



**Oscar Wilde's prison cell
in Reading Gaol**

Insights from literature

“The plank-bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's fingertips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame ...”

Oscar Wilde in 1897, from *De Profundis*

How can we best understand the past, present and future potential of the relationship between literature and the prisoner experience?

Dhillon Shenoy

Supervised by Professor Simon James and Dr Hannah King

An unlikely partnership?

For my research project, I sought to explore how literature has been and can be used to enhance public policy, individual and collective outcomes in English prisons and the criminal justice system. I took an interdisciplinary approach between literature studies – my own discipline – and sociology, of which the Durham Inside-Out program is a part.

Reading poetry

I was able to realise the potential of literature for the prisoner experience most practically via the creation of a poetry reading pack resource, for educational use behind bars by the Durham Inside-Out project. This was a challenging but vital task, that necessitated striking a delicate balance between facilitating accessibility for those previously deprived of advanced education, and appropriate challenge and engagement for the most able students.

Conclusions

I reached two main conclusions at the end of my research:

1. The potential of literature can be valued in the extent to which it allows us to advance our collective understanding of both what the current state of the prisoner experience is, and in visualising what we want it to become in the future
2. Access to writing provides prisoners with the prospect of self-determination (albeit in a very narrow and contextually limited way) within a system and regime which continues to be centred upon the deprivation of personal liberties and rights