

One flew over the cuckoo's nest

Family



The Politics of the Cuckoo's Nest Some have said that you can't escape politics and there are many ways this is true. In writing about a fictional psychiatric hospital in Oregon, Ken Kesey revealed that politics can even play a significant role in this type of institution. In this novel, the main character, Randy McMurphy, is an Irishman with a great deal of energy for trouble. To escape a harsh prison sentence, he cons the judge into giving him a sentence at a mental hospital. But when he's brought into the environment of the psychiatric ward, complete with its high level of manipulation and oppression under the dictatorial hand of Big Nurse Ratched, his energy suddenly shifted from being one of destruction and chaos to one of progress and change as he helps empower the other patients. Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* focuses on the power struggle between a dictatorship and a democracy. Although both leaders strive for power over the patients, McMurphy's tactics win the patient's allegiance while Nurse Ratched retains control of the weaponry so neither one really wins. Both McMurphy and Nurse Ratched are using the patients in the ward to fulfill their own personal desires. It is clear from the beginning of the story that McMurphy faked insanity to escape the hard work at the Pendleton Work Farm, " Don't overlook the possibility that this man might be feigning psychosis to escape the drudgery of the work farm" (Kesey 46). His need to escape after he discovers Big Nurse's control of the ward drives him to offer assistance to the other patients, such as when he tells Bromden, " I want to know can you promise to lift it if I get you as big as you used to be? You promise me that, and you not only get my special body-buildin' course for nothing, but you get yourself a ten buck fishing trip free!" (Kesey, 1962). McMurphy's purpose is simply to foil Nurse Ratched at first

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and then to escape her. " Everything that McMurphy has done for the men up to then has been to his financial advantage. For the largest part of the novel McMurphy is a con man, just as Big Nurse claims" (Foster, 2002). However, in getting the men to do what he wants them to do, as is illustrated in his bargain with Bromden, McMurphy offers them something they want or need in exchange. As he becomes more aware of the real conditions within the ward and the relative sanity of some of the Acutes, he takes a more active role in empowering them toward freedom. At the same time, Nurse Ratched works to break down the patients to make them into efficiently running machines. " The Big Nurse tends to get real put out if something keeps her outfit from running like a smooth, accurate, precision-made machine ... what she dreams of there in those wires is a world of precision efficiency and tidiness like a pocket watch with a glass back" (Kesey, 1962). The Oregon psychiatric hospital is a world completely dominated by this masochistic nurse who sits " in the center of this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend[s] her network with mechanical insect skill, know[s] every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants" (Kesey, 1962: 30). She is an oppressor trying to break the men into behaving the way that they are expected to behave for the efficient running of the nation according to the definitions she has established. " The shop symbolizes the hidden oppression operating in the outside world. The patients are broken-down machines that the asylum seeks to adjust. The Big Nurse's basic method is to destroy the patients' self-confidence by making them admit their guilt, shame, and uselessness" (Macky, 2010). With this acknowledgment, the men can then, presumably, be taught how they are expected to behave in the outside world with the expectation that they will

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eventually do as they're told. Although both Nurse Ratched and McMurphy are successful at times, neither one is able to win in the end. McMurphy is successful in proving to the other men that Nurse Ratched is simply manipulating their insecurities, destroying Nurse Ratched's reign in the process, but he weakens himself for the sake of these others. His success is most clear when he reveals Nurse Ratched's breasts in front of the other men: " screaming when he grabbed for her and ripped her uniform all the way down the front, screaming again when the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out" (Kesey, 1962: 267). Completely exposed as a flesh and blood woman and with her voice permanently silenced, Nurse Ratched loses her ability to terrorize the patients of the ward. However, this moment of McMurphy's greatest success is also the moment of his personal defeat and Nurse Ratched's revenge. He is sent in for a lobotomy as the only means of controlling him. This makes him a vegetable and a living testament to Nurse Ratched's powerful control to the other patients. Although he dies, it can be argued that McMurphy wins in his efforts to reduce the power of the combine. Bromden waits around just long enough after the lobotomy to gain access to McMurphy's vegetative body. By suffocating him in the middle of the night, Bromden removes Nurse Ratched's last symbol of control: " I was only sure of one thing: he wouldn't have left something like that sit there in the day room with his name tacked on it for twenty or thirty years so the Big Nurse could use it as an example of what can happen if you buck the system" (Kesey, 1962: 270). Although the men who would have known of what McMurphy had lost have either transferred out of the ward or are dead at this point in the story, Bromden still remembers McMurphy's example and the positive effect he had in

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helping them gain their sense of selves. Works Cited Foster, John Wilson. "Hustling to Some Purpose: Kesey's 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.'" Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. 2002: 67-78. <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?hid=15&sid=a8a64476-59ad-4c15-9136-9df912db2044%40sessionmgr11&vid=9&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=lfh&AN=16503978> Kesey, Ken. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. New York: Signet, 1962. Macky, Peter W. "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." Masterplots. 4th edition. Nov. 2010: 1-3. <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=a8a64476-59ad-4c15-9136-9df912db2044%40sessionmgr11&vid=15&hid=19&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=lfh&AN=103331MP424309820000205>