

Process Paper

As someone who deals with mental illness myself, I've always been interested in the treatment of the mentally ill throughout history. I had a basic idea of the gruesome history of asylums from doing small research studies and reading a lot of historical fiction, but I wanted to know more. Before the theme was even announced, I knew I wanted to center my 2020 NHD project on asylums. The first thing that came to mind when I learned of the theme was women's rights. I did a little bit of preliminary research and talked to my friends about how I might be able to combine these topics, and someone suggested: "that lady who went undercover in an asylum" – Nellie Bly.

The database that helped me the most last year was ProQuest, so this was the first place I went for preliminary research. I started with wide searches, such as Nellie Bly and Blackwell's Asylum. Not long after this, I realized that I needed to get her book as soon as possible, so I did. I began researching Bly more thoroughly in September, basing almost all my further research on questions and ideas that were raised by reading her book.

I've been performing for at least ten years now and acting for six, so performance was the obvious category choice for me. I started writing down specific phrases and elements I wanted to use in my script as soon as I started my project in July. As I was reading *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, I was subconsciously developing a personality that I would use to create the character of Nellie Bly in my performance. I started working on my script in early November, letting the character of Bly that I had developed tell the story as I was writing it. Costume and set ideas were easy as well. I found a perfect dress at the thrift store and painted a canvas backdrop.

Nellie Bly's exposé of Blackwell's Asylum broke barriers in three fields—feminism, journalism, and what I'm focused on, the treatment of the mentally ill. Bly was a feminist icon in the early 1900s and introduced a new type of journalism that we still use today; subjective journalism. Her reports lead to all of America's asylums eventually being shut down.

The contest being virtual this year threw a few hurdles my way. Originally, I had a strict timeline of when I needed to get certain aspects done, and the one week less than I had for regionals and the two weeks less for state pushed this timeline a lot shorter than I'm usually comfortable with. Being a "theater kid," I do my best performing in front of an audience, even though I am starting to do other work behind a camera. I missed the in-person aspects of the contest, which I thrived from last year. Overall, this turn of events was hard for me, but I learned a handful of new skills from having to do it this way.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary

“Are They Insane?.” *Playing Madwoman. The Sun* [New York, NY] vol. 55, no. 44, 14 Oct. 1887, pp. 2, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1887-10-14/ed-1/seq-2/>.

This is a short segment noting details of two of the women that Nellie Bly determined to be wrongfully condemned to the asylum. These were 33-year-old Annie Neville from Ireland and 25-year-old Matilda Maynard from the United States. Annie Neville specifically was mentioned multiple times in Bly’s book, even giving a statement to the jury when they visited the island after Bly’s stay.

"The Blackwell's Island Outrage." *New York Times* (1857-1922), May 21, 1867, pp. 5, ProQuest.
<http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/92282305?accountid=46>.

This short article describes a cruelty case involving a warden of Blackwell’s Island Asylum and a patient, which was eventually dismissed by the District Attorney working on the case. While this case did not take place during Nellie Bly’s time, it shows that Blackwell’s staff have been consistently cruel to the patients who live under their care. It further proves that what the courts needed to further investigate and eventually shut down Blackwell’s Island Asylum.

“Book Notices.” *The Morning News* [Savannah, GA] 12 Dec. 1887, pp. 7, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063034/1887-12-12/ed-1/seq-7/>.

This is a list in a local paper of newly released books. It includes Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House*. There is a small blurb explaining what the book is about. This shows that this was a book worth announcing—it was highly anticipated.

“Literary Notes.” *Wheeling Sunday Register*, vol. 25, 18 Dec. 1887, pp. 8,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86092523/1887-12-18/ed-1/seq-8/>.

This is another list of newly released books in a small, local paper. The segment on *Ten Days in a Mad-House* describes the book as “among the very few books that will attract more than casual comment” and praises the plain and unvarnished truth of the book. This source, once again, shows that this was a book that was worth reading when it came out, not just as a historical text today.

“Nellie Bly.” 1890. *Library of Congress*, Reproduction no. LC-USZ62-59924,

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2004671937/>.

This source is a full body photo taken of Nellie Bly in 1890. She is holding her hat in one hand and a bag in the other and is wearing a checked coat over a black or maybe brown dress. This is the main photo that I used as reference for my costume.

"NELLIE BLY, JOURNALIST, DIES OF PNEUMONIA: FAMOUS FOR RAPID TRIP AROUND THE WORLD IN 1889 AND OTHER DARING EXPLOITS." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Jan 28, 1922, pp. 11, ProQuest.

<http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/99625782?accountid=46>.

This article is an announcement of Nellie Bly's death. It also recaps her life and her main achievements, including her journey around the world and her asylum exposé.

A specific number is given for her peak yearly income, as well as more details on her child and teenage years.

“Nellie Bly Wants to be a Detective.”, *New York Times* (1897 – 1922), May 30, 1897, pp. 1, ProQuest.

<http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/95480792?accountid=46>.

This short, three sentence editorial continues to follow Nellie Bly after her trip around the world and her marriage. The author scoffs at her ambitions of becoming successful in a man’s career. This source gives a look into the passive aggressive, negative views of Bly during her time.

“New-York City Asylum for the Insane (Women), Blackwell’s Island.” 1893. *Asylum Projects*, http://asylumprojects.org/index.php/File:1893_Asylum_For_Women.JPG.

This is a photo of one of the buildings of Blackwell’s Asylum taken shortly after the institution was shut down. Before changing the setting of my performance between the school and regional competitions, I had planned on using this as a reference photo for my one of my backdrops.

“NY Blackwell.” *Asylum Projects*,

<http://asylumprojects.org/index.php/File:NYblackwell.png>.

This is a photo of another building on Blackwell’s Island. This was another image I planned on using as a reference.

“Official Reports about Her.” *Playing Madwoman. The Sun* [New York, NY] vol. 55, no. 44, 14 Oct. 1887, pp. 2, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1887-10-14/ed-1/seq-2/>.

These reports were from people that worked at the asylum and explained shortly their interactions with and assessments of Bly, whom they knew as Nellie Brown from Cuba. They mentioned how she supposedly “riled up” the other patients and was rude and disrespectful to the staff. The names that I recognized from Bly’s book were Dr. Kinier, Miss Grady, Miss Grupe, and Dr. Caldwell.

“Patients Working the Yards.” *Asylum Projects*,

http://asylumprojects.org/index.php/File:Patients_Working_the_Yards.jpg.

While this drawing doesn’t have much significance to Bly herself or any versions of my end product, I found it intriguing. It implies that the women of Blackwell’s were made to do the work of a landscaper or other groundskeeper, and the horrible mental and physical state that some of these women are in is evident in the image.

“Playing Madwoman.” *The Sun* [New York, NY] vol. 55, no. 44, 14 Oct. 1887, pp. 1–2, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1887-10-14/ed-1/seq-1/>.

In this series of articles, the newspaper tells the story of the “pretty crazy girl,” or Nellie Bly, and her exposé of Blackwell’s asylum. They are seeming to show her praise for being “too sharp” for the specialists at the asylum, Bellevue Hospital, and the police stations leading up to her stay on Blackwell’s Island. I mostly just skimmed this article and focused on a few key points that weren’t mentioned in Bly’s book, which I’ve noted in separate citations.

“Woman as a Journalist.” *Wichita Eagle* [Wichita, KS] vol. 7, no. 129, 16 Oct. 1887, pp. 9,
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85032490/1887-10-16/ed-1/seq-9/>.

This article is an excerpt from *The Pittsburgh Dispatch* written originally by Nellie Bly. It shows how a man in charge of a newspaper—*The Herald* specifically—reacted to her, a woman, asking for a job with the paper. What he says is full of contradictions; that the paper hires people solely based on ability, but then that women inherently do not have certain journalistic abilities, that they are unable to collect reports as a man can, that they are limited to specific topics, and that men do not feel comfortable working in such close proximity to women. Based on what I know of Bly’s personality, it is obvious why she did not end up working with this paper.

“View of the Lunatic Asylum and Madhouse, on Blackwell’s Island, New York.” 1853.

Asylum Projects,

http://asylumprojects.org/index.php/File:Blackwells_1853.jpg#filehistory.

This is what seems to be a drawing made of charcoal, pencil, or some other grayscale sketching material. It is of the same building as *New-York City Asylum for the Insane (Women), Blackwell’s Island*, accept from forty years earlier. The scene is much happier than in *Patients Working the Yards*, which leads me to believe that the island wasn’t always as terrible as it was in Bly’s time.

Bly, Nellie. “Behind Asylum Bars.” *New York World*,

<http://sites.dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/sites/dlib.nyu.edu.undercover/files/documents/uploads/editors/Behind-Asylum-Bars-Nellie-Bly-1.pdf>.

This collection of articles was the first of two published by Nellie Bly about her asylum exposé. While the book that she put together, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, was easier to read and analyze, this document includes original microfilm of the newspaper which the articles appeared in. In these articles, Bly explains getting into Blackwell's Asylum and the first part of her stay there.

Bly, Nellie. *Ten Days in a Mad-House*. Ian L Munro, 1887.

While Nellie Bly was a fascinating woman, what interests me most about her was the asylum exposé. This book is a primary source, and it is rich in information. It covers her whole time working on the asylum case, from how she got in to when she got out and began to spread what she had found to the public. After spending ten days in Blackwell's Asylum, Nellie Bly wrote multiple articles and other reports on her time there, her process of getting in, and what she found was happening under lock and key to the women at the asylum. Bly composed a book made up of these articles and included annotations where she thought context would be necessary.

Bly, Nellie. "The Mystery of Central Park." *The Evening World* [New York, NY] 26 Jul.

1889, pp. 3, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1889-07-26/ed-3/seq-3/>.

This is a segment of the only novel written by Nellie Bly. It is based around a couple who finds the body of a young woman in Central Park and the murder mystery that ensues. It was written in 1889, two years after her asylum exposé, showing the publicity and fame that she got from that case and the position that she got at *The World*.

Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library. "Plate 41:"

The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1879.

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5032c8d0-0b8e-0132-8e14-58d385a7b928>.

The bottom half of this image is a map of Blackwell's island showing the locations of all of the buildings as of 1879, eight years before Bly's exposé. It shows the scale of the asylum itself to everything else on the island, including a penitentiary, almshouses, and two hospitals. What I gained from this map was a visual to Bly's book *Ten Days in a Mad-House* and where certain segments take place.

Meyers, H. J. "Nellie Bly." 1890. *Library of Congress*, Reproduction no. LC-USZ62-75620,

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2002697740/>.

This is the most iconic photo of Nellie Bly, a portrait taken in 1890 by photographer H. J. Meyers. This is the photo that I modeled my hair and makeup after, and helped me get a general idea of her outfit.

Secondary

"The Fight for the American Museum of Women"□□ s History." University Wire, Jan 01, 2017, ProQuest.

<http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1855648528?accountid=46>.

This article is about the American Museum of Women and its importance. The authors brings up differences in representation between women and men in American monuments and a few of the women that might be recognized in this new museum. The difficulty of finding funds for the building of the museum is looked at, as well as the projects for representation for other underrepresented groups in history. Although this article only mentions Nellie Bly in passing, it is a good look at feminism in history.

Jones, Susan. "Nellie Bly: Trailblazer Honored on Her 151st,Nellie Bly: Trailblazer Honored on Her 151st.", Tribune – Review / Pittsburgh Tribune – Review, May 02, 2015, ProQuest.

<http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1677712236?accountid=46>.

This article includes a brief history of Nellie Bly. Jones then goes on to describe what is happening in the present-day world to honor Bly and carry on her story— celebrations in the name of her birthday, the writing of a children’s book about Bly by Ellen Mahoney (and an interview with her), the movie adaption of 10 Days in a Madhouse, a TV series about Bly’s life, and a theater production of a meeting

between Bly and Jules Verne. These things all took place in 2015, when this article was written. My performance is partly based around Bly's distinct personality. She was kind, caring, curious, and intuitive. The interview portion of the article describes this side of Bly.

Kroeger, Brooke. "The World." *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist*, Times Books, 1994, pp. 79–99.

In the first roughly half of the Kroeger's section on Nellie Bly's initial work with *The World*, she tells the story of Bly's asylum exposé. She uses exact dates and names, which I struggled to find anywhere else, and provided her interpretations of Bly's work during this time. There are a lot more details on how Bly got the job than are in *Ten Days in a Madhouse*.

Polumbaum, Judy. "The Legend of Nellie Bly Lives on--and it Stands Up -- Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist by Brooke Kroeger." *Nieman Reports*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1994, pp. 84, ProQuest.
<http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/216758954?accountid=46>.

This article covers Nellie Bly's life from her birth to death. Polumbaum heavily references Brooke Kroeger's *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* when talking about Bly. She also looks at the lasting effects Bly had on her society during her time—and how alike her style of reporting is to today's. This article introduced me to Brooke Kroeger and her book on Nellie Bly. It reminded me of the importance of her life as a child and teen and its importance to her later life as a reporter.

Shemberger, Melony. "Breaking News, Breaking Barriers." *Journalism History*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2018, pp. 50-56, ProQuest.

<http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2190030469?accountid=46>.

This article is about Clare Reckert, a business journalist who wrote under a man's pseudonym in the mid-1900s. She is seen as one of the first females in the field of reporting, along with other women such as Nellie Bly and Ambrose Bierce. She focused on taking stats and translating them into articles that everyone could understand. The development of women in journalism and business journalism is an ongoing theme in this article. While the author only mentions Nellie Bly once, it goes into a more general overview of women in journalism throughout history and the growing comfortableness of getting your news from a woman.