
Examining McMurphy's Problematic Character and Status

“A hero such as Mac [McMurphy] needs to be perceived as a hero; and as our eyes and ears in the novel, the conventionally mute Chief Bromden becomes the expression of McMurphy's greatness” (Klinkowitz).

Chief Bromden, as an observant narrator, possesses the eyes and ears that lead readers through the 1960's American Mental institution in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Bromden unreliably narrates McMurphy's confident entry into the ward. McMurphy's tenacity leads people to different opinions regarding his character. Klinkowitz argues that Bromden's biased perspective makes McMurphy appear heroic; and Kesey uses Bromden's narration to portray McMurphy as a beneficial leader. However, McMurphy abuses his heroic qualities to take advantage of the other patients, upsets the social dynamic in the ward, and manipulates the patients driving them to dangerous situations. Randal Patrick McMurphy's presence in the ward leads the patients towards their own demise rather than their freedom, contradicting Kesey's thesis that McMurphy is a hero within the ward.

McMurphy mocks the unstable patients in the ward, takes advantage of their trust in him, and tricks them into placing unfair bets. For instance, Bromden observes the chaos on the fishing boat: “I heard McMurphy laughing and saw him out of the corner of my eye, just standing at the cabin door, not even making a move to do anything... Everyone was shouting at him to do something, but he wasn't moving. Even the doctor, who had the deep pole, was asking McMurphy for assistance. And McMurphy was just laughing” (Kesey 213). McMurphy recognizes that these men need help and chooses to ridicule them instead of offering assistance. A true friend would not laugh at others' failures as McMurphy does; here he shows his true self by teasing them. Bromden does not discern that he and the other patients are mistreated by McMurphy. He idolizes McMurphy and views him as a superior although he is an equal among the group. Likewise, Nurse Ratched analyzes McMurphy's dishonest schemes to the patients:

Look at some of these gifts, as devoted fans of his might call them. First, there was the

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gift of the tub room. Was that actually his to give? Did he lose anything by acquiring it as a gambling casino? On the other hand, how much do you suppose he made in the short time he was croupier of his little Monte Carlo here on the ward? How much did you lose, Bruce? Mr. Sefelt? Mr. Scanlon? I think you all have some idea what your personal losses were, but do you know what his total winnings came to, according to deposits he has made at Funds? Almost three hundred dollars. (228)

Bromden describes Nurse Ratched negatively causing the reader to disregard anything she says; however her statement is true. McMurphy gambles in this ward with insignificant objects such as cigarettes, to entire savings; yet he never loses. To prove his point and convey the corruption in authority Kesey consistently writes about Nurse Ratched as a penurious tyrannical figure and McMurphy as a Christ-like figure. When McMurphy arrives in the ward he gambles with all the patients, making a profit due to their trust in him. McMurphy uses his higher mental stability to trick the other patients to bet against him and lose their money.

When McMurphy enters the ward, Cheswick feels pressure to impress McMurphy by undermining Nurse Ratched. Eventually she sends Cheswick to Disturbed where he loses his mental capacity, ultimately leading to his death. Therefore, McMurphy's unreliable behavior starts the chain of events that lead to Cheswick's demise. To begin, during a group therapy session Bromden observes, "He [Cheswick] nods stiffly, then settles his chin down on his chest scowling. He's pleased to be sitting next to McMurphy, feeling brave like this" (104). Immediately after McMurphy enters the ward, Cheswick loses his filter hoping to gain the approval of McMurphy. Cheswick wants the praise of McMurphy because he intimidates him, idolizes him, and treats him like a god. McMurphy's confidence creates a judgmental and untouchable atmosphere surrounding him. Furthermore, during another group meeting Cheswick exclaims, "'I ain't no little kid to have cigarettes kept from me like cookies! We want something done about it, ain't that right Mack?' and waited for McMurphy to back him up, all he got was silence...He sagged like he'd been punctured, and the two big ones dragged him up to Disturbed; you could hear the soggy bounce of him going up the steps" (149). Cheswick stands up on behalf of the other patients expecting assistance from his "friend" Mack as he has been doing since his arrival. McMurphy chooses not to speak up because he has had the epiphany that Nurse Ratched controls when he leaves the ward and his selfishness prevents him from taking the risk of defying her. However, McMurphy disappoints Cheswick and the other patient by his narcissistic behavior and silence. To continue, immediately after Cheswick returns from disturbed Chief observes his death:

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But just as soon as we got to the pool he said he did wish something mighta been done, though, and dove into the water. And got his fingers stuck some way in the grate that's over the drain at the bottom of the pool...by the time they got a screwdriver and undid the grate and brought Cheswick up, with the grate still clutched by his chubby pinky and blue fingers, he was drowned. (151)

Due to the electroshock therapy in Disturbed Cheswick loses his common sense; as a result he drowns in the pool. McMurphy's inconsistent demeanor in this ward creates the events leading to Cheswick's.

McMurphy's rebellious behavior initiates Billy Bibbit's insecurities causing him to act recklessly and eventually die. To start, when Nurse Ratched finds Billy and Candy in the tub room after obvious sexual activities, she asserts, "Billy this girl could not have pulled you in here forcibly'... 'She d-did.' He looked around and 'And M-M-McMurphy! He did...They t-teased me, called me things!'" (272). Billy becomes ashamed of his behavior and rightfully blames McMurphy when he is caught disobeying the ward rules by sneaking out of the bedrooms, drinking, and having sex with a prostitute. McMurphy and the others mock Billy for his lack of sexual experience and he wants to be accepted among his peers. Teasing and taunting becomes an issue only after McMurphy arrives in the ward. McMurphy negatively changes the social dynamic of the ward, making the patients feel insecure and humiliated. It is this unhealthy atmosphere that causes Billy to sleep with Candy, the prostitute. In fact, Billy was so remorseful about his actions that "he cut his throat...He opened the doctor's desk and found some instruments and cut his throat. The poor miserable, misunderstood boy killed himself. He's there now in the doctors chair with his throat cut ...First Charles Cheswick and now William Bibbit! I hope you're finally satisfied. Playing with human lives- gambling with human lives- as if you thought yourself to be a God!" (274). Billy feels embarrassed by his behavior and terrified to face the consequences that might arise. He fears the judgement he will face from his mother as well as society; it is McMurphy's scrutiny that forces Billy to rebel and his guilt that kills him. Nurse Ratched calls McMurphy out, yet the Big Nurse's negative connotation in this book leaves the reader defensive of McMurphy. In the end, McMurphy is to blame for the death of Billy Bibbit.

After McMurphy's lobotomy surgery, Chief Bromden puts himself in a legally and morally dangerous situation by committing two felonies for McMurphy's benefit. To start, during the first of his crimes, Chief suffocates McMurphy to death and "It fought a long time against having it taken away, flailing and thrashing around so much I finally had to lie full length on top it and scissor the kicking legs with mine while I mashed the pillow into the face" (279). Bromden refers

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to McMurphy as an “it” to show that he is subhuman now, therefore an “it” rather than a personal pronoun. Bromden’s word choice creates an understanding of the motives behind the murder of McMurphy. It helps Chief distance himself emotionally and morally from this crime, enabling him to disregard the enormity of his act. Although this may have benefited McMurphy, Chief commits murder to help his perfidious friend; a crime punishable by death. Moreover, Scanlon encourages Chief to break out of the ward: “‘Was I you, Chief, I’d breeze my tail outta here. Yessir. I tell you what...Oh, yeah just like that. Just ask ‘em to unlock the door and let me out.’ ‘No. He showed you how one time, if you think back’” (279). Scanlon is referring to the time McMurphy proves to Chief that he has the ability to pick up the control panel and throw it out the window. McMurphy even advocates that it would be an easy way to escape the ward. Chief Bromden perpetrates another crime to avoid confrontation with Big Nurse for McMurphy’s death. Now Bromden, a mental patient and criminal, is on the run with no money or family to turn to for help. McMurphy’s greed coerces an ill prepared Bromden into a dangerous situation.

Despite Kesey’s thesis describing Randolph McMurphy as a heroic figure, his presence in the ward leads the patients towards their own demise rather than their freedom. When McMurphy enters the ward he upsets the social dynamic and puts pressure upon the other patients to prove their rebelliousness. Cheswick accosts Nurse Ratched who sends him to Electroshock therapy where he loses his mental capacity, ultimately leading to his death days later. Also, Billy Bibbit commits suicide from the shame he feels after taking McMurphy’s advice to sleep with a prostitute. Chief murders McMurphy while in the ward and must break out to avoid punishment. These actions are taken as a result of McMurphy’s influence, yet Bromden is put in the dangerous position. Lastly, McMurphy takes advantage of all the patients in the ward and unfairly gambles with them. As Klinkowitz was saying, Bromden describes McMurphy and his actions as flawless to prove Kesey’s belief that McMurphy ameliorates the ward. However, McMurphy’s reckless behavior leads the patients to their downfall.

Work Cited

Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007. Print.

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