

Women in one flew  
over the cuckoo's  
nest



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In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey portrays women as overwhelmingly negative, either dominating or submissive. Nurse Ratched, Vera Harding, and Billy's mother are controlling women who use fear to reign over men and mask their feminine qualities. Candy Starr and Sandy Gilfilliam, on the other hand, are prostitutes who submit to objectification by men. Nurse Ratched masks her feminine qualities while the other women emphasize their sexual availability. Aside from one balanced female, the unnamed Japanese nurse from the Disturbed ward, Kesey's women are extreme and negative characters. Nurse Ratched defeminizes herself and subdues the men's masculinity. Her attempts to defeat the men are ironic because she herself tries to embody masculine characteristics. Illustrating her effect on the men is McMurphy's observation: "No, the nurse ain't some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter" (57). Symbolic language like "ball-cutter" is a metaphor because men know the degree of pain that is associated with groin injuries. Though the nurse does not physically harm the men; her actions damage their mentality. This destruction is shown by Harding's comment: "She's unselfish as the wind, toiling thanklessly for the good of all, day after day, five long days a week" (58). This quote represents the devastation of the men's ability to decipher manipulative activities. The men on the ward have become accustomed to Nurse Ratched and dismiss her tyrannical attitude as caring management. However, McMurphy is perceptive to Nurse Ratched due to his life adventures of working and gambling. He also is a fresh member of the ward and fakes mental illness in order to escape a work farm sentence. Even patients recognize that Nurse Ratched makes men feel inadequate; Harding, for instance, states: "Doctor Spivey is exactly like the rest of us, McMurphy,

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completely conscious of his inadequacy” (59). She belittles men by initially using peaceful words and ending with hurtful intentions: “ Good morning, Mr. Harding – why, look, your fingertips are red and raw. Have you been chewing your fingernails again?” (90). She further proves her maliciousness towards the men when she displays *Chronics* as a reminder of what can happen to the Acutes. Vera Harding, Dale Harding’s wife, differs from Nurse Ratched in that she uses her physical appearance and sexuality to intimidate Harding. When coming to visit, she flirts and blows a kiss to the black boy. This behavior leaves Harding feeling sexually insecure and vulnerable. When he does show happiness, she remarks, “ Dale, when are you going to learn to laugh instead of making that mousy little squeak?” (158). This direct insult cracks his ego because it tears away at his personality and humor. She continues her insults by saying, “ Oh Dale, you never do have enough, do you?” (158). Harding understands that this is a reference to his sexual inadequacy, and he becomes a pitied figure. By provoking her husband, Vera has restrained him into a nervous state. Vera shows her domineering attitude in a way unlike the cold Big Nurse. Vera Harding also exploits her husband’s homosexuality. The novel gives good reason to believe that Harding is a closeted gay, in part through what Vera says about him – for instance, declaring that she wishes Harding’s friends would quit dropping around the house. She continues by saying, “ The hoity-toity boys with the nice long hair combed so perfectly and the limp little wrists that flip so nice” (159). Vera’s attempts to “ out” her husband are demeaning, potentially lowering his status among among his peers. Vera is clearly another vicious woman whose actions are intended to dominate men. Billy Bibbit’s mother has authority over him, something Nurse Ratched uses to emasculate Billy

and entrench his dependence on women. Nurse Ratched reacts to finding Billy with a prostitute by saying, “ You know how [your mother] is when she gets disturbed, Billy; you know how ill the poor woman can become” (264). The thought of inducing illness in one’s mother is unthinkable, especially to a “ mama’s boy” like Billy. After the nurse shames him, Billy’s stutter – a symbol of his fear and self-doubt – reappears. As neighbors and friends, Billy’s mother and Nurse Ratched work together to dominate the young man. Candy Star and Sandy Gilfilliam are submissive women, in contrast to those just described, but are no more positively portrayed than Kesey’s other female characters. The women depend on men for financial reasons, not for love. Candy scoffs at marriage in saying, “ To tell the truth ol’ Sandy got married” (196); Sandy revels in sexual gratification when describing her experience with Sefelt: “ I have never experienced anything to come even close to it” (254). With their dependence on men, lack of commitment, and illegal profession, the prostitutes are another example of Kesey’s negative portrayal of women in this novel. The strong-minded Japanese nurse who makes a brief appearance does not compensate for the negativity towards females that prevails in the rest of the book. She insults Army nurses by saying, “ Army nurses, trying to run an Army hospital. They are a little sick themselves. I sometimes think all single nurses should be fired after they reach thirty-five” (234). She opposes conformity, which suggests that Kesey thinks of her as a female of substance, but lacks a name and any power in the ward – she works, after all, under Nurse Ratched. The Japanese nurse therefore does little to counter the novel’s general negativity towards women. Dominant or submissive, malicious or shallow, the women in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* are stereotypical and flat. The single female

with gumption, the Japanese nurse, lacks the power or presence to counter these characters. Kesey's novel is hailed as a great one, and for good reason, but his depiction of women is far less than laudable.