

# Welcome to asylum island

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A plethora of elegant dresses, elaborate curls, late night dinner parties...all of the above are what come to mind when considering Victorian era society. While the lives of many upper class citizens at the time painted a pretty picture, one more dark and gloomy lurked in the shadows. Much was tried to keep it behind closed doors, but mental illness was still able to play an immense role in the lives of the Victorian people. In fact, this misfortune was much more common than expected during that time period.

The Victorian era provided a gilded truth about mental illness, but novels produced during the time were able to expose the real happenings. When mentally ill patients were discovered during the Victorian era, they were sent to a new place of residence, usually in the form of a mental facility. These mental facilities were mainly used for housing mental patients as well as treating them; they were also referred to as "insane asylums". Prior to the establishment of these asylums, the mentally ill were kept in "the poorhouse or prison" (History to Her Story). Without the creation of a proper area of residence for the "lunatics", much harm and chaos would have broken out among Victorian society. Particularly, in Charlotte Brontë's Victorian novel *Jane Eyre*, Mr.

Rochester feels it to be in the best interest for everyone to keep his insanity stricken wife locked away at Thornfield Hall: "I must shut up my prize" (Brontë 296). Mr. Rochester himself wishes nothing to do with his wife and prefers to lock her away as many Victorian people did. The housing conditions in these facilities were inhumane and often degrading to the inhabitants: "Patients in these early asylums were kept in cages, given small amounts of often unclean food, had little or no clothing, wore no shoes, and

slept in dirt” (Frick, par. 1). The handling of the patients at these facilities was very similar to how animals were treated at the time-cruelly and unjustly.

Many times as well, the insane asylums would be crowded, overflowing with an influx of patients from around the city; only worsening the horrid conditions. Treatments manifested by doctors in the Victorian era seem rather unusual when put into comparison with the antidotes and treatments that are provided today. Many methods were devised to cope with these illnesses, some of which included: “ bleeding and purging with leeches, mustard plasters, footbaths, chops and beer...” (History to Her Story). Those methods proved to be the most effective at the time, successfully containing the mentally ill for the time being. Along with the existence of mental illness, came many different classifications or types of illnesses. These illnesses were diagnosed based upon the symptoms that the patient, usually female, exhibited, with each illness containing individual descriptions.

The different diagnoses consisted of: “ anorexia, nymphomania, and lesbians” (Frick, par. 1). Nymphomania, specifically, was not only one of the more common types of mental illness found in women, but it made an appearance in Jane Eyre, as part of the mental illness suffered by Bertha Rochester. Nymphomania is described through women who “ threw themselves to the floor, laughed, danced, jumped, lashed out, smashed objects, tore their clothes, grabbed at any man who came before her” (Frick, par. 1). As this illness caused the patient to exhibit such behavior, it would eventually turn the person insane, resulting in the loss of control over their bodies and minds.

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Bertha Mason Rochester is portrayed as a nymphomaniac when her character is first revealed: “ the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek” (Bronte 296). Mrs. Rochester exhibits more than one of the main symptoms of nymphomania, including lashing out and grabbing at any man who came before her. Due to the existence of these illnesses and mental patients, Victorian society created their own views of these people. The Victorian society looked down upon mentally ill people and described them as animals not worthy of any form of humanity.

“ Their madness supposedly stemmed from an evil within, and they thus were treated as animals” (Frick, par. 1). This thought of resemblance between the mentally ill and animals is redefined in the context of Jane Eyre, when Bertha is first encountered: “ What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it groveled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal...the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet” (Bronte 295). Mrs. Rochester is described to be the equivalent of a wild animal, something that is untamed and feared.

These descriptions and stereotypes were based off of the actions the mentally ill demonstrated when encountered. “ Clearly madness is seen is seen as a state of degradation and bestiality” (Beveridge, par. 4). Many of the mentally ill that lived during the Victorian era acted in a fearful manner similar to that of a wild beast, fitting the common label given to them. While Bertha Mason does fit the animal-like description of society’s view on the mentally ill, she also fits the belief that they are people to be feared and do not belong. Jane accounts: “ It was a savage face...it reminded me... of the

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foul German spectre—the Vampyre...I became insensible from terror”  
(Bronte 286).

Jane Eyre’s description of Bertha paints a picture of a fearful thing, far from humanity and almost nonexistent. Mrs. Rochester’s depiction as a terrifying animal lives up to the views/standards that the Victorian society put upon the mentally ill. The image that immediately comes to mind when thinking of the Victorian era is that of the high class society at fancy parties. Victorian society tried to cover up the existence of the mentally ill by shutting them up in facilities and shunning them overall as people.

Strained relationships between the mentally ill and the Victorian era citizens not only showed up in real life, but in novels of its time as well. Charlotte Bronte’s, *Jane Eyre*, in particular deals with a case of a lunatic and the events that occur because of the lunatic’s existence. When looking at and comparing the facilities and treatments, diseases, and views of the Victorian people in real life and the novel, many similarities or connections can be found. After all, what’s life (or a book) without a crazy little twist? Works Cited Beveridge, Allen. *The Presentation of Madness In the Victorian Novel*. Web.

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