situation of the

time, because "so great was the confusion of those years; so difficult was it, at the moment when 'humanity' was being re-evaluated" (Foucault 2001: 240) to determine the actual place the criminal personality was to occupy within it.

### **1. Murder as a Proof of Love. Robert Browning and his "Porphyria's Lover": to Kill Means to Protect**

Murder raised a peculiar and inexplicable fascination in the population living in the Victorian period. Besides being a daily subject in the news media, it was a recurring, obsessive theme in a wide variety of artistic fictions, such as in the works of Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. This apparently perverse interest in murder can be approached from several angles, for it is as much a general cultural phenomenon as it is a specifically social, legal, or psychological problem. Therefore, the aim of this section is to interpret one of Robert Browning's most renowned dramatic monologues, "Porphyria's Lovers", as a response to the restraints imposed by Victorian society upon individuals, and as the representation of a kind of love which challenges the previous canons of romantic intercourses and eventually results in destruction.

The poem, first published in 1836, may be superficially considered a portrayal of the classical male dominated relationship between a man and his lover. Instead, Browning makes use of an ironic dramatic voice to expose the extant contradictions proposed by the Victorian community at his time. The strict restraints imposed upon social behaviour led to a duality that affected both private and collective life, and that was strategically concealed to keep an apparent condition of moral perfection. The psychological outcomes were rather devastating for the population. Mentally disturbed personalities were the focus of Browning's poetry, which dealt with a new "type of madness: that of desperate passion. Love disappointed in its excess, and especially love deceived that has no other recourse but madness." (Foucault 2001: 30) The romantic description of the natural setting in the opening scene of the poem is soon replaced by the sombre thoughts of the speaker who, in an attempt to reverse the established social order, murders his lover, and then plays with her body, reasserting his masculine superiority. The madness mentioned by Foucault is expressed in the words of the speaker, who describes himself as "one so pale / For love of her" (Browning 33, ll. 28-29), but who, through a sudden shift in personality, grabs the reins of the situation and strangles her with "one yellow string" (l. 39) of her hair.

"The complicity of desire and murder, of cruelty and the longing to suffer, of sovereignty and slavery, of insult and humiliation (...) transformed into delirium of the hearth, madness of desire, the insane dialogue of love and death in the limitless presumption of appetite" (Foucault 2001: 209-210) can be considered the main features of the poem. The contrasting feelings of the lover, who realises that Porphyria is not willing to "set its struggling passion free / From pride, and vainer ties dissever" (Browning 33, ll. 23-24), thus coming to the conclusion that the only "thing to do" (l. 38) is to murder her, can easily represent the consequence of the restraints imposed by Victorian morality. Their most probably illicit relationship is strongly condemned by their society, as well as aggravated by the difference in social status between them. The social order represented by "tonight's gay feast" (l. 27) is endangered by Porphyria's decision to abandon the party and join her lover in the solitary cottage beside the lake, leading to a strife between order and chaos. The speaker's mental instability is concealed by his lucid and meticulous presentation of the facts but, due to the impossibility of the coexistence of both, the irrational prevails over the rational, and eventually ends in murder.

As Foucault points out, "the substitution (in literature) of the theme of madness for that of death does not mark a break, but rather a torsion within the same anxiety." (2001: 16) In the case of "Porphyria's Lover", the concern seems originated by the fact that his devotion is "all in vain" (Browning 33, l. 29) the hopelessness of their love, markedly related to the set of social values that condemns it. Porphyria, whose name may also be related to the homonymic and rare inherited disease which causes physical and mental disturbances to

the patient, seems to embody the aftermath of the *mal du siècle*. This term, first introduced by François-René de Chateaubriand in his works *Atala* and *René* (1801-1802), referred to the collective feeling of melancholy and disillusionment that affected nineteenth-century Europe. It was said to produce a particular penchant for self-destructive behaviour, as in the case of Porphyria, who "guessed not how/her darling one wish would be heard." (Browning 34, ll. 56-57) Even though it is the mere opinion of the speaker, the girl had wished for death to come; that is probably the reason why "she felt no pain" (l. 42) and "again laughed the blue eyes without stain" (l. 45) after the murder has taken place.

The reader's attention may be initially drawn to the apparent aimlessness of the action. The only plausible reason peers out from the speaker's words "That moment she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good," (Browning 33, ll. 36-37) which seem to emphasise his willingness to preserve —perhaps also to cherish— that precious moment. Therefore, an aesthetic-critical approach seems particularly appropriate in cases where there appears to be no reason that can justify the truculent act of a murderer. Joel Black argues, in fact, that "the idea of motiveless crime – or, more accurately, of an act that is regarded as crime precisely because it lacks a motive, and that, by violating the fundamental law of cause-and-effect relations, becomes a crime against reason itself – is a modernist discovery." (93) The inexplicable attraction for murder on the side of the reader may be partially due to the growing popularity newspapers were acquiring towards the middle of the nineteenth century. The issue recurrently appeared in periodic publications as *The New Monthly Magazine* (published between 1814 and 1884), or the *Morning Chronicle* (circulated from 1789 to 1865). Ruthless crimes were daily entertainment for the heterogeneous audience of the nineteenth century, and Black restricts this scope of interest to the aesthetic qualities of an artistic work.

It was the Romantic movement that first raised assassination—or at least its description—to an art form (Thomas De Quincey, in his *Miscellaneous Essays* on murder, was among the first writers to consider it as "One of the Fine Arts"). Nonetheless, Victorian artists used it figuratively to indicate the death of a whole set of values. Particularly, in Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, the narrative technique that leans on the narration of an unreliable and unstable speaker melts with further unusual devices to depict the chaos in the lover's mind. For instance, the cadence of the poem resembles classical ballads but, thanks to the asymmetric rhyme structure of cinquains following the pattern ABABB, it also recalls to the mental instability of the speaker. Moreover, Browning's "descriptions of murder achieve artistic merit – that is, they become aesthetically interesting" because the poet is able to shift "the reader's focus from the point of view of the victim to that of the murderer." (Black 60)

If the audience's attention is shaken by the detailed confession produced by the speaker, it can be shattered by the depth through which they can access the killer's mind. Reader identification is precisely what is required, according to Melissa Gregory, by a dramatic monologue, for the "willingness of the reader to understand the speaker, even to sympathise with him as a necessary condition of reading the poem, is the key to the poem's form." He then claims that "the monologue's truth will emerge from the reader's vacillation between sympathy and moral judgment - a movement between understanding and repulsion, empathy and distance." (497) Browning's narrative technique allows readers to come into contact with a speaker whose sinful fantasies and disruptive social behaviour profoundly violate nineteenth-century domestic norms, thus perturbing their comfortable role as uninvolved spectators. The active engagement required from the audience in order to fathom the neurotic mind of the lover is a device that dramatic monologue, in its heyday during the Victorian period, employs prominently not only to unveil the lyric speaker's temperament and character, but also to present it as the inevitable consequence constraints prescribed by society upon a fragile personality produce.

The outward appearance of sanity is undermined by an actual situation of psychological instability, overloaded by a fetishist and macabre aura. After the murder has

taken place, Porphyria's lover sits through the whole night with her corpse by his side, and awaits for some sort of punishment; the final exclamation "And yet God has not said a word!" (Browning 34, l. 60) points out that, notwithstanding the excuses he has considered to justify his crime, he still expects God to punish him. It is therefore likely to identify here a new connotation of guilt, which is not present in the rest of the poem, and which "describes blindness, the blindness of madness, as the psychological *effect of a moral fault*." (Foucault 2001: 158) On the other hand, the conclusive ejaculation may also reinforce the lover's plea for innocence, seeing as not even God dares to condemn him.

The intrinsic relationship between love and murder can be considered as the guiding theme of this essay, as it will be appreciated in the following sections dealing with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles'* crime of passion and Oscar Wilde's experience with a wife slaughterer. Nevertheless, Robert Browning was one of the first authors to present those two apparently disjointed elements as the two sides of a same coin. In *Porphyria's Lover*, the dependence of murder upon love plays an essential role in the portrayal of the anxieties and concerns of Browning's changing society. Even though his thematic choices may be justified by his need to meet the growing "unconcealed pleasure with which the Victorians welcomed a new murder sensation," (Altick 297) the attraction of the audience was not his only purpose. Due to his innovative writing techniques, he was able to portray the continual inner struggle between order and chaos that exists in every human being, thus proving to be a valuable *connoisseur* of human nature. In conclusion, Robert Browning made use of the theme of murder as opposed to canonical love to demonstrate the necessity for his society to subvert the corrupted social order proposed by the Victorian canon.

## 2. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or the Psychology of a Murderess

The inextricable connection between love and murder was the main interest of not only Robert Browning, but also of other Victorian writers concerned with the consequences of social restraints upon human nature. One of these authors was the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy who, in one of his most complex novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, truthfully explores the social withdrawal and emotional chaos of its main character, Tess. The novel follows the events of her youth and eventually leads to an apparently inevitable tragic ending that forces her to turn into a murderess, thus causing her tragic death.

As mentioned in the introductory section, the growing interest that Victorian audiences addressed to crime and horror was due to a necessity to put to the test their illusion of safety and comfort in a society that was actually threatening their well established set of values. Hence, a new connotation was assigned to murder, growing from a censurable and ruthless action to a new form of art, as claimed by De Quincey in his essay *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*. (5) Nevertheless, he gave special attention to crimes perpetrated by individuals in a socially lower personal situation as opposed to their victims, because "how can there be any pity for one tiger destroyed by another tiger?" (De Quincey 25) This is the case of Tess, an apparently innocent girl who seems to be forced by destiny to commit a crime she did not intend to commit, but almost welcomed by the reader as necessary for the fulfilment of her love for Angel Clare. "Pity and horror" are on the same level for the audience, thus allowing Hardy to reach "the final purpose of murder" (De Quincey 20) and, at the same time, to create a memorable literary character, still recognised nowadays, since "the beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed." (Hardy 340)

Hardy's decision to deal with such a controversial topic as murder may have stemmed from the background that surrounded him. "Bred, like all his contemporaries, in a literary atmosphere which tolerated and even encouraged the free use of murder as a convenient plot device", the Victorian novelist "could not help being conditioned toward its use." (Altick 83) Nonetheless, the psychological depth used by the author in the portrayal of his characters demonstrates that his text transcended sheer sentimentality or morbidity. Like



Robert Browning, "instead of studying the criminal personality, he studied the personality which became criminal" (Altick 84), thus challenging the mores of his time and positioning himself among the most innovative writers of Victorian fiction.

Contrasting feelings are usually associated with this heroine, who is considered either as a pure but fallen woman, victim of masculine superiority, or as a strong-willed self-determined nineteenth-century character. On the one hand, "Tess's willingness to blame herself for Alec's initial seduction/rape and for her return to him later" can be associated with the "persistent anxiety about the instability of virginity and its signs, and the difficulty of locating and reading it." (Lovesey 919-920) Even though, as the novel progresses, Tess accepts her role as a woman and never abandons her hope to redeem her purity, because "women do as a rule live through such humiliations, and regain their spirits, and again look about them with an interested eye" (Hardy 104), the capital punishment she suffers at the end of the book represents the only way to pay for her sins. Redemption is then achieved through the character of her sister Liza-Lu, who is "so good and simple and pure" (394), "half girl, half woman-a spiritualized image of Tess" (396), and who, arguably, seems to be the only person capable to restore her sister's purity.

On the other hand, Nicola Lacey decides not to focus on Tess's virginity but rather on her role as a murderess in a society in which criminality was commonly associated with masculinity. Lacey considers Hardy's heroine serves "as a metaphor for fundamental changes in ideas of selfhood, gender and social order (...), a radical shift in mechanisms of responsibility-attribution, with decisive implications for the criminalisation of women." (Lacey 2) In his article, he maps a course that goes from Moll (*Moll Flanders*) to Tess of the D'Urbervilles, while trying to explore the evolution of women's criminality in literature and society. His theory finds solid ground in Hardy's novel insofar as Tess, and, likewise, most "female offenders tend to be seen as victims: victims of their hormones, of their circumstances and, sometimes, of men." (Lacey 3) This idea is reflected in the novel in the scene in which the same author suggests, through the character of Parson Tringham, that "our impulses are too strong for our judgement sometimes." (Hardy 2) A hint at the tragic events that would later originate from the unfortunate discovery of the connection between the Durbeyfield and the D'Urbervilles families can be found in the premonitory words of the parson.

Lacey ascribes the source of Tess's crisis to an external and objective factor, "the possible de-civilising and de-moralising impact of urbanization and of increasing social mobility in the emerging individualistic world," (20) rather than to a sort of inner struggle commonly believed to be related only to feminine anxiety. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the influence of the social and cultural background was one of the main causes of the growing discomfort that was affecting Victorian society pervasively. Social order and stability were undermined by a new up-and-coming sense of class mobility, due to industrialization and urbanization, as in the case of Tess, who progresses from the idyllic agricultural background of Talbothays Dairy, to the dehumanized and mechanical context of Flintcomb-Ash farm, and finally to the alienated urban setting of Kingsbere. The stages in Tess's life underlines "the relative decline of the agricultural economy" in which she was "relatively securely integrated", thus exposing her to "the corrupting effects of modernization and urbanization." (Lacey 24)

As a result, Tess's crime may also be interpreted as a breach with the ancient covenant between man and nature. The *Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* tends, in fact, to see Hardy's heroine as "a representation of the archetypal woman associated with life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance" (Willingham 152), who sets out in a quest for identity and splits her personality in two, thus giving life to her ambivalent character of working-class woman and mythic figure. Instances of her peculiar relationship with nature can be found in the scene in which Tess shoulders responsibility for the death of the pheasants lying suffering under the trees of "the plantation wherein she had taken shelter." (Hardy 278) In this episode, she appears as some kind of

goddess in possession of the power to choose between life and death. "With the impulse of a soul who could feel for kindred sufferers as much as for herself, Tess's first thought was to put the still living birds out of their torture, and to this end with her own hands she broke the necks of as many as she could find." (Hardy 279) As a result, she executes an action that can be considered as a sort of compassionate killing. Like in Robert Browning's poem, the perpetrator feels a profound love for its victim, but decides to murder it in an attempt to put an end to its suffering. This, in turn, is caused either by social restraints—in the first case—or by human cruelty—in the last instance. At a human level, Porphyria's lover may seem far more open to censure than Tess, because of the apparent unmotivated nature of his crime, whereas her actions, both in the murder of the pheasants and of Alec, simply look more justifiable. Nevertheless, they share several traits in common, joined by their will to rebel against distorted social order, and by their need to annihilate their inner suffering by way of suppressing their victims' ones.

The narrative voice in the novel seems to anticipate Tess's inadequacy: "We may wonder whether at the acme and summit of the human progress these anachronisms will be corrected by a finer intuition, a close interaction of the social machinery than that which now jolts us round and along." (Hardy 43) This warns the reader about the irreparability of Tess's fate. A debate about free will versus determinism (Lacey 16) sprouts from this kind of foresight, thus questioning "the role of environment in producing character and conduct; about individual responsibility and autonomy."

Putting aside Tess's archetypal facet, it is possible to focus on her figure as a rejection of the conventions of Hardy's time instead; Tess, in fact, can easily be construed as a challenge to stereotypes. The very fact that she is a murderess stands out from the standards of the period when the novel is set, an era in which crime and murder were a distinctive feature of masculinity. Again, Lacey points out how "the real problem for women, it seems, is not so much assumed weakness of lack of rational agency, but rather the constraints and expectations associated with femininity in general and with marriage and motherhood in particular." (31) He therefore bestows a strong willpower on Tess, but acknowledges her incapacity to encompass the role society assigns her. Sure enough, the loss of her son (named, not entirely without irony, Sorrow) and of her love, Angel, may represent her failure both as a mother and as a wife, but actually, they represent a new concept of independent woman "operating within a very specific set of constraints" (Lacey 31), and unable to cope with them.

Society is not likely to absolve Tess, not even in the—allegedly—most benevolent place on earth, i.e. the house of God, since "the people who had turned their heads turned them again as the service proceeded; and at last observing her they whispered to each other. She knew what their whispers were about, grew sick at heart, and felt that she could come to church no more." (Hardy 85) The murder of Alec is the final instance of her separation from social norms, by committing the most condemnable crime for civilization. It is curious how, even in a magazine released only twenty years after *Tess of the D'Urbervilles'* publication, the American literary society of the *Fra Magazine* tended to blame "a silly cast-iron form of morality, built on an ignorance and a contempt for Nature" (Hubbard 110) for Tess's tragic end. As a matter of fact, the narrative voice of Hardy's novel tries to emphasise her innocence before the murder is committed, by resorting to a kind of internal monologue in which it is claimed: "Never in her life-she could swear it from the bottom of her soul-had she ever intended to do wrong; yet these hard judgments had come. Whatever her sins, they were not sins of intention, but of inadvertence, and why should she have been punished so persistently?" (Hardy 353)

Notwithstanding this attempt to justify Tess's actions, the girl appears prone to accept the punishment for her sins with an almost too resigned attitude. In the final scene of the novel, during the phase called by the author "Fulfilment", Tess is fully aware of the fact that the time for her chastisement has come, but she surrenders without opposition and claims "I am ready", because "It is as it should be", and she is "almost glad" (Hardy 396) for

it. After Angel's promise to look after her sister Liza-Lu, through whom she hopes to find redemption, she gives herself up to the police, and is finally executed at Wintonchester prison. It is her attitude towards her crime what, according to the self-confessed murderer Pierre Rivière, represents the mood of any criminal, since "by shedding blood, they have accepted the risk of the scaffold." (Foucault 1992: 206) In Rivière's memoir—collected and edited by Michel Foucault—views of madness, justice, and crime intersect, thus providing a faithful insight of the impenetrable network working inside a murderer's mind.

The greatness of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and, arguably, of Thomas Hardy as a novelist is, as in the case of Robert Browning, the ability to deeply portray the psychology of his characters, which, despite their disturbed mentality or unfortunate destiny, are still the representation of the anxiety and uncertainty of their time. As Oscar Wilde, the author whose work I will analyse in the following chapter, wrote, "There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture," (Wilde 1889: 18) especially during the Victorian age, a period full of contradictions and conflicting feelings. Still, Hardy was able to comply with his own perception of his role as a writer, because "how strange and god-like was a composer's power, who from the grave could lead through sequences of emotion, which he alone had felt at first." (Hardy 84) This is precisely the aim of artists: to astonish and create a shudder in the eternally expecting heart of their audience.

### **3. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol": Oscar Wilde Hanging in the Balance Between the Paradoxes of Morality**

The exploration of the intrinsic relationship between crime and culture was particularly widespread during the Victorian period, and the contrived morality of the time led to an increasing interest for the consequences of the traditional restraints of society upon individuals. Contrary to the way in which both Robert Browning and Thomas Hardy approached the issue, Oscar Wilde focused on his firsthand experience as a convict to write "The Ballad of Reading Gaol". The poem was published in 1898 after his release from jail (May 1897), where he had served a two years' term of imprisonment for sexual offences (i.e. homosexual practices). Its draft was inspired by the case of Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a Royal House Guard trooper, whose execution as a consequence of the murder of his wife took place during Wilde's incarceration. The event of the killing of the "woman whom he loved" (Wilde 1960: 409, l. 5) was precisely the source of inspiration for the long poem, which dealt with the censored theme of domestic violence, and subtly criticised the disciplinary actions implemented during the Victorian period to punish criminals and murderers. The aim of this section is to explore Wilde's critical attitude towards Victorian approach to crime and, at the same time, to explore the permanent relation between love and murder in the literature of the time, insofar as "each man kills the thing he loves," (Wilde 1960: 410, l. 37) as the poem somewhat expostulates.

The question of domestic violence was not a theme as recurring as one would expect from such a controversial period as the nineteenth century was. There was, in fact, an escapist tendency to avoid such topics, especially in literature, since "the traditional aristocratic vices of excess and profligacy refused to accommodate the possibility of violence in the home, no matter how common a historical reality." (Gregory 493) Nevertheless, murders within the household were quite a generalised phenomenon, and authors like Wilde, Browning, or Hardy dared to introduce them into their works. In most cases, unsuccessful attempts to escape the paradox of reality resulted in the embracement of themes such as death and decay. Therefore, an anti-Romantic belief in the sinful idiosyncrasy present in the whole humankind led those authors, among others (e.g. Charles Dickens and Lord Alfred Tennyson), to incorporate crime and murder in their works.

The personal experience of Oscar Wilde, when transfigured into the poem, provides a tentatively truthful perspective insofar as it is narrated from within the real punitive environment of Reading Gaol. The speaker's voice does not reveal itself as belonging to the writer, except in lines 393-395, when the poet states "None knew so well as I: / For he who



live more lives than one / More deaths than one must die." The reference to the multiplicity of lives endured by the speaker may clearly be interpreted as the task of the writer, who must soak in the various experiences of his characters to such an extent that they are perceived as his or her own. Wilde's skilfulness at melting with his narrative personas is particularly appreciated by Ellen O'Brien, who focuses her work on the main features of lamentations and ballads, and acknowledges his ability to "post the lyrical position of the murderous subject (...) who both speaks and is murderous." (l. 319) Admittedly, "the sensational violence of murder and execution formed a productive and provocative space for social analysis," (O'Brien 320) and allowed this literary genre to reach any kind of audience due to its musicality and cadence.

The form chosen by the author represents "the conflation of the criminal, poet, and victim of execution entangled in the rhetoric of the ballad, problematising moral judgement and re-defining the criminal." (O'Brien 324) Therefore, Wilde was quite shrewd at inserting social criticism into a genre known for its easy rhymes and rhythms. Surely, his choice was not random, because he was aware that the ballad "is the song of crime; it is intended to travel from singer to singer; everyone is presumed able to sing it as his own crime, by a lyrical fiction." (Foucault 1992: 207)

Possibly, making profit was not amongst the most relevant aspirations of Oscar Wilde, despite the fact that, after his conviction, he was reduced to a state of alienation and economical ruin. In his last works written during his exile, the author "literally became a criminal aesthete," (Joyce 503) favouring a kind of writing oriented towards social condemnation and struggle. The same title of the writing analysed in this section, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", may represent the sarcastic perspective chosen by the author to criticise the paradox of the morality of his time. Ballads, in fact, are traditionally conceived as narrative songs dealing—mostly—with love; instead, in Wilde's poem, murder and prison are its mainstays. Oddly, love is equally present, but its essence is quite different from the one expected to be found in a ballad. The murderous subject of the poem, even though fond of his wife, decides to kill her, thus juxtaposing a prototypical and a deviant ideal of love. Similarly to "Porphyria's Lover", this ballad leaves the reasons for the crime unknown to the reader, but instead uses the tragic event as the cause for scrupulous reflection about a whole cycle of crime and punishment.

The narrative voice of the poem relates his encounter with the man sentenced to death, "Like two doomed ships that pass in storm / We had crossed each other's way," (Wilde 1960: 413: ll. 163-164) and later describes "Two outcast men were we: / The world had thrust us from its heart." (ll. 170-171) The feeling of exclusion constitutes, apparently, the fair punishment for criminals, who are secluded from society in an attempt to restrain their misbehaviour. They are thus bound "Each from his separate Hell" (420, l. 407) and, in case of great wrongs, hanged "as a beast is hanged." (425, l. 510) Therefore, the question "whether Laws be right, / Or whether Laws be wrong," (426, ll. 534-535) is inevitable, since "only blood can wipe out blood, / And only tears can heal." (427, ll. 632-633) Prison has always been considered the punitive method *par excellence*, but, after his personal experience, the author seemed rather doubtful about its effectiveness. The austere code of conduct imposed by Victorian society conceived capital punishment in terms of "a debt to pay" (413, l. 132) in order to requite for the crimes committed. And promoted a new form of punishment based on the ideas of hard labour, silence, and separation, but rarely took into consideration the real consequences of such an inflexible attitude for the population.

Fear for death is an unflinching companion for convicts in prison, where "the personality of the murderer takes hold and shifts the focus from crime to the criminal procedures which culminate in execution. The authority of the criminal's self-judgment, reinforced by his or her impending death, crystallises an identity rooted in his or her own moral struggles." (O'Brien 322) The prisoners in the poem are assailed by a twofold fright, since "Horror stalked before each man, / And Terror crept behind." (Wilde 1960: 422, ll. 442-443) With this vividly sketched personification, the author refers to "Horror" as the

sense of revulsion resulting from the awareness of their crimes, and to "Terror" as the feeling of dread and anticipation that precedes their punishment. Past and future melt into an indefinite sense of time signalled by "a watch whose little ticks / Are like horrible hammer-blows," (411, ll. 77-78) counting down the minutes that separate them from their unavoidable destiny.

Due to the spatial proximity between the poetic subject and the other convicts, culpability seems to be shared among the prisoners, and "it is a fearful thing / To feel another's guilt!" (417, ll. 264-265) Jail constitutes the environment where expiation takes place, and which provides "the purification required not only of the murderer, but of any person or sacred object coming into contact with him." (Black 193) Notwithstanding the pessimistic approach of the author towards the punitive techniques of his time, he does not discard hope in a kind of justice which lies beyond human nature. The uncertainty about life after death is always present in his speech, since "none can tell to what red Hell / His sightless soul may stray," (Wilde 1960: 413, ll. 155-156) but, on the other hand, he appears to believe that "God's eternal Laws are kind / And break the heart of stone." (428, ll. 604-605) Afterwards, the methods employed by Victorian society to control crime seem useless when trying to achieve true repentance, and only worsen the moral status of prisoners, because "It is only what is good in Man / That wastes and withers" (427, ll. 560-561) in jail. According to the poetic voice, the ethical mores of the time simply "scourge the weak, and flog the fool, / And gibe the old and grey, / And some grow mad, and all grow bad," (ll. 566-568) thus resulting in the annihilation of both the souls and bodies of those who should be reformed. Similarly to the protagonist of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and up against the impossibility of redemption, the poetic voice lapses into resignation, and finally embraces the idea of punishment by accepting the death of his fellow convict.

In the same way as the other chapters of this essay, it can be observed that the relationship between love and murder arguably represents one of the centrepieces of this poem. The twice repeated passage: "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!" (Wilde 1960: 410, ll. 37-42) signals the controversial propinquity tying love to the reproachful crime. Regardless of the literal meaning of homicide, the author proposes a far more sombre connotation that, in turn, encompasses a slow and cruel way of killing. Arguably, he refers to the false and hypocritical people who pretend to admire but actually destroy others, and who are not punished like real killers. Probably due to his personal experience, the poet seems to consider betrayal as vilifying and condemnable an action as murder.

The last passage fully encapsulates Wilde's thorough critique of both the social and penal system of his time. A profound meditation about the paradoxes of Victorian morality peers out from the apparently simple lines of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", and his moral implication can be further demonstrated by some of his other works. In the essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), for instance, Wilde acknowledged that "Charity creates a multitude of sins," (2001: 128) showing a bitter awareness about the actual state of things. Undoubtedly, it was a period marked by technological and economical advances, which, together with the abolition of slavery and several other philanthropic initiatives, contributed to a merely superficial social progress. However, in the heart of society, lights and shadows still coexisted, concealed under a hypocritical façade. There is no denying that Oscar Wilde was born a Victorian and, to some extent, inherited the same ambivalent traits of the era, its mightiness and its vulnerability, but, in spite of all that, his greatest strength consisted of the ability to compensate for human frailty with his sagacity disguised as nonconformity.

#### 4. Conclusions

The ambivalence and confusion of the Victorian period were intensely portrayed in the literature of the time. After solving one of his controversial cases, the famous private detective Sherlock Holmes theorised about how our whole "life is spent in one long effort to

escape from the commonplaces of existence." (Doyle 3.2) If this is only partially true, then it is possible to acknowledge that the interest of the Victorians for murder was a simple way of avoiding this sense of boredom that might have affected them. However, this would be a simplistic interpretation of what this kind of works represented for them. As I pointed out in the previous sections of this paper, behind the ostensible aesthetic purpose of works such as *Porphyria's Lover*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, or *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, there is a profound proclivity towards the condemnation of the values proposed by Victorian morality.

In *Porphyria's Lover*, the anxieties and worries of a wavering society are reflected in the desperate act of a man who is incapable of fulfilling his love due to social restraints. Finally, he decides to put an end to his suffering by killing his unattainable lover. On the other hand, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is presented as the abhorred creation of the rejection of society. Her only choice is the murder of the man who was the cause of her wretched life. A different point of view is the one used in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in which the Victorian controversial methods of punishment are questioned.

Thanks to this investigation, I was able to perceive the subtle connection that exists between literature and the culture to which it belongs. Specifically, in dealing with the main topic of this paper, I acquired the necessary knowledge to verify that the result of a contradictory approach to social customs leads inevitably to a result inversely proportional to the desired one. It was also possible to corroborate the truthfulness of the assumption that "murder is where history and crime intersect," (Foucault 1992: 205) and to verify its applicability to our current state of affairs.

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**Author's profile:** Dalila De Marinis holds a degree in English Studies from Universidad Complutense de Madrid. During her studies, she was twice granted a scholarship for academic achievement by the Community of Madrid in 2010/2011 and 2011/2012. An Italian now based in Spain, Dalila has demonstrated her passion for languages and her innate talent for learning them. When she moved to Madrid in 2009, she had to cope with a completely new environment, but managed to attain fluency in Spanish. At the same time, she distinguished herself in the academic field and deepened her knowledge of English and French. She now aims at specialising in the areas of translation and international relations, without leaving aside her fascination for English literature.

Contact:

<[dalilademarinis@gmail.com](mailto:dalilademarinis@gmail.com)>

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