

Weekly Read week 14B. This is a non-fiction extract from a journal about Victorian London called 'The Pauper, The Thief and the Convict', written by British author Thomas Archer in 1865. In this extract, Archer writes about London's Newgate Prison: 'The Gaol of Newgate', which used stand next to the Old Bailey (the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales).

THE GAOL OF NEWGATE

Newgate Gaol occupies a considerable portion of one side of the thoroughfare known as the Old Bailey. Grim and soot-blackened, its massy stone walls stare blankly at the establishment of the Sunday School Union opposite, at the five or six flaring, dirty taverns, and at the one or two dingy coffee-shops, where seedy men, draggled women, impenetrable policemen, and irritable witnesses or prosecutors while away the dreary hours spent in waiting for the calling on of the cases in the criminal courts.

To one or other of these taverns¹, policemen, officers of the court, friends of prisoners, and hawkers² of nuts and small wares, repair during the sessions at the Old Bailey, and here, tired prosecutors who are kept waiting for their cases to be called, are compelled to seek refreshment from the stifling atmosphere of the courts. It may sometimes happen that an Old Bailey official in rusty serge³ gown, and with dishevelled hair, will rush wildly across for a dram at the expense of some hopeful witness, who is informed that his case may be put forward on the list in return for judicious liberality in the matter of brandy and water, but everybody hanging about the dirty bar, or seeking repose in the long close room, where a woman is busy frying sausages, comes at last to have a faded, jaded, drooping appearance, as if he had been up all night. The hard Windsor chairs and beer-stained tables provided for the public accommodation, always bear the marks of yesterday's occupants of these dingy rooms. Even the seller of nuts, who endeavours to enliven the proceedings by a little gambling, becomes listless; and talks to some casual acquaintance, with a furtive look now and then at the celebrated detective officer, who bites the top of a stumpy cedar pencil, and makes a pretence of consulting his note-book for amusement. Such slight jocularities⁴ as he may bestow upon the frier of sausages seem strangely out of place amidst the general weariness, and the Newgate blight hangs heavily in the air.

Standing opposite and looking at the relentless stonework, there is but one light spot in the whole expanse from the dead wall at the corner of Newgate Street to the last gate entrance to the courts where the sessions are being held. This one spot is the governor's house, which intercepts the solid masonry, and, falling back

¹ *tavern* - an inn or public house (pub)

² *hawkers* – travelling salespeople

³ *serge* – a type of woollen material

⁴ *jocularities* - jokes/being jolly

a step, shows a range of bright windows and a shining brass plate upon a narrow door. Even this, however, is accessible only by a flight of stone steps, its entrance being barred (as not altogether disclaiming prison associations) by a railing of iron. But this door, and, indeed, the whole space occupied by the official residence, is utterly superseded and extinguished into gloom by another door, which is in itself the very type of all those dread recollections that make the very name of Newgate significant of terror and vain remorse. It is a small, black, iron-studded, door, this; black, as with the dead blackness of dirty crape, low and narrow as the entrance to a vaulted grave, ascended by a ragged step, the dust on which lies untrodden. In hideous mockery of ornament, this ghastly portal is surmounted by a set of gyves⁵ and chains, which hang in a square niche, and look like the remains of some human skeleton kept there in its death fetters as a horrible warning to scare the gaol-birds yet at large.

From out this gloomy gate many a trembling wretch has walked as from a living tomb to meet a shameful and a terrible death; many a blatant villain has played the bully to the last and stared with bold and bloodshot eyes at the crowd who had come, full of greedy interest, to see him hanged.

- Explain how the writer uses **personification** and **adjectives** to convey his thoughts about Newgate Gaol in the first paragraph.
- Read paragraph two and shade **four** statements that are true:
 - Policemen, court staff, friends of prisoners and hawkers all go to taverns and coffee shops while they are waiting for court cases to start.
 - The atmosphere of the courts makes the prisoners tired.
 - The rooms in the taverns are not very clean.
 - The nut seller gambles.
 - A detective officer is chewing a pencil.
 - The woman frying sausages is being jolly.
- What stands in the only 'light spot' in the area? How does the writer use the description of this 'light spot' to **further emphasise** the appearance of Newgate prison he describes in the rest of the paragraph?
- How does the writer use **language** in the final paragraph to convey the sense of terror that prisoners feel when faced with death?
- What does '**superseded**' mean?

⁵ gyves – chains/manacles (ankle or handcuffs)