The History of Mental Illness Treatment and Insane Asylums

The history of the treatment (or lack thereof) of the mentally ill in the United States is a checkered one. The first colonists blamed mental illness on witchcraft and demonic possession, and the mentally ill were often imprisoned, sent to poor houses, or remained untreated at home. Conditions in these prisons were appalling. In 1841, Dorothea Dix volunteered to teach a Sunday-school class for female inmates; she was outraged by the conditions she witnessed. Dix went on to become a renowned advocate for the mentally ill, urging more humane treatment-based care than that given to the mentally ill in prisons. In 1847 she urged the Illinois legislature to provide “appropriate care and support for the curable and incurable indigent insane.” In 1851, Jacksonville Insane Asylum was opened.

The way people thought about mental illness changed profoundly during the Victorian Era (1837-1901). This was a period of rapid evolution, especially in England. Great improvements were made in many fields including great scientific advancements.

According to Durand and Barlow, the authors of the text book Abnormal Psychology, Louis Pasteur’s Germ Theory of Disease in 1870 indirectly facilitated a movement in Psychology towards searching for a more biological cause for mental illness. Therefore, rather than being seen as a soul sickness as it was in the middle and dark ages, mental illness was now being seen as a brain pathology. Many mental health professionals then assumed that comparable causes and cures might be discovered for most psychological disorders also. This of course affected the way the mentally ill were treated.

The average treatments people could expect in the early Victorian period included:

- Bloodletting (considerable quantities of blood were drawn from a patient). It was based on an ancient system of medicine in which blood and other bodily fluid had to be ‘balanced’.
- Induced vomiting
- Leeches
- Solitary confinement
- Strait-jackets
- Bland / meager diets
- Restraints (chained to the bed at night)
- Lobotomies (a kind of psychosurgery)
Hypnotism (originally used to treat the condition known in the Victorian era as ‘hysteria’). The word ‘hypnosis’ is an abbreviation of James Braid’s (1841) term ‘neuro-hypnotism’ meaning sleep of the nervous system.

Asylums

To understand what it was like to be in an insane asylum, we first must examine who the patients were. While asylum patients struggled with real mental illnesses that we recognize today, some people wound up in the mental asylums that had no real reason to be there, according to today's standards.

On the Tennessee Genealogical Society web site one can read about the bogus reasons that mentally healthy women went into the insane asylums. Some of these women were hospitalized because they questioned the authority of their husbands or were not good enough homemakers. Any woman was at risk for being placed if she questioned the man of the household.

If a woman grew too old the husband could have her committed and would take a younger wife. Menopause or PMS was reason enough to ship her off to a facility. Once a woman was committed to the asylum, it was as if she died, and usually an obituary was published.

A landlord could have a tenant committed for not paying rent, being outlandish in behavior or dress. A boss could do the same thing to an employee, if the employee was slow or a ‘bad employee’. People could be committed if they were poor. One could be committed for being an alcoholic, a person with a short fuse, or anyone who deviated from the normal things society thought was right. This goes for both men and woman, but asylums were more commonly filled with women during this time period.

Children who acted out or had mental or physical disabilities were also placed in mental asylums. Imagine a blind child or a child with a speech problem being locked away for his or her entire life because of a birth defect. Some of these children had normal intelligence and no mental diseases but they were placed in institutions with other people who did have these problems.

Patients inside these insane asylums were subjected to ice cold baths, beatings, starvation, or being a slave to the facility. They were forced to work within the facility until laws were passed that prevented it. Patients were chained or shackled to ensure complacency. This way they would not harm themselves or the other patients. The bedrooms within these facilities were unheated in the winter months up north, while insane asylum patients down south sweltered in the hot summer months.

Cleanliness was not stressed and infection control was unheard of so when an illness ran through the building many people got sick and some died without medical treatment. The common flu bug took many lives each season in mental asylums around the country.

Government Intervention

A turning point came when, in 1841, the UK government passed a new act that required them to inspect the living conditions of asylums. They expected it to be a therapeutic environment, not prison-like with poor ventilation, as they found it to be. In fact, on one such inspection the parliamentary commission found that people were being chained to their beds at night.
According to a report on ‘lunacy’, published in the Westminster Review in 1845, people in general were becoming significantly more open-minded and tolerant of mental illness. As the biological tradition flourished towards the end of the Victorian era, emphasis became on rest, diet and proper room temperature and ventilation as the main treatment option of mental illness.

Name:

Class Period:

Expository Article Analysis

1.) Just based on the photo on the first page of the article, what tone is set for the piece? How does this photo add additional depth to the article?

2.) Explain the organizational style of the article. How does the author break up his information to make it easier for the reader to understand?

3.) What is the thesis (direct or implied) in this article?

4.) What supporting evidence is provided to back up the writer’s assertions?

5.) According to the article, why were more women sent to institutions of this kind than men? Provide a quote to back up this answer. What does this article have to do with our study of Jane Eyre?
“The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Jane Eyre* were both published in the 1800’s and contain a fictional account of a woman with mental illness. Explain what universal theme these two stories reflect about either the time period, the treatment of women, human rights issues, or the misunderstandings of mental illness in the seventeenth century. Be sure to use evidence from both passages to explain your answer.