

Randle patrick
mcmurphy, a tragedy
from the beginning



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Would you ever accept a leadership role to a group of beat down patients at a mental institution knowing the consequence would be death? Randle Patrick McMurphy does just that. McMurphy, a con man who seeks institutionalization, becomes a role model for the inmates at a hospital. These male patients are lifeless human beings who fear the institution and its ruler, Big Nurse Ratched. Nurse Ratched runs the ward like an army prison camp with harsh and motorized precision. Nurse Ratched controls the inmates in every way possible, and they have no freedom.

When McMurphy comes along, the inmates realize he is their rescuer, and he fights their battle against society and Nurse, Ratched's control for them. In Ken Kesey's, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Randle Patrick McMurphy portrays the elements of a tragic hero by revolutionizing the hospital ward, accepting a leadership role to the inmates, and eventually falling to his demise. Randle McMurphy revolutionizes the ward and begins his rise to power performing the first step of a tragic hero. A tragic hero embodies nobility and virtue within himself and occupies a high status position. McMurphy begins this march to fame as soon as he sets foot in the hospital. He avoids the black boys so he can avoid being hit with a rectal thermometer, which must be given to any new admissions.

His initials RPM give substantial meaning to his actions. Richard Blessing outlines this when he says, " he is a personification of motion, energy, and change" (140). He creates a big nuisance throughout the ward with his gambling, singing, laughing, and constant movement. McMurphy runs away from the rules and regulations of Nurse Ratched. He captivates the inmates with his actions and individuality, and this becomes the basis of his success.

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McMurphy does not understand the system as the inmates do, and thus, the rise to greatness is made easier for him because the inmates lead lives of fear.

McMurphy has one major goal," he teaches the inmates to be same" (Goodwin, 3). This is shown with his actions throughout his time in the ward. Within the first week, McMurphy establishes his dominance when he bets the inmates he can make Nurse Ratched lose her temper in one week and he succeeds. McMurphy leads by example, but the inmates are reluctant to follow his lead because they fear Nurse Ratched. With his physical and mental movement within the ward, he proves the individual can succeed in the type of confinement of the institution.

He motivates the inmates to change their appearance as " rabbits" (Kesey 62) and become human beings. The change in the inmates is apparent when the group votes to watch the World Series instead of doing chores. The inmates' defiance against Nurse Ratched gives reason to believe they are following McMurphy's footsteps. This proves he is rising to fame like a true tragic hero. The inmates respect and honor for McMurphy increases and he develops into a leader to the patients and takes on the battle against the institution. By revolutionizing the ward, McMurphy makes himself stand out from the inmates and his march to greatness establishes that he is taking the first step of a tragic hero.

As McMurphy becomes more than a leader to the inmates, he becomes an idol, a Jesus Christ-like figure and thus, McMurphy completes his rise to greatness portraying a part of a tragic hero. He transforms the inmates for

the better using one tool. Jerome Klinkowitz explains it well when he says, "Laughter is his greatest weapon" (125). By laughing, McMurphy emphasizes the fact the inmates can succeed and will succeed by being individuals and not pawns of Nurse Ratched.

She outlaws laughing in the ward and with each laugh, the inmates become for individualistic and less controlled. As he laughs and encourages the other inmates to laugh, McMurphy brings energy into the ward. This elevates him to a high-ranking position among the inmates representing a quality of a tragic hero. By supporting the inmates as individuals, McMurphy creates a sense of hope for the inmates about the future. He becomes a father-like figure to the inmates, and the inmates begin to rely on him for their needs. As McMurphy continues to defy Nurse Ratched and her rules by creating a basketball team, gambling even more, and annoying Nurse Ratched, the inmates begin to see his actions as divine.

This proves he resembles Jesus Christ. He brings goodness into the ward to confront the evil set by the hospital. George Boyd describes McMurphy's purpose when he says, " he brings the promise of spiritual renewal to his disciples" (126). McMurphy clearly shows this when he repairs Chief Bromden and convinces him to speak again. The Chief stops talking and acts deaf because he fears the society and its rules. McMurphy gives him a new life and strength to overcome his fear and to challenge the rules of the ward and Nurse Ratched.

Another noteworthy example of spiritual renewal occurs when McMurphy takes twelve inmates on a fishing trip. He creates a sense of freedom and

strength within the inmates by the trip. The resemblance to the twelve disciples of Christ is no coincidence. Just as Christ, McMurphy gives his disciples a new life to live and a bright outlook for the future. The inmates grow stronger and lose their weaknesses they are still afraid to take the initiative and challenge Nurse Ratched and look to McMurphy to solve their problems. The achievement of McMurphy's rise to greatness completes another step in becoming a tragic hero.

Randle McMurphy's leadership role leads him to power, but it comes with a steep price; his death. Just like every other tragic hero, McMurphy's downfall is not completely his fault. Michael Boardman explains the cause of his downfall when he says, " the loss of the self comes gradually as his actions become more and more controlled by the needs and expectations of the other men" (133). McMurphy becomes a puppet of the inmates, he abides by all of their wants and desires, and he acts on behalf of them because they believe he is their savior.

The best example in the novel occurs when McMurphy beats up the guards when they try to give a shower to another inmate who does not want to receive one. McMurphy wants to avoid the confrontation, but he realizes the inmate is depending on him to solve the crisis as are every other inmate watching. McMurphy has no choice. His motivation to manipulate the system, beat the system, and create havoc throughout the ward is not his own happiness but the happiness of the inmates.

McMurphy realizes this and it eats him away internally, but he continues to act on behalf of the inmates because he understands his role and

understand he cannot get out of it. He realizes he cannot stop until he accomplishes the final goal, freedom from Nurse Ratched. The rest is explained, " He is pushed too far and finally tries to kill her" (Currie, 3). The final confrontation in the novel occurs when McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched and strangles her. This confrontation is the result of all the frustration in McMurphy's mind because the inmates control him, and he cannot take the pain anymore.

He also realizes this must happen because the inmates will be happy and free from all confinement from Nurse Ratched. This leads him to his punishment, a lobotomy. The punishment exceeds the crime, but it has to happen because Nurse Ratched does not tolerate his behavior any more. After his lobotomy, he is brought back to his bed to rest. During that night, Chief Bromden suffocates McMurphy because he believes McMurphy should not suffer any more than he already has.

Bromden understands the inmates gave McMurphy his demise not McMurphy himself. His leadership role is complete and it concludes with his death.

Randle McMurphy portrays a tragic hero because he endures a rise to power and he falls to his demise because of his tragic flaw. He achieves this because he performs the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of others. He resurrects the lives of the inmates. As his life is lost, many members of the ward leave and they regain their lives, which have been lost in the confinement of the ward.

He resembles a tragic hero because his loss is not a pure loss; there is an increase in strength, courage, pride, and compassion within the inmates.

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Even though McMurphy dies, his values live on, and he wins even though he loses. He accepts the leadership role to a group of mental patients at a hospital ward, and by transforming the ward, guiding the inmates, and collapsing to his demise, Randle Patrick McMurphy portrays a tragic hero.