

Moving towards
misogyny in "one flew
over the cuckoo's
nest"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Hell yes, we have a quota...We do keep women out, when we can. We don't want them here — and they don't want them elsewhere, either, whether or not they'll admit it.” This statement, issued by an unnamed dean of a medical school in 1960, generated an uproar within the feminist community. Two years later, author Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a novel that sparked second wave feminism, a political movement focused on women's right to work and break out of the domestic sphere. These ideals, however, were not without backlash. Many men felt that women would push them out of the workplace and firmly believed in the role of a housewife. The same year *The Feminine Mystique* was written, Ken Kesey published *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a novel which shows the author's misogyny through his portrayal of women. The antagonist, Nurse Ratched, is a woman in a powerful position who uses her power to belittle and control the patients in the psychiatric ward, thus earning her the nickname “ ball cutter.” The rest of the novel is scattered with female characters that overpower the men in the psychiatric ward. Kesey uses the sexuality and movement of female characters within the novel to suggest that women in power are unnatural, by depicting powerful women as stiff and tight, and subordinate women as loose and sexual.

Through Nurse Ratched's hidden sexuality and stiff movement, Kesey shows that women in power are unnatural because women must change their natural tendencies in order to have power. Kesey illustrates that women must cover their sexuality for power, because men dominate women through sex. At the beginning of the novel, Miss Ratched covers her body in order to have full power over the ward. However, Kesey establishes Miss Ratched as

a sexually appealing person by emphasizing her very large breasts, “ In spite of all her attempts to conceal them in that sexless get-up, you can still make out the evidence of some rather extraordinary breasts” (159). Even though Miss Ratched has appealing physical features, Kesey shows how the men cannot overpower her because her “ sexless get-up” gets in the way of his vision of the natural order of power. Then, towards the end of the novel, McMurphy, who is portrayed as the savior, rips open Miss Ratched’s uniform. When she returns to the ward after the attack, the narrator, Chief Bromden, describes her appearance, “ In spite of its being smaller and tighter and more starched than her old uniforms, it could no longer conceal the fact that she was a woman” (268). When McMurphy violently assaults Nurse Ratched, he is asserting his physical dominance over hers. Kesey sees this as the natural order; women are subordinate to men just because of their bodies. After the attack she can “ no longer conceal the fact” that she is a woman because her masculine facade generated by her “ starched uniform” has been assaulted. Nurse Ratched came to be subordinate as her sexuality became uncovered because she no longer possessed the masculinity Kesey claims is needed for power. To further his ideology that women with power are unnatural, Kesey not only uses Nurse Ratched’s hidden sexuality, but also her mechanical, unnatural movement.

To deepen his argument against women in power, Kesey uses several minor characters to compliment Mrs. Ratched by also portraying them as stiff. Because the Combine, or societies institutions, is such as vast concept, Kesey must show other women in positions of power throughout the Combine to strengthen his argument. Kesey first uses a memory of Chief

Bromden's to further illustrate his disillusionment with women unnaturally in the workplace. When a woman comes to Chief Bromden's home to evaluate the land, Kesey immediately sets up this woman as an antagonist. She is a leader within the Combine set out to destroy the natural lands of the Indian Reservation. Kesey then draws connections between this woman and Miss Ratched through the woman's outfit when he writes, "an old white-haired woman in an outfit so stiff and heavy it must be armor plate" (179). Kesey compares Miss Ratched's nurse attire and this woman's "armored plate" as both stiff and nonsexual. However, this woman's outfit is more exaggerated having been compared to a knight's breastplate to ward off sexual attacks from men. The outfit not only hides the women's sexuality but confines movement and is unnaturally "heavy" for such a hot day. The woman also wants to destroy the natural landscape of the reservation, making her go against nature both literally and figuratively. Kesey uses stiff, unnatural, and restrictive clothing to again illustrate that women in power are unnatural.

Finally, stiffness is also portrayed through Billy's mother, a woman who is close friends with Miss Ratched and abuses her power as a mother, "...lead [her son] out outside to sit near where I was on the grass. She sat stiff there on the grass" (246). Kesey places her in a natural setting being unnaturally stiff, just like the woman at the reservation. Usually when people sit outside in the grass, they lay carelessly at ease, but not Billy's mother whose stiffness seems uncomfortable. Kesey uses her connection to Miss Ratched through to show Billy's mother's ultimate power over her son's life as she holds him back from recovery. After Billy makes his "recovery" by sleeping with Candy, he kills himself because he cannot face his mother, giving her

ultimate power over him. A mother is someone who is supposed to be "the cure" for their sons or daughters, not the death of them. So not only is her stiffness unnatural, but so is her position as a mother who killed her son.

Through Billy's mother's stiffness and her position of power in an antagonistic role, Kesey asserts that women shouldn't hold positions of power because it is clearly unnatural. Throughout minor female characters within the novel, Kesey asserts their unnatural positions of power through covered sexuality and stiff movements that compare to Miss Ratchets' own.

To further his position on women in power, Kesey portrays a prostitute, Candy, with blatant sexuality and loose movement to highlight the natural female position of subordination. Kesey makes it obvious that Candy is the very opposite of Mrs. Ratched when Chief Bromden describes Candy's clothes, "...it didn't look like that was near enough material to go around considering what it had to cover" (197). If Nurse Ratched covers herself through her clothing, Candy is just the opposite as she doesn't even have "near enough material" to cover her body. Nurse Ratched is used to show Kesey's belief that it is unnatural for women to be in power, while Candy serves to show the position that Kesey sees as natural for women: subordination. To show his appeal to Candy's character, Kesey makes Candy the only reason the men can go on the fishing trip. Only one car comes to pick them up, and McMurphy needs a second car to get all the men to the pier. The doctor is so attracted to Candy; he agrees to drive another vehicle. Because of Candy's body and her revealing clothing, the patients are able to go on the fishing trip that makes them more confident. Through this interaction between the doctor and Candy, Kesey is putting a positive

connotation around subordinate and sexual women. Then on the trip, when Candy is on the boat, she insists on having her turn to fish. When she gets a large fish hooked on her line and struggles with holding onto the rod, Chief Bromden describes, “ the reel and the reel cranks knocking against her as the reel line spins out... the T-shirt she had on is gone- everybody gawking... with the crank of that reel fluttering her breast at such a speech the nipple’s just a red blur! Billy jumps to help” (211). The moment Candy loses power control of her fishing pole, she is seen as sexually desirable by the men who are “ gawking” at her as her shirt flies up. Billy jumps in and exerts his physical dominance over hers, showing her subordination in her natural sexual state. Kesey uses the fishing boat situation to show how it is natural for women to be subordinate to men. Kesey creates a natural, light feeling to the way Candy moves because, as a prostitute, she willingly shows off her body to men. By juxtaposing her occupation and her natural movement, Kesey illustrates the natural position of women as subordinate to men. Through both her movements and sexuality, Kesey uses Candy, a prostitute, as the cure for the patients in the psychiatric ward to show the natural subordination of women.

Throughout the novel, Kesey condemns women in power as unnatural through movement and sexuality. The issue of discrimination of women in the workplace started in the 1960s, but still continues today. Although feminism and misogyny had shaky definitions throughout history, Rebecca West, an influential feminist writer in the mid 20th century, clearly depicted the struggle for women when she wrote, “ I only know that people call me a

feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.”