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## **Defining the Carceral Characteristics of the ‘Dickensian prison’:**

### **A Corpus Stylistics Analysis of Dickens’s Novels<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Abstract:**

Charles Dickens is often evoked to make connections to Victorian times – and to highlight the need for change in today’s society. The situation of prisons is a prime example, where references to the ‘Dickensian prison’ figure in contemporary discourse to draw critical attention to the state of prisons and to call for reform. But it would be too simple to assume that today’s references to the Dickensian prison relate directly to the way Dickens narrates the prison. Therefore, this paper presents a detailed digital humanities textual study of prisons in Dickens’s novels to shed light on the vocabulary that the author uses to talk about this institution. The prisons in Dickens’s novels tend to be historic and outdated prisons, rather than the new Victorian-built model prisons. Using the CLiC (Corpus Linguistics in Context) web app, which combines a set of corpora with tools to access and search sets of texts, we set

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out to accumulate a substantial amount of textual evidence for a description of the carceral characteristics of Dickens's prisons. These characteristics describe features of the prison building, prison TimeSpace, prison life, and effects of the prison. Our findings present a valuable platform from which to consider the enduring popularity of the Dickensian prison in contemporary penal discourse.

**Keywords:** Dickens, corpus stylistics, prison, carceral, imprisonment, confinement

‘This shattering report on London’s best-known Victorian jail reveals levels of Dickensian squalor which ought to have been consigned to the history books.’  
Prison Reform Trust comment on HMP Wormwood Scrubs (*BBC News*, 2016)

The term ‘Dickensian’ is used in many ways. It is often deployed to reference the past and especially the more negative aspects of that past, as in the quotation from the Prison Reform Trust above. A 2017 inspection of HMP Manchester, similarly, criticised the ‘squalid, vermin-infested, damp environment more reminiscent of Dickensian England’ (Independent Monitoring Board, 7), and a 2019 parliamentary debate on prisons and probation likewise described HMP Liverpool as ‘rat-infested, with Dickensian conditions as thousands of basic maintenance jobs had not been completed’ (Burgon, 2019). Victorian society featured many forms of confinement and restraint, but the prison arguably represents the archetypal model of Victorian confinement; prison became the prevailing mode of punishment during the period, and many Victorian-built prisons are still in use in Britain today. It seems Dickens has always been useful to draw critical attention to the state of prisons, and such interventions have an established genealogy in the twentieth century. In 1979, for example, a similar debate called for the government to ‘destroy these Dickensian blocks of degradation, and thereafter rebuild prisons’ (Lord Hutchinson of Lullington). Such references to Dickens do not specifically refer to his writing, but more generally to his association with the Victorian period. As Bell points out, “‘Dickensian’ and ‘Victorian’ are often used more or less interchangeably” (3). Indeed, the continuing use of the term ‘Dickensian prison’ suggests that perceptions of this archetypal model of Victorian confinement are indebted to the prisons present in Dickens’s writing. The use of this term is undoubtedly pejorative, and presupposes the need for an alternative approach, yet its recurring hegemony suggests we remain captivated by the model of confinement depicted by Dickens. Dickens is a cultural

phenomenon that goes well beyond his actual writing, as John puts it, ‘the idea of Dickens has become conflated with the idea of the Victorian period’ (*Dickens and Mass Culture* 9). Importantly, this conflation often focuses on ‘a grim, urban cityscape of grinding poverty and deprivation. This is this side of Victorian life that lends the adjectives “Victorian” and “Dickensian” their negative associations’ (John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* 264).

Evoking Dickens to make connections to the Victorian era – and, in so doing, establish a case for change in the present – is not limited to the prison. But the Dickensian prison deserves particular attention for at least three reasons: Dickens’s own experience of prisons; the mechanisms that society in general has to learn about prisons; and the fact that prisons today still include Victorian-built institutions, with a quarter of operating prisons in England and Wales having been built in the nineteenth century (Moran et al., ‘Persistence of the Victorian Prison’ 1).

Dickens’s ‘evident obsession with prisons’ (Smith, 5) traces back to his childhood. In February 1824, when Dickens was twelve years old, his father John Dickens was imprisoned for debt in London’s Marshalsea prison (Smith, 3). Dickens senior was released after three months, following the death of his mother and his receipt of the resulting inheritance (Grass, 51), but John Dickens’s imprisonment would exert an enduring influence over his son’s life and work. As a journalist and novelist, Charles Dickens visited several prisons, including Newgate and Pentonville in London, Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia, and Kingston Penitentiary in Ontario, documenting these visits in his non-fiction writings, and drawing on the real-life experiences of carceral settings in his fiction. Dickens’s fictional prisons thus unite his childhood memories of parental imprisonment and his subsequent professional investigation of prison conditions.

The conflation of the terms ‘Dickensian’ and ‘Victorian’ is supported by the permeable boundaries of fiction and the real world in Dickens’s writing. Dickens’s fictional urban

spaces are created along with accounts of real carceral institutions like Newgate, the Fleet, and Marshalsea. The fictional engagement with such 'real' places is crucial for the contextualisation of Dickens's writing (see, for instance, Collins) that, in turn, makes the appellations 'Dickensian' and 'Victorian' so intricately linked. While Dickens is not the only author of the period who provides detailed descriptions of prisons (just think of Charles Reade or Edward Bulwer-Lytton), he is probably seen as the most influential. Alber and Lauterbach observe: 'Generally speaking, and in comparison with other nineteenth-century authors, it is in Dickens's oeuvre that the prison figures most prominently' (13).

Attempts to illuminate Dickens's approach to prisons do not only seek to explore the links between physical buildings and narrative references to them. Literary criticism has also explored Foucauldian readings of Dickens's prisons as indicative of panoptic state surveillance (Tambling, 48). In contrast to social topics and ideologies, what has received less attention are the textual techniques of narrating the prison. As John observes, 'the historical association of criticism of the Victorian novel with all themes "big" and social' (*Dickens's Villains* 108-9) has received more attention than the narrative prose. Grass opens the door for such attention to textual detail, arguing that the new reformatory prisons of the first half of the nineteenth century required more than factual accounts of buildings and procedures: 'facts were no longer adequate to narrate a prison that operated on the mind' (9).

The solitary cells were not only a matter of architectural design, then, but of psychological experience. This physical change also required discursive change. Prisons were no longer open, with the comings and goings of the old debtor's prison, where prisoners were not hidden from society, but could interact both within the prison and with the outside world. Now, prisons were private, which had implications for the social perception of them: 'Victorians increasingly experienced their jails only discursively, as the narrative sums of what was written in official reports and newspaper accounts and upon the bodies of the

confined' (Grass, 47). In this discursive experience, narrative fiction was one of the gateways for society to engage with the concept of the prison.

The fact that today's assessments of prison conditions use the term 'Dickensian' to make links to Victorian carceral institutions is also a form of discursive experience of the prison. Like the new Victorian prisons, prisons today are relatively private in the sense that members of the public cannot walk in and out freely. Society's perception of its prisons relies on reports, documentaries, and stories. This discourse might be more multi-modal and technologically enhanced, but it is still a discursive account of the prison. The use of the adjective 'Dickensian' is one of the elements in contemporary discourse, and, as Bell points out (7), it would be an overinterpretation to link the term to actual textual knowledge of Dickens's writing. Still, there is a very real connection to Dickens's time through prison buildings that survive to this day.

It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate the full complexity of the prison discourse from the Victorian period through to the present. Our focus is on the anchor point of narrative accounts of Dickens's prisons in his novels. We employ corpus stylistics methods to gain insights into the narrative constructions of carceral institutions in the novels. Corpus methods are text-driven, beginning with a detailed analysis of the text's language, allowing us to describe detailed linguistic patterns (see Mahlberg, *Corpus Linguistics*, 7). Such patterns, in turn, provide information on the meanings that are associated with prisons in Dickens's oeuvre. Once identified, these linguistic patterns form a reference point for comparative studies across a range of historical and contemporary texts in the wider prison discourse.

## A corpus stylistic approach to the Dickensian prison

This article offers a fresh perspective on the prison in Dickens's writing by employing corpus stylistic methods. The advantage of such methods is the focus that they allow on the actual textual patterns that narrate the prison. This approach complements what John has described as the preoccupation of criticism with the "big" themes' (*Dickens's Villains* 109). It specifically enables the detailed view that is needed to see the discursive construction of the prison emphasised by Grass (47). Within the wider context of the digital humanities, corpus stylistics occupies a place that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis. It is not fully automatic or purely quantitative, but uses computer-assisted methods to support the analysis of the critic (see Mahlberg and Wiegand). A textual focus enables us to provide a systematic and detailed account of meanings associated with the prison in Dickens's novels and to compare this to their occurrence in other nineteenth-century texts. Our analysis will show new detail and connections in this prison discourse.

The tool that we use for our analysis is the CLiC (Corpus Linguistics in Context) web app (see Mahlberg et al.). CliC combines a set of corpora with tools to access and search these sets of texts. A core functionality that we will use in this paper is the concordance. A concordance identifies and displays all the occurrences of a search word (or group of words) with a specific number of words on the left and right of the search word. **Figure 1** shows a sample of fifteen lines for the word *prison*. The display can arrange the search results in a number of ways. Figure 1 shows lines fifty to sixty-five from a concordance that was sorted on the first word to the left of *prison* so we see adjectives like *dismal*, *dreary* and *gloomy*. Words that precede *prison* include *Fleet*, that is, the name of a particular prison, and the concordance sample highlights the preposition *from* indicating how people escape from or are released from prison. In our study, we will make use of the concordance function to analyse detailed lexico-grammatical patterns that characterise aspects of prisons. Our analysis will



reveal four carceral characteristics relating to the prison building, prison TimeSpace, prison life and the effects of the prison. We will provide more detail on the analysis methodology in the sections below. To contextualise our findings, we also provide a frequency overview of prisons in Dickens compared to other authors. Further, we will highlight occurrences of named real prisons in the novels.

<FIG 1 NEAR HERE>

### **Prisons in Dickens's novels and in context**

To get a sense of the frequency with which Dickens writes about prisons, **Figure 2** provides an overview across his fifteen novels. The distribution covers the words *prison*, *prisons*, *gaol*, *gaols*, *jail*, *jails*, and *penitentiary*. The figure gives the raw figures for the sum of the terms, as well as the relative frequency (here frequency per million words) to account for the different lengths of the books. While *Little Dorrit* contains the most occurrences in absolute terms, its relevant frequencies only put it in third place after *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge*. The distribution plot further indicates where in the book the prison search words occur.

<FIG 2 NEAR HERE>

To contextualise the frequency of prisons in Dickens, we checked the same search terms in the *19th Century Reference Corpus*, a general reference for nineteenth-century fiction available in CliC. Our prison search terms appear in twenty-two of the twenty-nine texts in this corpus. **Figure 3** shows the ten texts with the highest relative frequencies, which are lower than the frequencies in Dickens's novels with the most prison occurrences. It is important to point out that we are merely dealing with uncontextualised information at this

stage. In other words, not every occurrence of the terms might refer to an actual prison, as there can also be metaphorical uses, and a comparison with a corpus specifically looking at ‘prison novels’ would give a different perspective, too. Overall, however, these figures give a useful overview pointing to Dickens’s preoccupation with prisons in the sense of prisons occurring in all his novels, and in some with very high relative frequencies. Additionally, the search does not account for stand-alone references to named prisons that do not use the word *prison* or *jail*, as in ‘Mr Micawber returned to the King’s Bench when his case was over’ (*David Copperfield*, chapter 12, paragraph 2).<sup>1</sup> There are, for instance, seventy-one such stand-alone references to *Newgate* and 160 to *Marshalsea*.

<FIG 3 NEAR HERE>

### Real prisons

To find examples of real prisons in Dickens’s novels, we searched our prison terms (*prison*, *prisons*, *gaol*, *gaols*, *jail*, *jails*, *penitentiary*) and sorted the concordance on the first word to the left. This search revealed thirty-nine instances where Dickens refers to named prisons: *King’s Bench*, *Cloisterham*, *Fleet*, *Harmon’s*, *Harmony*, *Kingston*, *Horsemonger Lane*, *London*, *Maidstone*, *Marshalsea* and *Newgate*. This does not include prison names used on a stand-alone basis, where they are not followed by the search words *prison*, *jail* and so on. *Cloisterham* and *Harmon’s/Harmony* are fictional, but the remainder are real prisons, as detailed in **Table 1**.

Prison	Year built	Year closed	Function in Victorian era
King’s Bench	1294, rebuilt 1758	1869	Debtor’s prison
Fleet	1197, rebuilt 1781/82	1842, demolished 1846	Debtor’s prison

Kingston [upon Thames]	1761	1852	Local prison
Horsemonger Lane	1791	1878	County gaol
Maidstone	1819	Still operating	Local prison
Marshalsea	1373, moved site 1811	1842	Debtor's prison
Newgate	Built 1188, rebuilt 1783	1882; used as lock-up until 1902	Local prison and county gaol for Middlesex

Table 1 Real prisons in Dickens's novels in CLiC (Mahlberg et al. 2020).

The real prisons listed in [Table 1](#) all pre-date the Victorian era, and except for Maidstone, ceased operating during the nineteenth century. Apart from Maidstone, they were located in the London area, and include some long-established and notorious metropolitan prisons – namely Newgate, King's Bench, Fleet, Horsemonger Lane, and Marshalsea. Many of these sites were used to imprison debtors, including Dickens's father, who was sent to the Marshalsea in 1824; indeed, our search also revealed fifteen instances where our prison search words are preceded by *debtor's* or *debtors'*. Crucially, however, the Victorian period saw the transition away from such historical carceral systems: Fleet and Marshalsea prisons closed in 1842, imprisonment for debt was almost completely abolished in 1869, and Newgate ceased to operate as a prison in 1882, retained only as a lock-up for the Old Bailey. In place of these ageing prisons, the Victorians instituted the 'separate system', which saw prisoners confined in individual cells to avoid moral contamination between different classes of criminals and to encourage reflection and repentance. This modern carceral system required modern prison buildings. A new model prison opened at Pentonville in 1842 and served as the blueprint for the ninety prisons that were purpose built or significantly

remodelled during the subsequent thirty-five years (Moran et al., 'Long Shadow' 11). This new breed of prison replaced historic institutions, such as Newgate and Marshalsea, reforming the backbone of the Victorian penal system. Many of these new Victorian prisons, which are commonly labelled Dickensian, are still in use today.

Institutions like Pentonville were designed and built during the period when Dickens was writing, but as Tambling has identified, the author's fiction instead focuses on older prisons that were largely redundant, rather than depicting the newly ascendant model prison. Tambling highlights an exception found in *David Copperfield*, where a scene is set in a prison that is most likely Pentonville (52). Dickens's preoccupation with prisons thus centres on what were then already historic and obsolete carceral sites, rather than the new prisons typically associated with the Victorian era. One implication of this observation is that, although Dickens wrote in the Victorian era, his novels are not always set in that same time. The novels with the highest relative frequencies of our prison search terms, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge* (see [Figure 2](#)) are both historical novels, set in the time of the Gordon Riots and the French Revolution. Also, for *Little Dorrit*, which has a high relative frequency of prison terms, the first opening sentence already reminds the reader that the story is not contemporary: 'Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day' (*Little Dorrit*, chapter 1, paragraph 1). While the term 'Dickensian' might be used in a way that equates Dickens with the Victorian period, it is important to realise that narrative accounts of prisons in Dickens are not necessarily about 'Victorian' prisons. In the next section we will take a closer look at the kinds of prisons we find in Dickens. Crucially, our research suggests that contemporary use of the term 'Dickensian' to describe the conditions in Victorian-built prisons is a misnomer. Dickens writes about prisons that pre-dated the Victorian era (that is those built before the 1830s), and often describes experiences in them which also pre-dated Victoria's reign. The new prisons, built after the 1830s, which feature very rarely in his

writing, are still in operation today, yet these are the prisons being talked about when contemporary commentators refer to prisons as ‘Dickensian’.

### **Carceral characteristics of Dickens’s prisons**

To gain a detailed picture of prisons in Dickens, we analysed the lexis of Dickens’s carceral fiction. We identified the words used by the author in relation to the prison and grouped them into thematic categories. These categories allow us to describe four carceral characteristics of the Dickensian prison: features of the prison building, prison TimeSpace, prison life, and effects of the prison.

For our analysis, we studied the contexts of our prison search terms across Dickens’s novels. Using concordance searches, we initially focused on the single words immediately preceding or following the search words; for example, in the phrase *the prison guard, prison* is the search word, *the* is the preceding word, and *guard* is the following word. Our prison search terms (*prison, prisons, gaol, gaols, jail, jails, penitentiary*) yielded 604 occurrences altogether; that is 604 concordance lines. To support the process of classification we sorted the lines alphabetically on the left and on the right, respectively, and grouped the words into the categories illustrated in **Tables 2 and 3**. **Figure 4** shows the first ten lines sorted on the left, which highlights occurrences of the indefinite article. As was to be expected, such ‘grammatical’ or ‘function’ words generally make up a large proportion in a concordance. In both **Tables 2 and 3**, function words hence constitute the biggest group.

<**FIG 4 NEAR HERE**>

While function words tend to be regarded as not adding much ‘lexical’ meaning, we grouped some grammatical words separately in a category accounting for location and movement (for example *from, in, to*), and in a category of possessives, for reasons which will

become apparent below. The categorisation of preceding words also included words that conveyed the prison name or prison type, which we discussed in the above section. The category *Descriptive*, which accounts for both words preceding and following the search words, and the categories *People*, *Prison life*, *Spatial*, *Temporal* and *Verb*, which specifically refer to words following the search words, contribute significant data to the carceral characteristics of Dickens’s prisons.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Function words	for example, <i>a, the</i>	364
Spatial	Words referring to location or movement, for example <i>from, in, to</i>	102
Descriptive	Words referring to the attributes of the prison, for instance <i>old, dreary, large</i>	52
Prison name	Specific prison name, such as <i>Marshalsea</i>	39
Prison type	Name of a specific type of prison, for example <i>debtor's</i> <i>prison</i>	25
Possessives	such as <i>his, her</i>	22

Table 2 Categorisation of words immediately preceding search words, ranked by frequency (Mahlberg et al. 2020).

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Function words	for example <i>a, the, at</i>  Includes cases where search word is followed by a new sentence or clause	446
Verb	Search word is followed by a verb	51

Building	Words denoting parts of the prison building, for example <i>walls, yard, bars</i>	45
Temporal	Words referring to time, for example <i>again, morning</i>	17
People	Words referring to people in the prison, for example <i>officer, children</i>	15
Spatial	Words linking the prison to spatial location, for example <i>upon, where</i>	12
Prison life	Words referring to elements of prison life, for example <i>fever, food</i>	12
Descriptive	Words referring to the attributes of the prison	6

Table 3 Categorisation of words immediately following search words (Mahlberg et al. 2020).

Based on this initial categorisation, we identified recurring themes in the data, such as time, space, and the prison building. The words in the *Descriptive* category were especially diverse, so we created the following sub-categories of themes: building and physical properties; Carceral institutions; Confinement and release; Darkness and light; Death, decay and burial; Emotional effects; People and community; Pervasive authority; Physical and moral contamination; Sounds; Time and space.

To increase the textual evidence for our description of the prison further, in the next step, we went beyond the words immediately next to the search words. To broaden our search to a context of five words on the left and on the right we used CliC's KWICGrouper function, which supports the analyst in checking the occurrence of words in the span around the search words and highlights them in the concordance display. We looked for different forms of the words we had already identified, as well as synonyms, or words with meanings related to the words returned by our initial search. **Figure 5** shows examples of words that we included in

the category ‘Prison building – building and physical properties’. The word *door* was found in our initial classification of the 604 concordance lines where we focused on the immediate right and left of the search words. Lines three to five show *door* as the first word on the right. Lines two, eight, ten, and eleven are additional instances of *door* in a context of five words on the left and right. The words *room*, *chambers*, and *bricks* are words we found in this five-word span that similarly add to the category of ‘building and physical properties’. A full list of the words we collected, and their categorisation, is provided in Appendix 1. This is the data that forms the basis of our discussion in the remainder of this article.

<FIG 5 NEAR HERE>

The categories we identified are ad hoc categories in the sense that they group together words that describe similar meanings. Such ad hoc categories are often used in corpus linguistics (Mahlberg, ‘Corpus Linguistics’ 36), and there are different approaches for reaching a classification. Tognini-Bonelli describes how such groupings may be ‘corpus-based’, employing a top-down, deductive approach that groups data around pre-existing categories, or ‘corpus-driven’, representing a bottom-up, inductive approach where groups are the result of what is suggested by the data (66; 87). In practice, however, categorisation often represents a combination of these methods (Mahlberg, ‘Corpus Linguistics’ 232-33), as does our approach. Our team is interdisciplinary and combines expertise from criminology, carceral geography, penal history, as well as language and literature. Therefore, our categorisation drew on existing concepts in these fields, while at the same time focusing on the patterns that emerged from the concordance analysis.

To be clear, the aim of our analysis is not a fully automatic and comprehensive data analysis, but is instead to use computer-assisted methods to take a fresh perspective on a textual analysis. The first step, the initial classification of the 604 occurrences of the prison



search terms covers all words on the immediate left and right. In this sense, **Tables 2 and 3** cover the 604 comprehensively. The second step, then, aims to find more textual evidence. The goal is not a comprehensive classification of all words in the context of the search terms.

We are aware that some words affiliated with prisons and carceral settings also align with other spaces, such as churches and schools. Therefore we took care to assess each instance appearing in our searches to confirm when those searched instances aligned with prison contexts. For example, in the sentence ‘The church tower, the church roof, the church yard, the prison leads, the very water-spouts and lampposts’ (*Barnaby Rudge*, chapter 65, paragraph 6), the words *roof* and *yard* describe a church and not a prison. So we are not arguing that every occurrence of the words listed in Appendix 1 refers to prisons. Moreover, our approach does not distinguish metaphorical allusions to prison, as in the phrase: ‘If I were shut up in a strong prison, you would draw me out.’ (*Our Mutual Friend*, chapter 15, paragraph 49).

Importantly, the focus of our analysis is on the cumulative picture and the overall tendencies that our data indicates. Our approach enables us to collect a substantial amount of textual evidence to account for the way in which Dickens narrates prisons. We are able to identify four carceral characteristics: features of the prison building, prison TimeSpace, prison life, and effects of the prison. We discuss each of these characteristics in what follows in more detail.

### **Mapping the prison building: Bar, cell, window**

One carceral characteristic of Dickens’s prisons is a detailed mapping of the prison building, its components, and its physical condition. We identified a number of words that signify parts of the prison building, and these components can be divided into three sub-themes. First, there are elements of the building that keep the prisoner confined, such as *bars*, *bolts*, *bricks*,

*foundations, locks, roof, stones, wall(s)*, which emphasise the function of the building in containing the prisoner. Second, there are words that refer to spaces in the prison, like *cell, cellars, court(s), courtyard, passage(s), room(s) stairs, staircase(s) yard(s)*, detailing the multiple layers of confinement that contain the prisoner. Third, we found recurring references to routes into and out of the prison, in the words *door(s), entrance, entry, gate(s), key(s), threshold*, and to ways in which prisoners may communicate with the outside world, like *grates, grating, window(s)*.

These carceral components create a detailed image of the prison space, often organised around the boundaries between private and public space, which construct the prison building for the reader, from the foundations to the roof. Prison consists of ‘nested pods of space’ (Moran, *Carceral Geography* 76), which confine the prisoner and control their movement, and Dickens’s itemisation of prison building components accentuates the layers of carceral confinement. At the same time, the most iconic of the prison’s constituent parts, such as bars or cells, fulfil a metonymic function, whereby individual elements represent the prison as a whole (see also Fludernik 33), thus Dickens’s repeated references to carceral components suggest that the prison system is omnipresent, enveloping, and impossible to escape. Dickens’s prisons are made up of multiple confining components, arranged into layered, interconnected carceral spaces, with controlled entry and exit routes.

Alongside these building components, our search reveals words that appear to describe the building’s physical qualities. We identified words associated with the physical strength and austerity of the building, such as *bare, blank, coarse, hard, heavy, large(r), strong(er)*, which emphasise the sturdiness and endurance of the building, but also suggest the hardships and deprivations of life within its walls. This strength is accompanied by words describing the pervasive, enduring nature of the prison institution, created from two main lexical groups. A number of words convey the prison’s authority, like *abounding, common, customary*,

*dominant, eternal, infamous, Majesty's, powerful*, plus frequent references to the prison as *old*, demonstrating its enduring, perpetual, historical presence. Equally, the prison is discussed alongside other disciplinary institutions, including *almshouse, convict-ships, hospital(s), hulks, infirmary, lazar-houses, madhouse, school, workhouse*, locating the prison within a penal network reminiscent of Foucault's 'carceral archipelago' (297). In Dickens's novels, prisoners are thus incarcerated in a space consisting of multiple, specific layers of confinement, which are physically strong and austere, and seemingly everlasting, located within a wider system of disciplinary institutions.

### **Sensing carceral TimeSpace: Gloomy, thundering, cramped**

A second carceral characteristic relates to the experience of imprisonment within such buildings – specifically its spatial and temporal qualities, and the sensory experience. Our search words were often directly preceded or followed by words that are spatial or temporal, emphasising that imprisonment fixes prisoners in a 'carceral TimeSpace' (Moran, "Doing Time" in 'Carceral Space'), sentencing them to be imprisoned for a defined period of time in a defined space. In her work on this topic, Moran (314) privileges neither space nor time in understanding carceral experience, instead recognising time and space as co-constitutive of this experience, and considers TimeSpace a means of uncovering and understanding those other registers, such as rhythm, force, or affect, in the experience of incarceration. She also draws attention to TimeSpace as a means of understanding the inherently embodied nature of incarceration, with the incarcerated body as the 'site' of carceral experience. Characters in Dickens's writing repeatedly move *from, in, into, to* prison, and prisons are described as being *here, under, upon, where, wherever*, placing these prisons in exact spatial orientations. Likewise, there is a connection between prison and time, through recurring temporal vocabulary, such as *again, before, days, every, last, now, until, and when*. While the prison

building may appear timeless and permanent, Dickens's description of these prisons is spatially and temporally specific, narrating a prison sentence that occurs in an identifiable place and time, but which is, both within each individual narrative and within the wider body of Dickens' work, articulated with rhythms of repetitive spatio-temporal engagement with carceral space.

Imprisonment occurs in a particular location and moment, and in this location and moment, it is sensed by the incarcerated body. Taking this approach further, our work reveals that Dickens's description of carceral TimeSpace centres on the sensory experience of imprisonment. Sensory criminology establishes both that penal ideology is 'encoded in the sensorial outputs and transmissions' of prisons, and that 'places and processes of punishment and social control are experienced sensorially' (Herrity, Schmidt and Warr xxiii), thereby foregrounding the centrality of the sensory to accounts of penalty. Our research noted a focus on sights and sounds in Dickens's carceral writing, firstly through a recurring theme of darkness. Prisons are associated with darkness and night, conveyed through the words *black, dark, darkened, darkening, darkness, gloom(y), midnight, night, shade, shadow(s), twilight*, which are contrasted with light sources, in the words *blazing, bright, burn(ing), candles, dawned, day, daybreak, lamps, lighted, shining*. This juxtaposition of darkness and light documents the sensory experience of prison, but also has a metaphorical resonance, in which darkness represents despair, ignorance, or evil, while light signifies hope, purity, or enlightenment, linking this sensory language to the negative emotional effects of prison discussed in a following section.

Words relating to the sounds of prison have similar emotional resonance. There are references to the unpleasant carceral 'soundscape' (Herrity, 240; 256), with a particular focus on distressed voices, created via words like *echoes, murmuring, muttering, noise, noisy, outcry, resounded, shrieks, shrill, sound, thundering, voice(s)*. While these words primarily

describe sound in the prison space, the words *echoes* and *resounded* are also evocative of the repetitive, cyclical nature of carceral time (Foucault 149–51; Armstrong 140-1). As with the juxtaposition of light and dark, there are a small number of antonymic words: *quiet*, *silent*, *whispering*, and this theme of silence again has a metaphorical dimension, representing the removal of prisoners from society, the silencing of their voices, and the metaphorical ‘living death’ to which prisoners are sentenced. Sensory language evokes the sights and sounds of prison for the reader, but also fulfils a metaphorical function in conveying the deprivations of prison.

Further sensory references occur in allusions to the prison’s tactile quality, which centres on awareness of continual confinement contrasted with a concomitant desire for release. Our concordances reveal words signifying the confining nature of the prison:

*barred, barricaded, barrier, below, beneath, captive(s), captivity, close, closed, closeness, closer, closing, confined, confinement, contained, cramped, crowd(s), crowded, custody, detained, fetters, immured, inside, interior, little, locked, narrow, prisonous, shrunk, shut(s), smallest, tighten*

Notably, several of these words appear in multiple forms, as in the examples of *close/closed/closeness/closer/closing*, *confined/confinement*, and *crowd/crowded/crowds*.

This evidences the recurring nature of the theme, but is also suggestive of a pervading claustrophobia evoked by prison space. This recurring sense of confinement is accompanied less frequently by words that promise freedom: *escape, escaped, liberty, open, opened, out, outer, outside, release(s), released, unbarring*. Again, the repetition of the words in various forms highlights the importance of the theme for the Dickensian prison. Thematically, confinement and release build on the words identified in the previous section, relating to the confining components of prison space, and the control of entry and exit routes. Dickens’s novels thus locate prison in a specific spatial location and temporal moment, document the

sensory experience of this carceral TimeSpace, and foreground a visual, aural, and tactile vocabulary.

### **Recording prison life: Debtors, turnkeys, grime**

Our third carceral characteristic centres on prison life; the people, roles, relationships, and activities in prison. This encompasses those who are imprisoned, who are variously described as *prisoner, inmate, debtor, felon, offender*, as well as those who keep them imprisoned, who are termed *gaoler, governor, guard, jailer, keeper, officer, turnkey*. In addition, several other individuals and groups are named, specifically *acquaintance, agents, ambassadors, chaplain, children, chum, community, companion, comrade, fellow, fellow-pickpockets, fellow-prisoner, neighbourhood, people, population, visitors/wisitors*. Many of these roles are preceded by the word *prison* to create compound nouns such as *prison children* or *prison population*, demonstrating that these words refer directly to individuals and groups in prison. This proliferation of roles suggests that Dickens's portrayal of the prison centres on the range of people who are impacted by imprisonment. In particular, the references to *acquaintance, chum, community, companion, comrade, fellow, fellow-pickpockets, fellow-prisoner, neighbourhood, people, population* indicate that Dickens depicts prison as a community made up of relationships, rather than focusing solely on prisoners and their guards.

This focus on human aspects of the prison comes through in our research in two further ways. First, our search words are often immediately preceded by the possessives *her, his, my, their, your*, as in *her prison*. This creates a link between individuals and the prison, thereby emphasising its human impact. Second, several words directly following the search words relate to carceral life, specifically *birth, cookery, discipline, fever, food, hanging, manners, poultry, regulations, rules*. These words are again coupled with the search words *prison, gaol* or *jail* to form compound nouns such as *prison food, gaol fever, jail poultry*, which describe

specific aspects of prison life. While this set of words is small, and references to *discipline*, *regulations*, and *rules* are to be expected in the carceral setting, this group encompasses a wide variety of recognisable activities, including birth, food, disease, and death, emphasising the parallels between life inside and outside prison walls. This variety suggests that Dickens seeks to humanise prison's inhabitants, by describing the range of people present in the prison setting and their activities.

In addition to these carceral characters, there are two further significant figures in Dickens's prisons – the prison institution and the narrator. It has been proposed that the main character in most prison novels is 'the prison itself' (Massey, 111), as forbidding carceral architecture and strict prison procedures dominate the narrative. Accordingly, we found several instances where our search words were immediately followed by a verb, thereby describing an action ostensibly carried out by the prison, and thus anthropomorphising the penal institution. We find verbs that are indicative of the prison taking on human qualities: *being*, *breaking*, *exists*, *fell*, *fought*, *gorged*, *leads*, *proving*, *standing*, *stood*, *suffered*, *turned*. The verbs *being*, *exists*, *proving*, *standing*, *stood* are again suggestive of the prison's permanence and resilience, whereas the verbs *breaking*, *fell*, *fought*, *suffered* are redolent of conflict and change, suggesting that the prison's position is less secure than it appears. Crucially, the association of these verbs with the carceral institution indicates that the prison at times adopts human qualities, becoming a character in its own right in Dickens's prison writing. Beyond narrating the prison, this type of personification is a well-known means in Dickens's fiction.

Additionally, our analysis reveals the pivotal role of the narrator in describing the prison. To focus on the narrator, we made use of the functionality of CLiC to run searches within 'quotes', that is text within quotation marks and 'non-quotes', text outside of quotation marks. This search revealed that, for the *Dickens's Novels Corpus*, 29% of instances of our

search words appear in quotes, while the majority of references to prisons (71%) are made by the narrator. In comparison, a search of the *19th Century Reference Corpus* found that the carceral search words were evenly distributed throughout the narrative, with 49% appearing in quotes and 51% in non-quotes. Moreover, in the *Dickens's Novels Corpus*, it was more common for words falling into the *Descriptive* category, and for words relating to the building, its inhabitants, and prison life to appear in non-quotes than in quotes. This analysis reveals that the richest descriptions of the prison, and of the people affected by it, are provided by the narrator, rather than by the novels' characters. These depictions include the narrator's opinions of the prison, its attributes, routines, and inhabitants. Dickens's carceral writing therefore sees the narrator describe in rich detail the people, roles and activities of prison, humanising the many individuals affected by the penal system, while also anthropomorphising the prison itself.

### **Condemning the effects of prison: Dismal, neglected, buried**

Our final carceral characteristic relates to the effect of prison on prisoners and society, which is overwhelmingly negative. This characteristic can be broken down into three sub-themes of physical and moral contamination, death and decay, and prison's emotional effects. Our analysis suggests that the prison is repeatedly associated with physical contamination: *blemish, contamination, dust, fever, filthy, grime, impurity, jaundiced, mud, rank, rats, rotted, rusted, sick, sluggish, smoke, spoil, squalid, stain, taint, turbid, unhealthy, wasted*. These words suggest that the conditions within and around the prison are dirty and diseased, but also that such contamination spreads to the inhabitants. A related set of words alludes to moral corruption, where our search disclosed *abject, bad, blame, crime, criminal's, disorder, guilty, idleness, loathsome, madness, poor, rogue, rotten-hearted, vice, vile, villainous, vulgar(ly), worse, worst*. This emphasis on physical and moral contamination reveals the



prison as a site of abjection (to use Julia Kristeva's term), rendering the prisoner an abject Other who is physically and morally expelled from society. Such images of corruption and contamination exist in clear opposition to the ostensible aim of the prison to deter, reform and rehabilitate prisoners: references to *disorder* and *idleness*, particularly, appear contrary to penal practices of discipline and labour. The combination of these words suggests that Dickens depicts the prison as materially and morally contaminated, unable to deliver the discipline, order, and reform that it promises.

Linked to images of dirt, disease, and corruption, our analysis identified frequent allusions to death, decay, and burial. These may relate to the literal moment of death, in words such as *dead*, *death*, *die(d)*, *oblivion*, *perish(ed)*. There is a recurring theme of death as punishment, through references to executions carried out within the prison, in the words *hanged*, *hanging*, *hangman*, *hung*, which figure the prison as both the site and cause of death. This is further intimated by the word *dead-wall*, an architectural term that refers to a blank wall, without windows or doors, but which draws a direct link between the prison building and death, and is also suggestive of the public display of executed bodies on a wall (Tarlow and Battell Lowman, 227). The words *buried*, *decayed*, *grave*, *tomb* allude to the burial of executed prisoners within prison grounds, and depict imprisonment as living death or live burial, as prisoners are cut off from society, and contained within the prison, reducing them to 'the status of *living dead*' (Mbembe, 40, original emphasis). The word *spectral* is suggestive of the haunting of the prison site by deceased prisoners, but also positions prisoners as ghosts who exist in a liminal state between prison and society, redolent of the status of 'civil death' that was historically conferred on the prisoner, depriving them of the right to vote or own property. The vocabulary shows that Dickens repeatedly presents the prison as a site of literal or figurative death, and describes prisoners as subjected to an uncanny live burial or living death.

Alongside references to contamination, corruption, death and decay, our analysis identified a number of words that convey negative emotions, several of which signify emotions that might be expected to be experienced by prisoners. There is a recurring theme of loneliness, evidenced in the words *alone, contempt, indifference, indifferently, neglected, unnoticed*, and more generally of unhappiness, conveyed through words such as *dismal, dreary, dull, languished, languishing, melancholy, miserable, mopes, sad, solemn, unfortunate, unhappy*. Our analysis also identified words that relay despair or desperation, in the words *appalled, doom, doomed, dread, hopeless, wretched*, which may denote emotions experienced by prisoners, or the effects of the prison on onlookers. Finally, a number of words relate to fear and distress – *anxiety, danger, disquietude, fear, frightened, horror, infernal, nightmares, suffer(ed), threatening* – and physical or mental pain – *afflicted, agonised, bewildered, pain(s)* – which suggest that the prison is threatening and hurtful for its inhabitants and for the wider population. While our searches did reveal some positive words, including *cheerful, comfort, compassion, happiness, happy, hope, humane, pleasant, safer, safety*, we uncovered a more diverse range of negative emotions. The Dickensian prison, thus, fails in its mission to engender order, discipline and reform, instead spreading physical and moral contamination, causing death and decay, and invoking misery and hopelessness in its inhabitants and wider society.

### **Entrapped by the Dickensian prison**

Dickens's name has become a byword for historical hardship, particularly in relation to prisons, and the author's carceral fiction remains a touchstone for how contemporary carceral conditions are evaluated. Acknowledging the continuing influence of the author's historical prisons, this article set out to identify the carceral characteristics of the Dickensian prison, thereby providing a platform from which to interrogate the term's enduring appeal. Our

corpus stylistics approach has enabled a fresh perspective on the Dickensian prison by enabling us to base our observations on a substantial amount of textual evidence.

Our research confirms that Dickens primarily writes about older prison sites, systems and experiences, typically debtor's prisons such as Marshalsea and historical London prisons like Newgate, rather than describing the new model prison that arose during the Victorian era, many of which still operate today. Crucially, descriptions of modern-day conditions in these Victorian-built prisons as 'Dickensian' conflates two very different – indeed, oppositional – models of prison design and operation.

Although the clichéd term 'Dickensian prison' is typically deployed today for prisons other than those featured in the author's writing, its popularity is undeniable, and our study therefore sought to characterise the attributes of the prisons present in the author's work in order to better understand the significance of the term to contemporary penal discourse. The computer-assisted methods we have drawn on supported us in cataloguing the carceral content of Dickens's novels. Based on a substantial amount of textual evidence, we were able to identify four carceral characteristics of the Dickensian prison. First, Dickens maps the pervasive confinement within the prison landscape, via repeated references to components of the prison building, accompanied by vocabulary that describes the prison as strong, austere and long-standing, and allusions to other carceral institutions. Second, he foregrounds the sensory experience of carceral TimeSpace, situating the prison in a particular location and moment, with repeated allusions to sensory and embodied aspects of prison. Third, he foregrounds the humanity that exists in prison, describing the people, roles, relationships, and activities of prison, accompanied by anthropomorphism of the prison building and rich narratorial description. Fourth and finally, he displays the overwhelmingly negative effects of imprisonment, creating images of physical and moral contamination, death, decay, burial, loneliness, sadness, despair, and fear, rather than the order, discipline, and reform promised

by prison authorities. Together, these four carceral characteristics provide the most detailed and extensive analysis to date of the fictional penal institutions that the term Dickensian prison ostensibly describes.

Politicians, policymakers, prison reformers, creative practitioners, scholars, and the general public remain ensnared by the imaginative spectre of the Dickensian prison, persistently comparing contemporary penal systems to the author's fictional prisons, unable to break free of this deeply entrenched carceral trope. By systematically interrogating the textual detail of Dickens's prison writing, and defining the carceral characteristics in his work, we hope to trigger a critical reappraisal of how the modern penal system remains entrapped by the enduring legacy of the Dickensian prison.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: List of words relating to Dickens's carceral characteristics, by category

<b>Carceral characteristic</b>	<b>Thematic category</b>	<b>Words</b>
Prison building	Building and physical properties	bare, bars, blank, bolts, bricks, buildings, cell, cellars, chambers, chimneys, coarse, cold, court(s), courtyard, door(s), empty, entrance, entry, foundations, galleys, gate(s), grates, grating, hard, hardened, heavy, hot, iron, key(s), large, larger, lobby, locks, lodge, night-cellar, passage(s), roof, room(s), staircase(s), stairs, stones, stony, strong, stronger, threshold, wall(s), wicket-gate, window(s), wood, yard(s)
	Carceral institutions	almshouse, convict-ships, hospital(s), hulks, infirmary, lazar-houses, madhouse, school, workhouse
	Pervasive authority	abounding, common, customary, dominant, eternal, infamous, Majesty's, powerful
Prison space	Confinement and release	barred, barricaded, barrier, below, beneath, captive(s), captivity, close, closed, closeness, closer, closing, confined, confinement, contained, cramped, crowd(s), crowded, custody, detained, escape, escaped, fetters, immured, inside, interior, liberty, little, locked, narrow, open, opened, out, outer, outside, prisonous, release(s), released, shrunk, shut(s), smallest, tighten, unbarring



<b>Carceral characteristic</b>	<b>Thematic category</b>	<b>Words</b>
	Darkness and light	black, blazing, bright, burn, burning, candles, dark, darkened, darkening, darkness, dawned, day, daybreak, gloom, gloomy, lamps, lighted, midnight, night, shade, shadow(s), shining, to-night, twilight
	Sounds	echoes, murmuring, muttering, noise, noisy, outcry, quiet, resounded, shrieks, shrill, silent, sound, thundering, voice(s), whisper
	Time and space	again, alone, before, days, every, from, here, in, into, last, morning, now, space, to, under, until, upon, when, where, wherever
Prison life	People and community	acquaintance(s), agents, ambassadors, chaplain, children, chum, community, companion, comrade(s), debtors, debtors', debtor's, fellow, fellow-pickpockets, fellow-prisoner, felons, gaolers, governor, guard, inmates, jailer, keeper, neighbourhood, offenders, officer(s), people, population, prisoner(s), prisoner's, turnkey(s), visitors/wisitors
	Prison activities	birth, cookery, discipline, fever, food, hanging, manners, poultry, regulations, rules
	Possessives	her, his, my, their, your

Carceral characteristic	Thematic category	Words
	Verbs	being, breaking, called, could, do, exists, fell, fought, gorged, had, is, leads, left, might, proving, seemed, should, standing, stood, suffered, turned, was, were
Prison's effects	Death, decay and burial	buried, carnage, dead, dead-wall, death, decayed, die, died, grave, hanged, hanging, hangman, hung, oblivion, perish, perished, spectral, tomb, wreath
	Emotional effects	afflicted, agonised, alone, anxiety, appalled, beauty, bewildered, blessing, broke, broken, brokken, cheerful, comfort, comfortably, compassion, contempt, danger, destroyed, dismal, disquietude, doom, doomed, dread, dreary, dull, eager, fear, frightened, furious, happiness, happy, hope, hopeless, horror, humane, indifference, indifferently, infernal, languished, languishing, melancholy, miserable, miserly, mopes, neglected, nightmares, open-hearted, pain(s), pleasant, poverty, punishment, sad, safer, safety, solemn, suffer, suffered, threatening, ugly, unfortunate, unhappy, unnoticed, waif, worn, wretched, youthful
	Physical and moral contamination	abject, bad, blame, blemish, bloom, contamination, crime, criminal(s), criminal's, disorder, dust, fever, filthy, grime, guilty, idleness, impurity, jaundiced,

<b>Carceral characteristic</b>	<b>Thematic category</b>	<b>Words</b>
		loathsome, madness, mud, poor, rank, rats, rogue, rotted, rotten-hearted, rusted, sick, sluggish, smoke, spoil, squalid, stain, taint, turbid, unhealthy, vice, vile, villainous, vulgar, vulgarly, wasted, worse, worst

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<sup>1</sup> All references to works by Dickens are from the *Dickens's Novels Corpus*.