

Masculinity and  
femininity: analysis of  
one flew over the  
cuckoo's nest text  
and ...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout modern and historic literature alike, the battle of the sexes has waged on. From Greek dramas to modern stream-of-consciousness novels, the struggle among men and women has been commonplace. In this way, within his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey pits the contrasting characteristics of Nurse Ratched and Candy Starr to put forward a concept of duality. However, as it appears in the movie interpretation of the novel, such a theme is present, albeit much less so.

From the outset of the novel, Kesey develops a generalization of women as cold and manipulative, focusing on Nurse Ratched as the center of power. For instance, to depict the head nurse as distant and controlling, Kesey describes her as more mechanical than human. The nurse's smile is said to twist and stretch "into an open snarl" as she "blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor" and barrels toward the black boys (5). Here, the nurse's female characteristics like a "compact or lipstick or woman stuff" are hidden in favor for the "thousands of parts that she aims to use in her duties today" (4). The effect of such literal objectification through reverse personification serves to paint the nurse as a potent force whose feminine characteristics are replaced by means to control the men around her. Moreover, as McMurphy complains of the Nurse's absolute rule over the ward, she is called an "old buzzard ... going down for your vitals," a "strong wolf" among rabbits, and the ruler of a system in which the men "are victims of the matriarchy" (62-65). With such an explicit description of a woman with a veritable vendetta for men, Kesey crafts the female antagonist as an omnipotent force whose sole motive in life is to debilitate the male patients. However, this vengeful portrayal of the nurse is less apparent within the

movie interpretation. For instance, during the staff meeting that occurs in the movie, the nurse does not employ the same manipulative tactics of silence and condescending glare that were constant in the text version. Moreover, in the movie the chief is not present in the staff meeting. This has the effect of lessening the nurse's appearance of power since the Chief's fear of the woman cannot be shown. Because of this, the recurring descriptions of the nurse as omnipotent and manipulative that are common in the novel are lessened in the movie. Nevertheless, as Kesey manifests the controlling and passive aggressive characteristics that some men, including McMurphy, see as characteristics of women, the inclusion of Candy Starr tempers such a generalization.

By including the prostitute Candy in his novel, Kesey adds an important qualifier on his emerging stereotype of women. For example, in direct contrast to how the nurse attempts to hide her feminine features and controls the men on the ward, Kesey describes Candy's first encounter with the male patients as eye opening. For instance, when Candy meets the men, Kesey explains how the patients were enthralled by her body to the point of describing the scene with the vulgar hyperbole " it was so quiet ... all along the Chronic row [you] could hear catheters popping off" (232). More so, not even the righteous doctor could avert his gaze. Instead, Dr. Spivey is observed " eyeing the blond girl's T-shirt like nothing else existed" (233). Here, the nature of Candy's personality is on display as she is objectified by the men as they gawk at her femininity. However, more importantly, such an exploitation of the prostitute serves to form a foil between her and the nurse since by fondling over Candy, the men assert their dominance rather than

lose it when Ratched undergoes reverse personification to belittle the men. Nevertheless, this stark contrast of dominance of and by women is much less clear within the movie. For instance, when the patients in the novel prepare to board the fishing boat, they are confronted by a group of misogynistic men, and, although they fail to act in defense of Candy, the patients begin to understand their mistake in doing so as the Chief declares “ all our crew... got to feeling ashamed we didn’t do something” and “ I could feel my feet getting wet as the dock sank with shame into the bay” (242). Because of this, the male patients confront their shortcoming in respect to self-confidence and begin along their path to recovery through the fishing trip, yet this scene is completely omitted from the movie adaptation of the novel. In this way, the movie fails to address Candy’s role in the betterment of the patients which the Nurse was unable to achieve and lessens the dichotomy of the two characters that Kesey aimed for.

With the addition of Candy Starr, Kesey indirectly forms an antithesis between the two women on the ward. Nevertheless, a direct juxtaposition emerges when Candy sleeps with Billy Bibbit and Nurse Ratched guilts him into suicide. For example, after being caught in bed with the courtesan, Bibbit is described as looking “ pleased with his success” in reference to his conquest of the woman (314). Here, by sleeping with Bibbit, Candy has allowed him to recover a sense of power that has habitually been stolen by the nurse. Conversely, after berating the man, Nurse Ratched succeeds in guilting him toward suicide by asking “ how is your poor mother going to take this” with Bibbit’s reaction being as if “ he’d been burned with acid” (314). Along these lines, this dichotomy between Candy empowering the

men and the Nurse demeaning them is one of the few similarities among the novel and the movie in regard to the power struggle of the genders.

Specifically, the scene in which Bibbit slits his throat has the same effect of displaying the nurse's manipulation since McMurphy immediately proceeds to strangle the passive aggressive woman to seek revenge for Bibbit's death. Furthermore, such contrasting images of women serve Kesey's intent of commenting on the nature of duality as he describes that McMurphy "won't let the pain blot out the humor no more'n he'll let the humor blot out the pain" (250). Here, Kesey poignantly represents the common adage of 'taking the good with the bad' and that the nature of circumstance is as two-sided as the women on the ward.

Throughout his novel, Ken Kesey employs a battle of the sexes to further his meaning. By manifesting a controlling and manipulative women, he presents one possible description of femininity. However, with Candy Starr, a stark contrast is formed by a female character ready and willing to please the men and allow them to assert their dominance in the most basic of ways. Because of this, Kesey's overarching theme of duality emerges based on McMurphy's life view. To this end, Kesey comments that, along with the merriment of laughter, there will be pain; much like the presence of the two foiling women.