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Treatment of the Mentally Ill in the U.S. Gilded Age

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Bridgewater State University

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Honors Thesis

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Treatment of the Mentally Ill in the U.S. Gilded Age

The maltreatment of the working class and immigrants was quite prominent throughout the Gilded Age of the United States. The endless capitalist desires of a growing industrial nation often left American laborers at the mercy of corporations and businessmen. Workers endured strenuous labor, hazardous work environments, and unjust management; yet, earned barely enough money to pay for their rent, let alone food and other necessities. Immigrants flooded the country with hopes of securing profit for their relatives back home, only to encounter inhumane working conditions and prejudice from nativists. As the distribution of wealth between laborers and the middle and upper classes grew, so did the belief that several factors other than socioeconomic status contributed to poverty. Increasingly, Americans viewed poverty as a result of ethnic or biological inferiority and coincided with the rising perspective that poverty was an unavoidable destiny for certain individuals—a concept eventually labeled as “Social Darwinism.” This growing acceptance in Social Darwinism played out in many fields, one of which was increasing focus on mental fitness. At the center of this was the emergence of large, state-based mental health facilities, known at the time as insane asylums.

Intrigued about the lives and treatment of patients within insane asylums, New York journalist Nellie Bly went undercover disguised as a poor Cuban immigrant with amnesia in order to admit herself in Bellevue Hospital, an all-female public psychiatric ward, on Blackwell’s Island. There, Bly uncovered the inhumane treatment of patients, and her published firsthand accounts—a first in the field of investigative journalism and muckraking—exposed this

corruption to the public eye. Furthermore, Bly's investigation challenged the societal and intellectual expectations of American ladies, as well as the treatment of mentally ill women. As muckraker Nellie Bly detailed in her account of Bellevue Hospital, entitled *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), industrial America regarded poverty and non-American qualities as a disease, which thus resulted in the false imprisonment of working-class individuals and immigrants in horrendous asylums, all under the guise that the patients were insane and dangerous to society..

Bly lived during one of the most transformative eras in U.S. history, and through her investigation at Bellevue Hospital alone, she witnessed some of the most detrimental effects of this rapidly evolving society. Posing as a working-class immigrant herself, Bly witnessed the societal scorn and pressure that laborers and immigrants endured for their failures in a country as supposedly full of opportunity as the United States. Those with advantages often misinterpreted those with disadvantages as suffering from mental unfitness. Economic instability and the growth of capitalist and corporate greed rocked millions of Americans, while the few wealthy elite controlled much of the nation's property and wealth to their own benefit. Political ideologies, especially progressivism, encouraged the middle class to advocate for further societal reform from the government on behalf of American laborers, without truly understanding the common horrors industrial wage laborers encountered. Bly stood amidst the terrible growing pains of an industrial nation, and her desire to write a captivating story greatly impacted the world of journalism and the United States as a whole. Bly's *Ten Days in a Madhouse* helped usher in a completely new genre of journalism and provided Americans an exclusive look into the daily struggles of the working class and immigrants, both inside and outside of the asylum. Furthermore, her investigation and stories of abuse garnered further reform and awareness towards mental health treatment and working-class conditions.

The American working class faced strenuous occupational responsibilities and dangerous work environments throughout the Gilded Age. With the rise of industrialism, the corporate

United States reserved unskilled labor jobs for the immigrant working class, such as meatpacking, infrastructure construction, and factory production. Since business elites prioritized profits, working-class pay for such jobs only amounted to a few cents per hour. Due to the long work hours, laborers also had very little leisure time, which prohibited them from attaining an education to enter the skilled labor force or white-collar positions. On top of this, the wages of working-class men were not sufficient to support their families. In her 1994 journal article, “‘Was She Clothed with the Rents Paid for These Wretched Rooms?’: Elizabeth Buffum Chace, Lillie Chace Wyman, and Upper-Class Advocacy for Women Factory Operatives in Gilded Age Rhode Island,” Rhode Island historian Elizabeth Stevens discusses the work of social reformers Elizabeth Buffum Chace and her daughter, Lillie Chace Wyman. Both Chace and Wyman advocated for political and social reform throughout the Antebellum Period and Gilded Age, including anti-slavery legislation, female civil liberties, and workplace improvements—especially for female factory workers. Stevens pulls evidence from Chace and Wyman’s study to conclude that in textile factories, “teenage girls were sometimes required to do ‘the most difficult and the most straining of any work done in a cotton mill’ because of their alleged ‘nimbleness and dexterity of the fingers,’ and although they were able to sit during ‘spare moments,’ their work demanded that they stand for ten or eleven hours a day.”¹ Occupational conditions amongst the working class was hazardous and inhumane, and in order to support their family’s survival and afford basic necessities, even women and children had to partake in long hours of physically demanding and dangerous labor, which also prevented working-class youth from receiving an education. Likewise, working-class living conditions was equally hazardous and insufficient.

Akin to labor conditions, housing provided for the working class during the Gilded Age was hazardous and inhospitable. In order to compensate for a rapidly growing urban population

¹ Elizabeth C. Stevens, “‘Was She Clothed with the Rents Paid for These Wretched Rooms?’: Elizabeth Buffum Chace, Lillie Chace Wyman, and Upper-Class Advocacy for Women Factory Operatives in Gilded Age Rhode

and labor force, tenement houses provided multiple apartments and living quarters within a single building. Landlords often chose decrepit buildings and facilities to transform into tenement housing and charged tenants either a weekly or monthly rent. Additionally, tenement houses provided no sense of hospitality or proper building maintenance, as overcrowding eliminated sufficient space and privacy, which, when combined with improper ventilation and waste disposal, often contributed to outbreaks of disease. Jacob Riis, a Danish muckraker and photographer, directly experienced tenement housing and other common working-class struggles upon his migration to the United States. Once he procured his job as a journalist, Riis's successful articles and photographs regarding tenement housing encouraged him to publish his exposé *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which detailed the horrid conditions of New York tenements and the daily lives of its tenants based on their ethnicity and race. In his book, Riis cited the findings of other New York organizations and reform groups, including the Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, who described tenements as “‘crazy old buildings, crowded rear tenements in filthy yards, dark, damp basements, leaking garrets, shops, outhouses, and stables converted into dwellings, though scarcely fit to shelter brutes, are habitations of thousands of our fellow-beings in this wealthy, Christian city’... ‘a general asylum for vagrants.’”² Tenement housing in itself was akin to an asylum as it failed to provide adequate and safe shelter, and the inhumane conditions endangered both the well-beings and lives of its tenants. Additionally, the cruel attitudes and greed of the landlords worsened tenement life.

Tenement landlords and their insatiable greed also did not improve housing conditions for tenants. Although landlords minimally refurbished tenement houses from extremely old and decrepit buildings, the rent did not reflect the true living conditions and states of the tenements.

Island,” *Rhode Island History Journal* 52, no. 4 (November 1994): 113. America: History and Life with Full Text.

² Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890; reis., Project Gutenberg, 2014), 13–14.

Landlords charged weekly or monthly rent to its residents, and unlike the boarding houses that wage laborers also resided in (where landlords charged daily rent), tenement housing did not provide meals as a part of its fees, which left tenants on their own to procure food.³ In spite of the fact that tenants only rented the property, landlords also expected further financial responsibility beyond their rent, including the full payment of any damages, regardless of whether or not the landlord would actually fix it.⁴ Landlords continued to greedily siphon money out of their tenants through charging extremely high rent, despite the state of the building. In Riis's words, landlords believed that tenements "are still 'good property,' and the poverty of the poor man his destruction. A barrack downtown where he has to live because he is poor brings in a third more rent than a decent flat house in Harlem."⁵ The rent and fees that landlords charged their tenants was equivalent to—if not more—than good-quality middle and upper class housing; thus landlords exploited the working class and their inescapable state of poverty for their own financial benefit. Riis and contemporary historians also identified a clear pattern in the ethnic identities and socioeconomic statuses of tenants.

The tenement housing population represented evident socioeconomic and racial discrimination. The majority of the tenant population consisted of minority and immigrant groups, as well as working-class individuals. In *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis even noted the distinct tenement populations through reserving chapters for the experiences of specific ethnic groups, such as "The Italian in New York" and "Chinatown."⁶ While tenement rent was comparable to that of middle- and upper-class apartments, the working class and immigrants faced restrictions from achieving more adequate housing. Landlords strategically built tenements close to the factories and facilities where laborers worked, thus making tenements appear more

³ Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887; reis., Columbia, SC: Nouveau Classics, 2017), 11.

⁴ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 13.

⁵ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 19.

appealing to the working class and immigrants due to the cut in transportation costs. On top of this, the costs of rent and other living expenses for wage laborers and immigrants, along with low wages, made social mobility and access to better housing unattainable. Riis revealed that tenement landlords even determined rent costs based on ethnicity, with Blacks often paying higher rent than other tenants.⁷ In his journal article, “Beneath the Surface of Tenement Life: The Dialectics of Race and Poverty during America’s First Gilded Age,” historical archeologist Charles Orser, Jr. describes urban tenements as “dark, dangerously built, [over]crowded, airless, and malodorous. Rather than tenements simply being a place to live... the tenement [was] both a harsh reality of daily existence and a physical symbol of social inequality.”⁸ Tenements further accentuated both the inhumane conditions of the working class and the socioeconomic divide between laborers and the managerial class, as well as demonstrated discriminatory attitudes towards the working class and non-white individuals. The unequal distribution and consolidation of wealth in the industrial United States also further emphasized the socioeconomic divide amongst the working class and upper class.

The unequal distribution of wealth in the United States during the Gilded Age was a major cause of poverty and economic instability. The majority of the nation’s wealth and property resided within the upper class, which consisted of roughly 12 percent of the total population yet owned more than half of overall property. On top of this, middle class occupations also received drastically higher wages than those of the working class, with administrative white-collar work valued anywhere from \$1,000 to \$3,500 per year—more than

⁶ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, ix–x.

⁷ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 151–152.

⁸ Charles Orser Jr., “Beneath the Surface of Tenement Life: The Dialectics of Race and Poverty during America’s First Gilded Age,” *Historical Archaeology* 45, no. 3 (2011): 156.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23070040>.

enough to afford basic necessities and a comfortable lifestyle.⁹ Compared to both the middle and upper classes, the accumulated wealth and wages of the much larger working class was not sufficient enough to even pay rent. In her 1987 book, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919*, historian Nell Painter calculates that in Massachusetts, “the expenses of ordinary workingmen making about \$800 per year had increased between 1897 and 1902: 11.2 percent for food, 16.7 percent for dry goods, 52.4 percent for rent, and 9.7 percent for fuel.”¹⁰ Despite the growth of the US money supply and the economy, wealth was increasingly unevenly distributed amongst the population, and working-class wages failed to compensate for rising prices and further economic growth, to the point where laborers struggled to afford rent and other basic necessities. However, detached from working-class issues, the middle and upper classes adopted the belief that poverty was merely the result of a poor work ethic, not misfortune. On top of this, the destruction of American ideology regarding the working class further contributed to the intolerant perspectives of poverty.

The harsh views Americans held towards poverty in the Gilded Age was further emphasized through the invalidation of the popular free labor ideology. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, Americans commonly believed that wage labor was only a temporary aspect of society. Defined as the free labor theory by contemporary historians, Americans believed that individuals would only briefly participate in wage labor until they accumulated enough wealth for entrepreneurship or a salaried white-collar position.¹¹ However, with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, wage labor gained further integration in American society, and thus transformed into a permanent condition where social mobility was not typically possible. As economic research analyst and historian Stephen Leccese illustrates in his 2017 journal article,

⁹ Nell Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1987), xx, xxiii.

¹⁰ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 175.

“Economic Inequality and the New School of American Economics,” the “rise of a permanent industrial working class contradicted the national vision that Americans had constructed for themselves. Crucial to that vision was independence and opportunity... the loss of independence that resulted from permanent wage work challenged the vision Americans had crafted for themselves.”¹² Americans did not want to accept the falsity of the free labor theory and the grim reality that economic independence and plentiful work opportunities was nearly impossible to achieve. If the system of free labor possessed no faults, then it must be the individual who is to blame for their own poverty. This contributed to the perspective that poverty was self-inflicted and a product of one’s lack of motivation and drive within their occupation. Since the middle and upper classes fared much better than laborers in the expanding economy, and often had very little interaction with the working poor, they accepted the conclusion that poverty resulted from poor work ethic and a lack of occupational commitment and drive rather than systemic flaws in the economic, social, and political structures. Similar cultural bias blinded many Americans to the reality of mental illness.

Americans in the Gilded Age regarded both poverty and insanity as a lack of a good work ethic and effort from the working class. The managerial class and corporate elites maintained that financial success and prosperity was achievable through a commitment to work obligations and a drive for success, even if one resided at the bottom of society. Therefore, the corporate world implied that an improper work ethic and an absence of commitment was the true cause of poverty, and as such the working class brought such misfortunes upon themselves. Social movements and popular philosophies also embodied a similar message. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), for example, associated alcoholism and its financial burden

¹¹ Stephen Leccese, “Economic Inequality and the New School of American Economics,” *Religions* 8, no. 6 (May 2017): 101. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8060099>.

¹² Leccese, “Economic Inequality,” 99.

directly to poverty.¹³ As such, the perspective that poverty was a preventable force coincided with the psychiatric belief that insanity resulted from similar vices. In his 2010 article, “From Cure to Custodianship of the Insane Poor in Nineteenth-Century Connecticut,” University of Connecticut history professor Lawrence Goodheart concludes from Gilded Age psychiatric findings that “individual indulgence not only produced disease and dependency but contaminated posterity... the suggestion was that individual volition—wrong personal decisions—was the cause of insanity.”¹⁴ Poverty and insanity corresponded to one another, as Americans believed that a variety of poor decisions (such as no occupational commitment and alcoholism) resulted in poverty, and this overall lack of self-control and insufficient wealth thus resulted in insanity. Ethnic bias also contributed to these assumptions, with the influx of immigrants into the working class adding to the common misconceptions of poverty and social mobility.

The United States experienced a sharp increase in immigration as foreigners sought to achieve more favorable economic opportunities, yet only encountered increased socioeconomic hardships. As word of the United States’ industrial growth and economic success spread around the world, foreigners soon turned to the promising young nation in a quest for such financial prosperity. Immigration rates also rose as foreigners entered the United States to escape religious prosecution or economic hardships in their home country, such as the Irish potato famine. However, not only did immigrants endure the same adverse and grim conditions as the native-born working class, but they also encountered occupational disadvantages due to their foreign nationalities and were thus highly concentrated in the lowest level jobs. German historians John Jentz and Hartmut Keil argue in their 1981 article, “From Immigrants to Urban Workers: Chicago’s German Poor in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1883-1908,” that immigrants:

¹³ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 105.

¹⁴ Lawrence Goodheart, “From Cure to Custodianship of the Insane Poor in Nineteenth-Century Connecticut,” *Journal of the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences* 65, no. 2 (2010): 124. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhmas/jrp036>.

were significantly unrepresented—attaining only about half their share of the whole population—in the two categories of professional and clerical services, types of occupations requiring at least proficiency in English and in some cases extensive educational training. Even unskilled Native American farm boys had the linguistic skills that put them several steps ahead of German immigrants when applying for positions as clerks in the great retailing houses of [Chicago].¹⁵

Since they lacked English proficiency and other American qualities, immigrants faced ostracism in the workforce and experienced further prevention from gaining the necessary skills and mobility to leave the working class, yet middle- and upper-class Americans still regarded them as lazy and unmotivated. Even most labor unions excluded immigrant membership due to the public fear that they would overtake the workforce, thus also restricting immigrants to the immobile working class. Furthermore, the definition of both white and American narrowed with the arrival of different immigrant groups in the workforce.

Throughout the late-nineteenth century, surges in immigration both challenged and transformed the cultural identity of the United States, as well as the definitions of American and white. As immigration surged and foreigners increasingly occupied industrial labor jobs, the United States experienced culture shocks. Consequently, the identity and meaning behind the term American evolved to accommodate for the various cultures and ethnicities that took hold of U.S. society. Although this changed in future generations, native-born Americans did not immediately consider immigrants as true Americans, and hence viewed them as inferior. However, as Painter describes in *Standing at Armageddon*, immigrant groups were “divided between the rough and the respectable... aspirations as much as wealth separated the ‘shanty Irish’ from ‘lace curtain Irish’ and their equivalents in other working-class groups. The respectable were more likely than the rough to attend church and to belong to temperance

¹⁵ John B. Jentz, and Hartmut Keil, “From Immigrants to Urban Workers: Chicago’s German Poor in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1883-1908.” *VSWG: Vierteljahrschrift Für Sozial- Und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 68, no. 1 (1981): 52–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20733958>.

organizations.”¹⁶ Native-born Americans expected immigrants to assimilate themselves to American culture as much as possible upon arrival in the United States, and both their occupational motivation and financial standing determined their status as a respectable working-class immigrant. This categorization continued forth into the workforce, as differentiations between immigrant groups with regards to the expanding definition of American and skilled versus unskilled labor began to gain prominence.

Certain immigrant groups during the Gilded Age became integrated into society based on their labor skills and assumed ability to adopt to American ideals, while the unskilled and less-assimilated received further scrutiny and inferior jobs. Many foreigners who travelled to the United States did not intend to stay in the country permanently, but instead planned to return to their home country after accumulating a profit to support their families, and hence were not immediately offended by the ostracism. Furthermore, the industrial sector valued immigrant workers due to their performance and replaceability in unskilled labor, and corporations often used them as strikebreakers. Nonetheless, as different immigrant groups arrived in the United States and assimilated to American culture in varying speeds and degrees, certain foreigners received scrutiny based on their lack of skill and respectability. In his 1989 article, “The Formation of Class Fractions in the Gilded Age,” historian Antoine Joseph states that “the best paying occupations were most accessible to native whites and older immigrant group workers,” such as the Irish, and that as “differences between older immigrants and native whites narrowed in the ten-year interim [from 1890 to 1900], newer immigrants and blacks are becoming solidly entrenched in inferior occupational positions.”¹⁷ While all immigrants worked low-paying jobs, foreign groups who failed to assimilate as quickly and efficiently as others received further discrimination and exclusion from the evolving definition of American, and had worse job

¹⁶ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, xxv.

opportunities. This un-American perception thus affected their perceived respectability and work ethic, which suited the Gilded Age's understanding of insanity. As more Americans increasingly came face-to-face with these challenges related to poverty, wealth inequality, poor living conditions, mental illness, and immigration they began to question how all these, individually or collectively, challenged the American ideal. At the forefront of this question of the challenges facing the working class and immigrant laborers emerged a new form of political ideology, as well as the rise of investigative journalism, that both quickly gained popularity.

The rise of progressivism in Gilded Age society and politics, as well as the activism and reform that accompanied it, coincided with the new changes and genres in journalism. During the late nineteenth century, progressivism gradually replaced populism as the dominant reformist political belief. While populism catered more so to farmers and advocated for radical reform, especially in the agricultural sector, progressivism appealed to middle- and upper-class urbanites—mostly female—and promoted increased governmental and societal reform for the less fortunate.¹⁸ Progressivism accentuated the struggles of the lower classes to the elites and upheld the moral responsibility for reform, as well as emphasized distrust towards the corporate world and the fear of class warfare, and thus called for appropriate governmental intervention in order to remedy these issues. Historian and Rutgers University professor Jackson Lears articulates in his 2009 book, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, that progressives desired to bring domestic values and morals into their activism and reform, yet “the irony was that... they ended up leaving the home more vulnerable to government intervention. Self-control yielded to social control, personal responsibility to public

¹⁷ Antoine Joseph, 1989, “The Formation of Class Fractions in the Gilded Age,” *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 12, no. 4 (1989): 496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1989.9993649>.

¹⁸ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 199–200.

responsibility. The government gained a foot in the door of private life.”¹⁹ Progressivism and elite moral responsibility towards the public good established intense expectations and pressure for increased government regulation in the personal lives of citizens. This progressive ideology benefited from a radical increase in print media and developments in American news reportage and technology, which contributed to the rising popularity of progressive journalism, even to the point of developing whole new genres in journalism.

Significant changes in American press and technology in the late nineteenth century paved the path for expanded readership and new forms of journalism. Newspapers and magazines had existed well before the nineteenth century, however the expensive costs of such publications (averaging at around thirty-five cents per magazine) and restricted leisure time for the working class thus restricted subscriptions to the middle and upper classes.²⁰ However, after the Civil War, newspapers shifted their main focus and source of revenue from partisan advocacy and funding to wider circulations and larger varieties in both content and advertisements, all without political funding or influence.²¹ Furthermore, the decrease in the manufacturing costs of paper and cheaper implementation of photographs and illustrations in publications (through halftone photoengraving) both increased circulation for newspapers and magazines and reduced their prices.²² As Harvard University history professor Ellen F. Fitzpatrick states in her introduction in the book *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles* (1994), “the advent of inexpensive, well-produced, mass-circulation magazines proved decisive to [journalism and] muckraking. For the first time Americans of diverse social classes had a consistently produced and nationally distributed source of information, entertainment, and

¹⁹ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 198.

²⁰ Ellen F. Fitzpatrick et al., *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994), 8–9.

²¹ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 193.

²² Fitzpatrick et al., *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles*, 9–10.

news.”²³ Cheap prices, reformatted content, and the overall increase in quality allowed for magazines and newspapers to make their publications accessible to all Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic status, for the first time in U.S. history. The growth in consumer reliance and readership for press publications also resulted in more reformatted content, including new genres in journalism.

The new genre of sensational journalism helped popularize progressive ideals and established increased pressure towards the government for social reform. In order to surpass the dominant rival New York newspaper company, Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York Evening World*, publisher William Hearst sought to incorporate his own unique techniques into his newspaper, the *New York Morning Journal*, to increase readership. As the son of a prominent Californian publisher, Hearst had an extensive background in journalism. After observing that the most popular articles in his father’s newspaper were ones that targeted large corporations, Hearst took this strategy and other observations and perfected it in his own newspaper. For instance, the expansion of public education and the societal fascination with fictional “dime novels” as a means of escape from real world struggles contributed to a sharp increase in literacy and general readership, including the working class.²⁴ However, most journalists and editors at this time expressed little to no sympathy for the working class, which therefore resulted in a lack in publications catered for laborers.²⁵ Hearst crafted his newspaper and published articles with these factors in mind. As historian Painter comments in *Standing at Armageddon*, the *Journal*’s “professed concern for the underdog and opposition to entrenched money power,” combined with dramatic and exaggerated language, garnered massive attention and success, and Hearst

²³ Fitzpatrick et al., *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles*, 10.

²⁴ Fitzpatrick et al., *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles*, 10.

²⁵ Fitzpatrick et al., *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles*, 9.

usurped Pulitzer as the dominant New York publisher.²⁶ Hearst's creation of sensational journalism, along with its exciting tone and support for the common man over that of the overly-powerful private sector, permanently transformed the focus of the American press and its published content. Sensational journalism also provided the foundation for investigative journalism.

From sensational journalism arose another new genre known as investigative journalism, or more commonly referred to as muckraking. Popularized by *McClure's* journal in the early 1890s, this form of reporting focused on highlighting the plights of the working class through first-hand observations, as well as unveiling amoral government and capitalist enterprises.²⁷ Investigative journalists often went undercover and even created new personas to gather personal experience and information for their reports, and aimed to expose specific companies and societal issues in order to increase public awareness and pressure for legislative reform. While sensational journalists used overly-exaggerated language and even intentionally omitted facts to purposefully sway the reader's emotions and opinions, investigative journalists focused on well-researched factual reporting in order to establish an impartial and reliable reputation. Nonetheless, as Painter remarks in *Standing at Armageddon*, investigative journalism possessed flaws and encountered criticism, with President Theodore Roosevelt as a major opponent, as "he criticized [it] for lacking constructive purposes and serving merely to expose the sordid side of public life—raking up muck."²⁸ While investigative journalism (coined as muckraking by Roosevelt) was effective in increasing awareness and social reform efforts for corrupt federal and business practices—especially amongst the educated middle and upper classes—the genre failed to offer any constructive criticism or long-term solutions. Even so, these first-hand

²⁶ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 193.

²⁷ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 198.

²⁸ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 199.

accounts provided awareness and progressive reform for a class of individuals who did not possess a powerful voice, and Bly's *Ten Days in a Madhouse* was especially effective in revealing the true horrors and cruel realities of insane asylums during the Gilded Age and served as a bridge between sensational journalism and investigative journalism.

Bly's difficult childhood helped strengthen her charismatic and vigorous character, which greatly contributed to her intense and dedicated style of journalism. Born as Elizabeth Jane Cochran on May 5, 1864, Bly was the rebellious thirteenth child in a blended family of half-siblings. Bly grew up in the town of Cochran Mills, Pennsylvania, and was the daughter of a prominent local judge, Michael Cochran (the town's namesake). Bly's family affectionately gave her the nickname "Pink" due to her mother's appreciation of the color on Bly. However, when her father died when Bly was only six, her mother—Mary Jane Cummings—remarried to an alcoholic, who abused Bly and the rest of her family for eight years. Once Cummings divorced her stepfather, Bly dropped out of high school and traveled to Pittsburgh to help manage a boarding house with her.²⁹ Due to her experiences in boarding house management, Bly's political views aligned closely with social and economic reforms, and she held no fear in speaking up for the less privileged. Journalist and professor Brooke Kroeger describes in her book, *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, and Feminist* (1994), that Bly had great confidence from a young age, and:

while the other mothers of Cochran's Mills dressed their daughters in traditional gray calico and brown merino cloth, Mary Jane chose a starched, stand-out pink for her little girl, set off by frilly white challis and long white stockings instead of utilitarian black... from the very start, Mary Jane groomed her daughter to know how to attract attention and revel in it. The lessons would never be lost.³⁰

²⁹ Brooke Kroeger, *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, and Feminist* (New York, NY: Times Books, 1994), 5–26.

³⁰ Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 5.

Despite her grim childhood, Bly made the most of those experiences and her beloved mother's guidance and continued to maintain a high level of courage and determination. Bly expressed no hesitancy in voicing her opinions and gaining attention, and this exact nature suited her aspirations as a journalist.

Although Bly knew little information regarding mental illness and psychiatric treatment, her exposé on Gilded Age insane asylums managed to strengthen her reputation as a journalist. In 1885, Bly sent an angry letter signed as “poor little orphan girl” to the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in response to the recently published article, “What Are Women Good For?,” which argued that women were only fit to be housewives. Her fiery and powerful writing attracted the attention of the *Dispatch*'s editor, who immediately offered Bly a position as a journalist, and thus Bly began her career with an undercover report in a local sweatshop. However, Bly's investigation attracted negative attention from local factory owners, and when the *Dispatch* repeatedly placed her in the women's society column to appease this reception, Bly quit and traveled to New York City in hopes she would gain acceptance as a female investigative journalist.³¹ With no success after four months in the city, Bly forced herself into the office of the *New York Evening World* editor, John Cockerill, and advocated for a trial assignment. Skeptical and doubting of her skills, Cockerill offered Bly a position on the condition that she successfully completed a ten-day undercover assignment at Bellevue Hospital on Blackwell's Island as an insane working-class girl without any assistance, which Bly eagerly accepted.³² Journalist Liesl Bradner notes in her *American History* article, “Trouble Maker” (2018), that as the *World* published Bly's investigation in a series of articles, respective copies of the newspaper sold out in record times, and that “stunt factor aside—until Bly, reporters rarely attempted so grand a deception, and few had produced so dramatic a narrative—Bly's reporting presented not only shocking content but

³¹ Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 34–56.

³² Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 79–86.

substantive allegations and evidence to support them.”³³ Not only did Bly gain prominence and respectability in a heavily male-dominated field, but her writing also served as a notable transition from sensational journalism to investigative journalism, as she still maintained a dramatic tone while presenting impartial facts and a truthful first-hand account. Bly also exposed the corruption behind insane asylum management and successfully advocated for those who did not possess the ability to do so themselves. Consequently, Bly’s undercover report and eventual book, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, inspired reform for psychiatric treatment and increased awareness towards socioeconomic inequalities, as well as solidified Bly’s name as a distinguished journalist.

Bly’s investigation of Bellevue Hospital occurred in a historical setting of limited and inconsistent medical knowledge and treatment. With regards to physical health, doctors struggled to address both old and new illnesses that progressed alongside Gilded Age society and industrialization, and thus lagged behind. For instance, epidemics of infectious diseases (like typhoid and tuberculous) grew in frequency due to urbanization, yet cities only just began to enforce public health measures and policies, like sewage systems and sanitary codes.³⁴ Physicians also expressed hesitancy towards expanding medical procedures and treatments, despite the increased societal need for such growth. Robert Shikes, a Colorado pathologist and medical historian, observed in his 1983 article, “Colorado’s First Physicians: A Look at Medicine from before the Gold Rush to the Gilded Age,” that late nineteenth-century medicine:

was a bizarre mixture of old and new. A surgeon might be able to amputate a limb in less than two minutes but was still afraid to open a patient’s abdomen to remove a diseased appendix. Anesthesia had been used for decades but intravenous therapy, blood transfusion, and the use of oxygen remained experimental procedures. The infectious nature of such diseases as malaria,

³³ Liesl Bradner, “Trouble Maker,” *American History* 52, no. 6 (February 2018): 45. America: History and Life with Full Text.

³⁴ Robert H. Shikes, “Colorado’s First Physicians: A Look at Medicine from before the Gold Rush to the Gilded Age,” *Colorado Heritage* 3, no. 4 (December 1983): 24. America: History and Life with Full Text.

cholera, and tuberculosis had become recognized but was still being treated by a variety of medications which were at best useless and at worst harmful.³⁵

With a new industrial society, the United States scrambled for effective ways to advance its medical care and knowledge, and treatment remained inconsistent and unsophisticated for its time. Psychiatric treatment and physicians' understanding of mental health also followed the same path of inconsistencies in the Gilded Age.

The understanding and treatment of mental illnesses during the Gilded Age lacked consistency and effectiveness amongst physicians. Most late nineteenth-century psychiatrists diagnosed mental illnesses as “neurasthenia,” and encompassed a wide variety of physical and psychological symptoms, such as insomnia, tooth decay, phobias, and a lack of control over both emotions and aspirations.³⁶ Psychiatrists believed that each individual possessed a limited amount of “nervous energy” and thus could not surpass it; however, the unlimited demands of such energy in the United States' new industrial and capitalist society resulted in the overexertion of nervous energy, and therefore neurasthenia—and potentially insanity.³⁷ Despite the general agreement amongst psychiatrists regarding the theory of neurasthenia, each psychiatrist established their own remedies, such as extensive vacations amongst nature and limited mental and emotional strain for both children and women—the latter of which psychiatrists believed were more susceptible to neurasthenia.³⁸ Psychiatrists commonly recorded neurasthenia amongst all social classes, and although it was most prominent amongst the middle and upper classes, treatment for the condition represented a class bias towards wealthy Americans. Barbara Sicherman, a retired Trinity College professor who specializes in both

³⁵ Shikes, “Colorado's First Physicians,” 24.

³⁶ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 7.

³⁷ Barbara Sicherman, “The Paradox of Prudence: Mental Health in the Gilded Age,” *The Journal of American History* 62, no. 4 (March 1976), 893–894, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1903843>.

³⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 69.

mental health and women's history, claims in her 1976 article, "The Paradox of Prudence: Mental Health in the Gilded Age" that a healthy individual "struck a balance between work, celibacy, and abstemiousness on the one hand, and frivolity, licentiousness, and indulgence on the other... physicians urged Americans to moderate their ambition, their love of money, and—a new concern for this generation—their compulsion to work."³⁹ Treatment for neurasthenia was not only inconsistent, but its expensive costs and need for a limited work schedule and monetary aspirations was only achievable for the upper class. Working-class men, women, and children, and some middle-class Americans, were unable to afford less time away from work and decreased financial ambitions (thus exposing them to increased mental exhaustion), and other psychiatric remedies were too costly. The contrast between privately- and state-owned insane asylums also contributed to insufficient and prejudiced mental healthcare systems.

The quality of care that asylum patients received varied greatly based on their socioeconomic status and the institution they resided in. Prior to the Gilded Age, mental health facilities had typically been privately-owned, with treatment reserved for middle- and upper-class individuals due to the high costs. However, the rise in immigration and industrialization, as well as evolving definitions of insanity and mental illness (such as neurasthenia), resulted in pressure from social reformers for state legislatures to create public asylums with government funding for patients. Compared to private institutions, the new state asylums were not nearly as well-funded and well-managed, and accentuated disparities in mental health treatment based on the socioeconomic status of the patient. For instance, Connecticut's first attempt with a state asylum was disastrous, as they hoped the opening of the Connecticut Hospital for the Insane in 1868 would alleviate the overpopulation of patients in the privately-owned Hartford Retreat for the Insane. Professor Goodheart emphasizes the inconsistency in care between these two asylums

³⁹ Sicherman, "The Paradox of Prudence," 895.

in “From Cure to Custodianship of the Insane Poor,” even with regards to the accommodations each facility offered, and claims that:

with the opening of the public hospital on 30 April 1868, for the first time in Connecticut the rich and poor were segregated in different facilities... the poor insane warranted Christian charity but not refinement and gentility above their station. The rectilinear angles of the stolid design indicated not homey comfort, but calculated efficiency. The stone and brick veneer with mansard slate roof—not unattractive—were unrelenting in their lack of embellishment... the public institution confirmed the low status of its occupants in its sparse functionality.⁴⁰

Despite the general inadequacy and misunderstandings of psychiatric care at this time, there was still an intentional divide in the quality of treatment that the working class and the upper classes received, thus discriminating against mentally ill Americans based on their personal wealth—or lack thereof. Not only did socioeconomic status determine the quality of mental health treatment during this time, but gender also contributed to this factor.

Women often faced increased discrimination and mistreatment than men when receiving psychiatric care and treatment. In the Gilded Age, women were still confined to traditional gender roles and stereotypes, with men believing their responsibilities resided in the domestic sphere and that females were mentally fragile and naturally prone to erratic emotions. As such, medical professionals did not care for women with mental illnesses as adequately, with treatment designed to further restrict their lives to domesticity.⁴¹ Bly encountered such prejudice during her stay at the all-female Bellevue Hospital, as did many other women. The most famous case is that of author Charlotte Perkins Gilman. When suffering from modern day symptoms of postpartum depression, prominent psychiatrist Silas Weir Mitchell diagnosed Gilman with neurasthenia and prescribed her “rest cure,” where she remained locked in a room with no stimulation for several

⁴⁰ Goodheart, “From Cure to Custodianship of the Insane Poor,” 112.

⁴¹ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 239.

months and consequently damaged her mental state.⁴² In a short story meant to protest rest cure, the poor treatment of mentally ill women, and American patriarchal society, Gilman relayed her experiences with Mitchell's care in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). The short story, written as diary entries by a new mother, chronicled the narrator moving into a summer home with her physician husband, where he confined her to rest cure to treat her neurasthenia. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator constantly described the sickly and distressing yellow wallpaper in the bedroom that moved on its own, yet when she complained to her husband about it, he only:

laughs at me so about this wallpaper! At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies. He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on... "do let us go downstairs," I said, "there are such pretty rooms there." Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain.⁴³

The narrator detailed her bedroom akin to a prison cell, with barred windows, a bed chained to the floor, a gate on top of the stairs, and peeling mutated wallpaper that disturbed the young mother enough to later drive her into psychosis. Nonetheless, despite her pleas to move to a different bedroom, the husband stated he would only do so once she felt better again, thus completely ignoring the distress the room caused his wife. Through *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman also emphasized how medical professionals prescribed treatment that harmed their psyche and disregarded the requests of patients.

Not only did psychiatrists provide treatment that further reinforced gender roles and patriarchal ideologies, but their care also hurt the mental well-being of their female patients. Mitchell's rest cure required absolutely no stimulation and work—including reading and writing—which caused Gilman to revert back to a childlike mindset. The only way Gilman

⁴² Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 241–243.

interacted with her environment in her complete isolation was through crawling around the room on her hands and knees, as well as hiding under furniture, therefore worsening her mental health.⁴⁴ The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* also experienced the exact same isolation, thus reducing her to the same disturbing behaviors as Gilman by the end of the story. When first prescribed to rest cure by her husband and other psychiatrists, the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* professed that she:

disagree[s] with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition. I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but [my husband] John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.⁴⁵

Although the narrator did not believe that rest cure properly addressed her needs, her husband-doctor dismissed her worries and continued to provide treatment that harmed the mother more so than it helped her. The narrator desired to continue to write beyond her secret diary and yearned for increased socialization and work in her life—the exact opposite of rest cure—yet her physician husband ignored her requests and manipulated her into believing these feelings were not healthy as an effect of neurasthenia. Therefore, Gilman emphasized the non-consensual and damaging treatment that psychiatrists forced mentally ill women to endure, all while dismissing the patient's concerns and self-advocation. Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the narrator's inability to voice her concerns also emphasized the sexist rationale behind Mitchell's rest cure.

Mitchell's rest cure treatment accentuated the patriarchal ideals in Gilded Age society. Although women were gradually beginning to leave the sphere of domesticity and household

⁴³ Gilman, Charlotte P. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Project Gutenberg, 1999. First published 1892 in *The New England Magazine*, 2.

⁴⁴ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 242.

⁴⁵ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 2.

obligations at this time, their participation in politics and scholarship was still frowned upon, and the belief that females were naturally overly-emotional and hysteric further rationalized a male-dominated society. Created in 1872, Mitchell's rest cure treatment was originally used to treat soldiers with battle fatigue and modern-day symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); however, this therapy quickly extended to nervous and hysteric women, who became the majority of Mitchell's patients.⁴⁶ Mitchell himself also viewed women as biologically inferior to men, and that their emotional sensitivity and expressiveness contributed to their weaker physical state. As such, rest cure restricted both a woman's emotions and intellect in order to promote patriarchal obedience and maintain the domestic sphere. Ellen Bassuk, a psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School, asserts in her 1985 article, "The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts?" that Mitchell:

advocated that women be more like men, but not equal to them. They should run their households and their domestic lives according to male 'rules.' In psychiatric jargon, they should become less hysterical and more obsessional... generally speaking, the Mitchells as well as many of their contemporaries believed that the obsessional characteristics of 'masculinity' were more desirable than the emotional and expressive style of most women.⁴⁷

Mitchell consciously designed and prescribed his rest cure therapy to force women to conform to patriarchal ideals and adopt more masculine qualities—detachment from emotions and increased commitment to their responsibilities and work, which belonged in the household—and lacked genuine psychiatric basis. As a prominent psychologist at the time, other doctors agreed with and enforced Mitchell's beliefs on their own female patients, thus attempting to keep women confined to the domestic sphere without their consent. Bly's investigation similarly revealed that not all patients consented to such psychiatric treatment and did not possess the ability to communicate such feelings.

⁴⁶ Ellen L. Bassuk, "The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts?" *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2 (1985), 247, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772132>.

In her firsthand account of Bellevue Hospital, Bly discovered that a majority of patients were originally unaware of their admittance in insane asylums. As poverty rates rapidly grew throughout the Gilded Age, the United States experienced an increase in charitable causes and organizations. In the 1880s, social reformers built settlement houses to shelter and provide educational and social amenities to the working class and immigrants, with Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago as the most notable example.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, in the process of seeking such charity and assistance, asylums admitted poor, working-class individuals without their consent or awareness. As recounted in *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, Bly spoke with a Hebrew patient named Sarah Fishbaum, who fell on difficult times and “‘applied to the commissioners to be sent to the poorhouse until I would be able to go to work... I knew after I got here that the majority of these women are insane, but then I believed them when they told me this was the place they sent all of the poor who applied for aid as I had done.’”⁴⁹ Wage laborers desired to receive aid and recover physically and financially enough to continue to work; however, state and local governments interpreted the self-claimed need for charity as a sign of no motivation and self-control, and thus labeled these individuals as insane and admitted them to asylums without their knowledge. Likewise, many immigrant patients admitted into asylums were also unaware of their circumstances.

Due to linguistic barriers, immigrant patients who resided in asylums lacked awareness of their admittance. The influx of immigrants entering the United States during the Industrial Revolution hardened prejudiced ideals for Americans. On top of this, immigrants competed with native-born whites for unskilled labor jobs, which further solidified racism and discrimination towards foreigners. Since the United States interpreted non-American qualities as grounds for

⁴⁷ Bassuk, “The Rest Cure,” 250.

⁴⁸ Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 107.

⁴⁹ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 77–76.

insanity, and stigmatized certain immigrant groups as lazy and unrespectable, asylums admitted immigrants without their knowledge. Bly detailed her interactions with a German patient, Louise Schanz, in *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, and questioned if:

such carelessness [can] be excused...when it is so easy to get an interpreter?... [h]ere was a woman taken without her own consent from the free world to an asylum and there given no chance to prove her sanity. Confined most probably for life behind asylum bars, without even being told in her language the why and wherefore. Compare this with a criminal, who is given every chance to prove his innocence.⁵⁰

Thus, Bly established the connection that asylum patients—especially non-English-speaking immigrants—received worse treatment than even that of criminals, as such institutions essentially imprisoned victims without consent and explanation. Despite this virtual imprisonment for both immigrants and paupers, nursing staff (a predominately female occupation) maintained that asylums provided charity to patients, even if such assistance and amenities were severely inadequate.

Asylums provided insufficient amenities to patients, yet claimed they still completed acts of charity. During the early years of the Gilded Age, to admit poverty brought up feelings of shame, as most Americans believed insufficient finances only resulted from a poor work ethic, not misfortune. Likewise, seeking out assistance and charity when faced with difficult times was also encountered with scorn by the general population.⁵¹ Such feelings carried over to asylums, especially since patients were easily dismissed as insane and invalid by staff members. In *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, Bly described how patients were rarely comfortable, whether it was due to cold temperatures within the asylum or hunger; however, when patients complained and asked for help, the staff would always answer “curtly that I was in a charity place and I could not

⁵⁰ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 50.

⁵¹ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 174.

expect much else... ‘People on charity should not expect anything and should not complain.’”⁵² Attitudes of contempt towards the lower class continued in asylums and reinforced the poor treatment of patients and insufficient resources for them under the accusation that patients should express gratitude for what they already received. Additionally, asylum staff also took advantage of the charity granted to patients.

Not only did asylum patients receive insufficient amenities, such as heat, but nurses and staff also exploited the federal assistance and charity given to patients. The food prepared for patients was, in Bly’s words, one of the worst aspects about Bellevue Hospital. All of the cooked food contained little to no seasonings, not even salt, and much of the bread and meat were either spoiled or contaminated with insects.⁵³ Due to this, patients often had to force the food down or starve. When Bly confronted a doctor regarding the horrible condition of the food after she left the asylum, he stated that it was because of a lack of funding granted to the institution.⁵⁴ However, Bly exposed that this statement was evidently false, as during short walks outside the asylum, Bly and other patients would pass “the kitchen where food was prepared for the nurses and doctors. There we got glimpses of melons and grapes and all kinds of fruits, beautiful white bread and nice meats, and the hungry feeling would be increased tenfold.”⁵⁵ Asylums abused their federal funding and charity for the benefit of the staff instead of the patients, who instead received severely inadequate amenities and food because of such corruption. Nurses also provided improper and cruel care to patients.

Patients residing within asylums did not receive proper medical care by both its nurses and doctors. Although psychiatric and general medical knowledge was not abundant in the

⁵² Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 36.

⁵³ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 63.

⁵⁴ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 89.

⁵⁵ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 68.

Gilded Age, nurses purposefully went out of their way to torment and deprave patients of proper care and treatment. Physical and emotional abuse at the hands of nursing staff occurred daily. Nurses also did not honor the requests of patients who fell physically ill and begged to see a doctor for treatment. The worst unit in Bellevue Hospital, the “rope gang,” contained the asylum’s most ill-behaved and suicidal patients, yet patients only received increased violence from the nurses and arduous work in the asylum’s factories as supposed medical treatment.⁵⁶ Bly also encountered improper medical care and neglect from the nurses. When a nurse confiscated her notebook and pencil for her undercover report, Bly—disguised as a Cuban immigrant with amnesia—begged for it back under the claim that it:

“helps me remember things.” I was very anxious to get it to make notes in and was disappointed when [the nurse] said: “You can’t have it, so shut up.” Some days after I asked Dr. Ingram if I could have it, and he promised to consider the matter. When I again referred to it, he said that Miss Grady said I only brought a book there; and that I had no pencil. I was provoked, and insisted that I had, whereupon I was advised to fight against the imaginations of my brain.⁵⁷

Even though Bly stated that writing helped her amnesia, the asylum nurses consciously deprived her of this treatment, and attempted to further harm and manipulate her memory through the claim that Bly never brought such materials with her. Asylum staff also failed to properly address and care for the basic needs of patients.

The little care and assistance that patients did receive from nurses did not fulfill basic human needs. Asylum staff remained adamant in their perspective that patients already received enough charity through purely their admission into the institution, which provided shelter and food. However, care regarding the housing, clothing, and feeding of patients lacked sufficiency. Patients slept with a single wool blanket and no clothing, with the windows of the institution

⁵⁶ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 80–81.

⁵⁷ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 63–64.

open regardless of the weather and temperature.⁵⁸ Patients also received minuscule amounts of food with each meal and nurses refused to grant them additional servings, no matter how malnourished patients were.⁵⁹ On bathing days, nurses scrubbed patients with little pieces of soap, and required patients to wear the same dirty clothes for numerous days at a time.⁶⁰ Bridget McGuinness, a fellow patient, disclosed to Bly that she had:

“seen the patients wild for water from the effect of the drugs, and the nurses would refuse it to them. I have heard women beg for a whole night for one drop and it was not given to them. I myself cried for water until my mouth was so parched and dry that I could not speak”... patients would beg for a drink before retiring, but the nurses—Miss Hart and the others—refused to unlock the bathroom that they might quench their thirst.⁶¹

Not only did asylums fail to address the medical needs and supposed insanity of patients—the primary reason of their residency—but nurses also did not adequately provide the basic human essentials for survival and infringed on their access to food and water, thus accentuating the improper treatment of patients and violations of fundamental necessities. Likewise, what medical treatment patient did receive within the Gilded Age asylums also damaged their mental states and caused more harm than good.

The medical care provided for patients in asylums severely harmed their mental states. Psychiatric knowledge and practices during the Gilded Age was quite limited, and since medical professionals focused more so on the discovery of cures than gradual treatment and healing, such practices both physically and mentally hurt patients. For instance, the rest cure and restriction of stimulation commonly prescribed to those with neurasthenia severely harmed the mental fitness of patients, as experienced by Gilman during her afflictions with postpartum depression.⁶²

⁵⁸ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 59.

⁵⁹ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 68.

⁶⁰ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 79.

⁶¹ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 81.

⁶² Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 241–242.

Psychiatric treatment within asylums corresponded closely with Gilman's own experiences with regards to harsh remedies and abuse. Bly asserted in her first-hand account, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, that:

I would like the expert physicians who are condemning me for my action, which has proven their ability, to take a perfectly sane and healthy woman, shut her up and make her sit from 6 A.M. until 8 P.M. on straight-back benches, do not allow her to talk or move during these hours, give her no reading and let her know nothing of the world or its doings, give her bad food and harsh treatment, and see how long it will take to make her insane.⁶³

Bly suggested that asylums manufactured further "insanity" within its patients through their damaging and cruel medical care, and that the overall lack in stimulation and forced nerve bankruptcy generated more mental harm than relief. On top of this claim that asylums manufactured insanity, medical staff also forced patients to uptake manual labor in place of time for treatment.

Nurses still expected patients to work and complete manual labor for the benefit of the institution. The staff tasked patients with numerous responsibilities meant to assist the other patients and nurses, as well as maintain the cleanliness of the asylum. Instead of receiving treatment and rehabilitation for their supposed mental ailments, much of a patient's day was spent completing manual labor. For instance, patients sewed clothes for other their peers, completed laundry, and worked in on-site factories—all for which they received no compensation for.⁶⁴ As Bly observed during her stay at Bellevue Hospital, patients had extensive daily tasks, as "a number of women were ordered to make the beds, and some of the patients were put to scrubbing and others given different duties which covered all the work in the hall. It is not the attendants who keep the institution so nice for the poor patients, as I had always thought, but the patients, who do it all themselves—even to cleaning the nurses' bedrooms and

⁶³ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 67-68.

⁶⁴ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 84.

caring for their clothing.”⁶⁵ Asylum nurses and staff pushed their responsibilities and extensive manual labor onto the patients to upkeep the condition of the institution, which consumed much of their time and energy in place of the actual treatment they needed for their supposed insanity. Furthermore, asylum staff physically abused its patients, as well.

Physical abuse at the hands of asylum nurses was extremely common in the Gilded Age. Since the majority of the patients were either wage laborers or immigrants, nurses viewed them as inferior, especially since these classes of individuals were at the mercy of charity, which Americans perceived as shameful. Thus, nurses often turned to physical abuse in order to reinforce their power and authority over the patients. Doctors were rarely aware of the physical mistreatment towards patients, as the nurses threatened further violence in the event that patients confided with the doctors. Nurses inflicted violence on a daily basis, such as when patients refused to eat, complete their tasks, or when patients complained about inadequate amenities or care. Even well-behaved and physically ill patients endured endless torment and abuse at the hands of nurses. Bly once observed a group of nurses attack a blind and elderly patient, and when the woman tried to lie down to get some rest, the nurses would “pull her up again. It sounded so pitiful to hear her cry: ‘Oh, give me a pillow and pull the covers over me, I am so cold.’ At this I saw Miss Grupe sit down on her and run her cold hands over the old woman’s face and down inside the neck of her dress. At the old woman’s cries, she laughed savagely, as did the other nurses, and repeated her cruel action.”⁶⁶ Nurses mercilessly antagonized and physically abused patients—even those with disabilities and other ailments—and purposefully failed to provide adequate and humane treatment that met their basic needs. Despite the horrors Bly witnessed, her written experiences greatly improved public and government support towards the treatment of the mentally ill.

⁶⁵ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 63.

⁶⁶ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 70.

Bly's investigation promoted social awareness about mental health treatment and encouraged governmental reform. After Bly left Bellevue Hospital and finished her successful investigation, Cockerill approved of her findings and quickly published her story in the *World*. Her story was immediately a hit amongst readers nationwide, and Bly turned into a star almost overnight. Shortly after reading her story, the New York Grand Jury and Assistant District-Attorney Vernon M. Davis summoned Bly to discuss her experience and the extent of the abuse she witnessed, and decided to formally investigate Bellevue Hospital while accompanied by Bly.⁶⁷ News outlets also reported on the Grand Jury's formal investigation as a result of Bly's findings, which further solidified her name as a reputable woman journalist and raised increased awareness of patient abuse in asylums. An article from Michigan's *Telegram-herald* in December of 1887 referred to Bly as a "brave girl correspondent," and commented that "the *World* and Miss Bly have done a splendid work in securing the appropriation of one million dollars more than was ever before appropriated for the care of the insane. Miss Bly's story is a remarkable one, but the New York grand jury have shown by their action that they believe it wholly."⁶⁸ Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* successfully garnered public sympathy and awareness towards the maltreatment of the mentally ill, as well as immediately urged further government intervention and increased financial aid towards asylums. In addition to this, Bly's successful report also initiated public debate on the role of women in journalism.

As a result of Bly's nationwide success with *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, public debate sparked over the role of women in journalism. At this time, a woman's sole responsibility lay in the domestic sphere and the care of her family and household, and women faced discrimination and judgement for holding an actual job, as well as disproportionate pay compared to their male coworkers. In fact, Bly had originally moved to New York City in the first place to find better

⁶⁷ Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 89.

writing opportunities outside of the women's column in newspapers, and Cockerill offered her the challenge of investigating Bellevue Hospital due to his doubts in her capabilities as a woman.⁶⁹ The instant nationwide popularity of her report therefore ignited public discussion over whether or not women belong in journalism, especially beyond the women's column. Several journalists published their support of Bly and advocated for increased female involvement in the field. In an article in Mississippi's *The Grenada Sentinel* from January of 1888, a female journalist wrote of her personal experiences with and support towards Bly, asserting that "there is no reason whatever, there can be no argument whatever, against girls working on newspapers, in publishing establishments of any sort or kind, but in that branch of work, as in every other, experience is what tells. First comes the natural gift, then the discretion, the ingenuity, the information born of experience."⁷⁰ Bly's investigation and unwavering efforts as a journalist thus served as a large step forward in the normalization of women in the American press, as well as inspired other females to gradually step out of the domestic sphere and possess employment opportunities of their own, regardless of the patriarchal expectations at that time.

Nellie Bly's writings illustrate the maltreatment of the working-class and immigrants during the Gilded Age of the United States. The endless capitalist desires of a growing industrial nation often left American laborers at the mercy of corporations and businessmen. Workers endured strenuous labor, hazardous work environments, and unjust management, yet earned barely enough money to pay for their rent and provide food on their table. Immigrants flooded the country with hopes of securing profit for their relatives back home, only to encounter hazardous working conditions and prejudice for their non-white nationality. As the distribution of wealth between laborers and the middle- and upper-classes grew, so did the perspective that

⁶⁸ *Telegram-herald*, Grand Rapids, MI, December 11, 1887, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress.

⁶⁹ Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 79–86.

poverty was much more than a socioeconomic status. Intrigued about the lives and treatment of patients within insane asylums, journalist Nellie Bly went undercover as a poor Cuban immigrant with amnesia in order to admit herself in Bellevue Hospital on Blackwell's Island, New York. There, Bly uncovered the inhumane maltreatment of patients, and her published first-hand accounts introduced investigative journalism and muckraking to expose corruption to the public eye. As muckraker Nellie Bly detailed in her first-hand account of Bellevue Hospital, entitled *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), industrial America regarded poverty and non-American qualities as a disease, which thus resulted in the false imprisonment of working-class individuals and immigrants in horrendous asylums, all under the guise that the patients were insane and dangerous to society.

In the first-hand account of Bellevue Hospital, *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), muckraker Bly exposed the horrors of asylum life during the Gilded Age and detailed the United States' perception of poverty and non-American qualities as a disease, and thus reinforced the admittance and false imprisonment of "insane" working-class individuals and immigrants in asylums. As the United States grew into a flourishing industrial nation, its endless capitalist desires left the country and its citizens at the mercy of the corporate elite and businesses. Limited to only blue-collar manual labor jobs, both the working class and immigrants encountered dangerous work environments and long hours, only to earn barely enough money to pay their rent. In the tenement houses that working-class individuals and immigrants commonly resided in, multiple families cramped into small and dark apartments, while the poor structural integrity of the buildings and overcrowding resulted in outbreaks of disease. Although most immigrants only planned to temporarily stay in the United States in order to earn higher wages for their families back home, they also met inhumane working conditions and prejudice. Americans associated

⁷⁰ *The Grenada Sentinel*, Grenada, MS, January 7, 1888, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress.

poverty with laziness, and soon insanity, as asylums admitted working-class individuals and immigrants against their will and knowledge. Curious about the lives and treatment of patients within asylums, Bly accepted an undercover operation where she was also admitted into an infamous New York asylum on Blackwell's Island. Bly's report brought awareness to the maltreatment of patients within insane asylums and their false imprisonment amongst middle- and upper-class Americans, which thus encouraged further social reform and federal funding for such institutions and mental health treatment.

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