

THE PRISONER (York 1853)



In this hell hole York prison, I wait out my years,
And ponder on loved ones alone, with their fears.
Men judge me as guilty; harsh sentence received,
But, where are my witnesses – so they believed?
Oh yes I felt angry, and have a strong will.
T'was not my intention to go out and kill!

This strong door of Jarrah was once a tall tree,
No more it grants shelter...just imprisons me!
I hear soldiers laughing in Court-yard outside.
I've dreamed of the future, then broke down and cried.
Although I've been Groomsman, and toiled in my hate;
I'd NEVER have murdered the State Magistrate.

In winter it's freezing, my heart aches anew.
With Summer, that cruel heat is crushing me through.
Where thick walls surround me, to torment my mind -
I think of the darling in path-ways behind.
Those memories stir as all I have left;
One lad in our stable proved guilty of theft.

He used the same knife with temper of fire,
And MUST have out to murder the squire!
Arrested o evening...My ankles wore chains.
That Stable Hand married my love, for his gains!
No one would listen, on all I could say.
The jailer puts food through, and then walks away!

My possessions are simple - but better than some.
I stare at the iron bars, and plead death might come.
Dry bread or stale onions, salt meat for my bones.
I hear in the distance harsh whippings and groans.
This building shall stand; when my life is done-
A gift from the devil, to some woman's son!

When visitors call here, as time moulds our fate;
My ghost will accompany the dead magistrate!
I've carved out my story - injustice to read.
...It's only through dying, a spirit is freed.
I plead innocent, while tired grow my calls.
There's a bucket, a blanket, and four towering walls

*Valerie J. Laughton 1989
(W.A Poet & winner of the 1988 Henry Lawson Awards)*



Activities to use with *The Prisoner (York 1853)*

Read the poem. What crime was committed?

As you walk around York Courthouse Complex, work out which parts of the site are described in the poem. For instance what is the poet referring to when she describes 'This strong door of Jarrah was once a tall tree'?

The poet writes 'In winter it's freezing, my heart aches anew.
With Summer, that cruel heat is crushing me through.'
Sit inside a prison cell and imagine what it would be like in winter and in summer. Using your five senses, write lists that describe what you would notice if you had been imprisoned in these times.

Sense	Descriptive words
Sight	
Sound	
Taste	
Touch	
Smell	

Which parts of the poem describe conditions for the prisoners?

Find a quiet place in the York Courthouse Complex to sit and write some thoughts that could later be used in a poem of your own.