

English assessment

Context introduction:

The two texts I will be writing about are Reading gaol: a poem written by Oscar Wilde in 1897 after he was released from Reading gaol. He was convicted of homosexual offences in 1895 and sentenced to two years' hard labour in prison. When releasing the poem he published it under the name c.3.3, which stands for cellblock C, landing 3, cell 3. This ensured that Wilde's name did not appear on the poem's front cover. It was not commonly known, until the 7th printing in June 1899, that C.33 was actually Wilde. The second text I will be writing about is called Marshalsea written by the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens. He did not experience prison first hand like Oscar Wilde, but his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea prison in Southwark. An Act of Parliament closed the Marshalsea in 1842, and on 19 November that year the inmates were relocated to the Bethlem Hospital if they were mentally ill, or to the King's Bench Prison at that point renamed the Queen's Prison. In the novel *Little Dorrit* he introduces the reader to the prison.

Section 1: The prison is presented as inhumane in Reading gaol. We know this as he describes the cells as "narrow" and "a foul and dark latrine" showing the horrific life they were forced through, it also implies they were not properly sanitized. He suggests the prison wardens to be pitiless and strict, as they do not care for the prisoners and let them "rot" and fed them "bitter bread" filled with "chalk and lime", used as an old technique to cheapen the cost of bread. The prisoners are shown as confused whether or not they deserve to be treated in such a brutal state. "I know no whether I am right, or whether laws be wrong". Oscar Wilde describes the experiences in the prison to be so mentally and physically brutal it damages the "soul and body marred". All these create the cold-blooded feeling to the poem.

Section 2: Marshalsea, written in a similar context to Reading gaol, presents the prison in a negative light. Like Reading gaol, it highlights the filth within the prison saying "squalid". The text depicts the atmosphere of the prison. It shows the cells as "confined" combined with the "high walls dully spiked at the top" surrounding the prison, this shows the unfriendly, negative environment the prisoners experienced whilst being in the Marshalsea prison. Charles Dickens uses strong vocabulary like "incarcerated" meaning locked up, to emphasise the hatred he has towards the prison, by Charles Dickens not describing the time prisoners spent as doing their time, as described by modern society. We describe it as 'paying of their debt' he instead evoked the idea of being forced into the prison. This is similar to Reading gaol as they both show the prison as being inhumane. However, there is a subtle difference as Oscar Wilde: writer of Reading gaol, experienced prison first hand but Charles Dickens experienced it second hand, as rather than him being imprisoned his father was.