
The Construction of Theme of Sexuality and Its Portrayal

Sexuality has always been a powerful tool for writers: it can make heroes or break them, forge relationships or destroy them, suggest utter misery or heavenly bliss. Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* offers a unique take on this theme: there is no single long-standing relationship in the whole of the novel, and yet sexuality is one of the most important themes in terms of plot development.

Before examining the details, one must first concentrate on the larger issues at play in this work. The Oregon State Mental Hospital, where the novel is set, immediately suggests the importance of this theme to the plot. The institute is run almost entirely by women, and all of the patients are men. The radical division of the two sexes asserts the role of each gender in the story from the start. Women are the ones in charge, the ones who dictate the rules and enforce them (if they choose to do so). Men, on the other hand, must be quiet, submissive, and obedient. As Harding puts it in one of the book's most memorable quotes, "We are victims of a matriarchy here." Given that the book was written in the 1950s, during a time when decidedly concrete gender roles were commonly endorsed, it is likely that this inversion was intended to shock readers. Much of the scandal caused by the book originated from the silent implication that women could control men.

The novel's matriarch is Nurse Ratched: a once-attractive woman of 50 and the head of the ward. She wields her power over the patients and other staff members with a total lack of remorse. The metaphors used in her initial description are decidedly unnatural: "Precise, automatic gestures. Her face is smooth, calculated and precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, skin like flesh coloured enamel." The implication is that she is the tool of a machine-like society, and as such, has assumed its features. She is devoid of feelings such as compassion, empathy, and regret: all that remains is a plastic smile of practiced sympathy that hides wholly opposite intentions. The dehumanization of her character extends beyond her personality. The "Big Nurse" wears an overly-starched, tight-fitting uniform in order to hide her large breasts - a symbol of her womanhood, and therefore of a carnal weakness. "A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would have otherwise been a perfect work, and you can see how bitter she is about it." The result is a ruler as impenetrable as a fortress: simply put, she has no weakness to exploit. Insinuation and guilt are her main weapons, used to crush any rebellious behavior and make patients believe that they are doing wrong. "She doesn't need to accuse. She has a genius for insinuation."

The intentions behind Nurse Ratched's sexless, cold attire are explained by Harding: "man has but one weapon against [women] but it is certainly not laughter. One weapon, and with every

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passing year in this...society, more and more people are discovering how to render that weapon useless." Harding is talking about the male phallus - a tool that men use to subvert women. Nurse Ratched's composed attire and frigid attitude, however, repulse the human feelings a man would feel towards a beautiful (though old) woman such as she. In doing so, she is able to undermine men, reversing the situation. McMurphy is forced to agree: "I couldn't get it up over old frozen face in there if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe."

Nurse Ratched's nemesis is Randle McMurphy. He is the newest admission on the ward, and different from anyone that Nurse Ratched and the other patients have seen. He is a con-man, a joker, a gambler, and - most importantly - a playboy, so much so in fact that his sexual relations are one of the reasons he has been sent to the hospital: "'psychopath' means I fight and fuh - pardon me, ladies - means I am overzealous in my sexual relations." The novel depicts him as emotionally strong because he possesses two qualities that no one else on the ward has: sexual freedom and the ability to laugh. For these reasons, he is also the only truly "sane" character in the novel. McMurphy can, in a way, be seen as a beacon of light in a world of darkness: amidst the madness of the patients and the institution, he reminds the reader what true sanity looks like.

McMurphy is the most sexually accomplished of the patients, but does not brag about his conquests openly because he knows that to do so would only discourage his comrades. Rather, he puts his skills to use against Nurse Ratched. McMurphy and Nurse Ratched are opposites, and must inevitably clash. One loves controlled order, while the other revels in utter chaos. One is a remorseless megalomaniac, while the other is a fun-loving trickster. One is sexless, while the other cannot get enough of it. This last difference is the strongest weapon in McMurphy's arsenal: by alienating herself from sex, Nurse Ratched has forgotten that she herself can be subject to sexual scrutiny and humiliation.

Throughout the book, McMurphy and Nurse Ratched remain locked in a power struggle over the patients. However, McMurphy is fighting for the patients' physical and mental freedom, while Nurse Ratched seeks their imprisonment for the purposes of her own ego. The weapons they wield are as different as their goals. Nurse Ratched uses insinuation and a divide-and-conquer tactic to subvert McMurphy, while he uses what comes most naturally to him: his sexuality.

The patients see Nurse Ratched as more than a woman, more than a human, even. Her sexless nature helps create this illusion, but by distancing herself from her own sexual instincts she makes herself vulnerable. McMurphy constantly harangues Nurse Ratched, asking "if she didn't mind tellin', just what was the actual inch-by-inch measurement on those big ol' breasts that she did her best to conceal but never could." Later, "through the back of her uniform, [he] gave her a pinch that turned her face red as his hair." As a consequence of McMurphy's jokes, the patients' notion of Nurse Ratched as an impregnable being ceases to exist, and with every one of

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McMurphy's sly comments the power structure shifts slightly. At the end of the novel, this power is completely dispelled through McMurphy's last, desperate sacrifice for the sake of his friends: "he grabbed for [Nurse Ratched] and ripped her uniform all the way down the front, screaming again when the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out." This gesture not only exposes Nurse Ratched as a human being, but also nullifies her power - never again will the patients see her as the superhuman being they once thought she was.

Much of the evidence for this theme is hidden in symbolism. One clear symbol of sexuality in the novel is McMurphy's boxer shorts. In one of their many confrontations, McMurphy meets Nurse Ratched wearing only a pair of boxer shorts, "coal black satin covered with big, white whales with red eyes" and curiously similar to the figure of Moby Dick. This is important because Moby Dick was often interpreted as a phallic symbol, and here it is representative of McMurphy's sexuality. The Moby Dick shorts are also symbolic of McMurphy's struggle with Nurse Ratched, which mirrors Ahab's struggle with the whale. Finally, many have interpreted Moby Dick as a holy figure, much as McMurphy mimics Christ in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The shorts were originally given to McMurphy as a present "from a co-ed at Oregon State, a Literary major...She gave them to me because she said I was a symbol."

Another important symbol is the pack of cards McMurphy plays with throughout the novel. The pack is the first object he presents the patients with, and the cards depict "fifty-two positions." Exactly what these cards depict is made clear by Cheswick's reaction: he is "pop-eyed already...what he sees on those cards don't help his condition." Apart from being an obvious representation of McMurphy's open sexuality, the cards also reveal something about his character. This is no normal pack of cards; the pack thus reveals McMurphy's non-conformist nature and need to shock, to be the center of attention.

McMurphy's association with symbols does not end there. While he and the patients are returning from their fishing trip, he notices a small dress hanging from a tree, "a rag, yellow and black." The dress inspires him to tell the story of how he first lost his virginity to a girl of nine, whose dress ended up in the boughs of a tree after McMurphy cast it into the wind. McMurphy wears his sexuality like a dress in the wind, waving it proudly for everyone to see. Symbolism aside, this part of the novel is extremely important to both the theme of sexuality and to the development of McMurphy's character. This insight into McMurphy's youth helps the reader understand where his unique personality originated, as famously stated by McMurphy himself: "[she] taught me to love, bless her sweet ass." It reminds the reader how important a healthy sexuality is to the growth of a man: the other patients had troubled sex lives, and are now deemed mad. The situation is thus infused with a heavy dose of irony: the other patients have been institutionalized because of an under-active or unhealthy sex life, while McMurphy because of his over-active sexuality.

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Billy Bibbit is an insecure 34-year-old virgin with a speech impediment. The root of his problems is his non-existent sex life, which left him unable to mature into a man. The blame for this falls not on Billy, but on his mother. Having been treated like an infant all his life caused Billy to be overwhelmed by the world's complexities, creating the foundation for his insecurity. In the one scene where his mother comes to visit, it becomes obvious that Billy's mental condition was borne from his mother's oppressiveness: "Billy was talking about looking for a wife and going to college someday. His mother laughed...at such foolishness." Were Billy younger such a conversation might have sounded rational, but Billy is "th-th-thirty-one years old," and is clearly no longer college-bound.

Later in the novel, McMurphy helps Billy lose his virginity with Candy, a prostitute who breaks into the hospital, thereby eradicating his life-long stutter and insecurity. The beautiful moment, however, is short-lived: after Nurse Ratched discovers what has taken place, she threatens to tell Billy's mother, sending Billy into a nervous breakdown: "He was shaking his head like a kid that's been promised a whipping just as soon as a willow is cut." Soon after he is taken away, the others receive news that he has "cut his throat." Billy's suicide is not entirely surprising. He behaves much like a child facing punishment, blindly attempting to escape the guilt and the fear.

Indeed, all patients in the hospital have had a powerful, emasculating female figure in their lives. In Harding's case, this was his wife. Harding has been institutionalized because he is a homosexual. While no one explicitly reveals this information, the reader can deduce this both from his first conversation with McMurphy ("I have been accused...of having relations with male friends of mine, of holding my cigarette in an affected manner...") and the description of his wife's visit ("She talks of some of Harding's friends who she wishes would quit dropping around the house looking for him...The hoity-toity with the nice, long hair combed so perfectly and the limp little wrists that flip so nice"). What isn't known is whether he was a homosexual before or after he married, though there is strong evidence to suggest the latter. Harding claims to have been intimidated by his wife, who is indeed a very beautiful woman who attracts a great deal of attention. Harding also states that he was afraid he would not be able to satisfy her. Evidently his fears swamped any love he might have had for her or any other woman, causing his interests to wander elsewhere. For Harding, there is no quick solution as there was with Billy, but he states in the final pages of the novel that he wants to come to terms with his sexuality before confronting society again.

The narrator of the novel, Chief Bromden, has also had a traumatizing experience with a woman: his mother. She was able to slowly sap any confidence and power from both him and his proud father and tribal leader, Tee-Ah-Millatoona ("The-Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-On-The-Mountain"). Only her surname is mentioned in the book, Bromden, an indication that the Chief is trying to forget her stifling presence. She imposes her surname on the Chief's father and himself: a symbol of the permanent influence she has on their lives and a direct usurpation of

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Tee-Ah-Millatoona's role as head of the family. His downfall into the sorry drunkard he becomes is a consequence of the mother's oppressive nagging, which the Chief says "made him too little to fight any more" and ultimately persuaded him to sell the valley that was home to him and his ancestors. The Chief's mother can be seen as a tool of a mechanistic society, infiltrating one of nature's last havens in an effort to conquer and exploit it.

We know that the Chief finally became insane while fighting in World War Two because he was committed shortly after the war ended, but his perceptive abilities had already been significantly stunted by his mother. When McMurphy asks the Chief how big his mother was, he replies that although a carnival worker once told him she was "five feet nine and a hundred and thirty pounds," he imagines her to be bigger than his father, "twice his size."

Sexual violence is yet another theme present in the book. When Nurse Ratched pretends to get McMurphy's name wrong and calls him "McMurry," he delves into a story about "an uncle whose name was Hallahan...he went with a woman once who kept acting like she couldn't remember his name right and kept calling him Hooligan just to get his goat. It went on for months before he stopped her." When the doctor asks how he stopped her, McMurphy replies, "I keep Unk Hallahan's method a strict secret, you see, in case I need to use it myself someday." He is, of course, referring to rape. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, rape is portrayed as the last resort for men who wish to assert their "natural" authority over women.

The first time this theme appears in the novel is during Chief Bromden's recollections about Taber. Without warning, Nurse Ratched's cronies "catch Taber in the latrine and drag him to the mattress room," where Nurse Ratched is waiting, "smearing Vaseline on a long needle." Shortly afterwards, she reappears, "wiping the needle on a shred of Taber's pants." Significantly, she "[leaves] the Vaseline jar in the room" for the wardens to use on Maxwell. Symbolically, it is as if she has raped him. Not only is Nurse Ratched able to nullify men's last weapon over women, but she is even capable of using it against them.

The last time this theme appears in the novel is during McMurphy's final sacrifice. Prior to being committed to the hospital, he was never violent in his sexual relationships - contrary to what the hospital believed. The atmosphere of the hospital, however, with its twisted absence of sexuality and horribly cruel psychological ordeals, forces McMurphy to turn to sexual violence as a last resort. He rebels against the cruel matriarch, tearing off Nurse Ratched's uniform. In a way, McMurphy has to resort to "Unk Hallahan's" method to bring about change - ultimately, the uncanny prophecy proves to be true.

Yet another major theme in the novel is castration. The most memorable usage of this theme occurs during Rawler's suicide: he bleeds to death after cutting off his own testicles. Particularly striking is the phrase with which the Chief concludes the anecdote: "What makes people so

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impatient is what I can't figure, all the guy had to do was wait." The sentence can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Firstly, the Chief might be suggesting that the institution itself would have killed him in the long run: being classified as "Disturbed," Rawler would have been subjected to electroshock therapy and other operations that would most likely have brought about his demise. However, the Chief might also have meant that Rawler would have eventually been castrated by the institution. The sexless nature of the hospital would drive any man to a mental - if not physical - castration.

This theme becomes even more important towards the end of the novel, after McMurphy has been subjected to three electroshock treatments. Nurse Ratched, seeing no change in McMurphy's behavior, suggests "that we consider an operation" - by which she means a lobotomy. Before she can continue, however, McMurphy retorts that "it wouldn't be any use to lop'em off; I got another pair in my nightstand." As usual, he makes a joke out of the nurse's grave announcement, pretending to believe that they want to castrate him. Both operations, however, rid a man of his individuality, his freedom to choose, and his pride. Kesey's implication is that the two operations are symbolically identical.

There is much debate over the function of this theme in the novel. Many have simply labeled the novel as offensive towards women, but the truth of the matter is in fact far more complex. Kesey's negative portrayal of women is not intended to undermine the female sex. In order to effectively convey the extreme differences between the nurses and the patients, Kesey not only had to separate them not only morally, but also physically. By dividing them by gender, Kesey creates a world in which females can immediately be identified as "evil" and male characters as "good." The notion of a society completely governed by women is extremely alien to us (and would have been even more unimaginable to Kesey's contemporaries), thereby emphasizing that the hospital environment is twisted and unnatural.

Possibly foreseeing the reaction to his novel, Kesey included a character intended to discredit the theory that he was blatantly misogynistic. The Japanese nurse who treats McMurphy and the Chief's wounds is the only truly "normal" woman in the novel: she has a little of the prostitutes' goodness and a little of the nurses' authority and status - in other words, she is a true neutral. Her kindness and thoughtfulness come through when she "[gives] McMurphy a cigarette and me a stick of gum," but her lesser authority prevents her from being able to protect the men by keeping them in her ward. Her remark that "It's not all like [Nurse Ratched's] ward. The Army nurses...are a little sick themselves" strengthens the theory that Kesey did not want to portray women negatively: the hospital nurses are exceptions, and not indicators of women as a whole. The criticism that women are portrayed as little more than sexual playthings is also countered by the Japanese nurse. McMurphy attempts to flirt with her, asking "how long [they] could have the pleasure of her hospitality" and spinning her response around: "Not very long, you're afraid?" but her indifference to McMurphy's advances clearly indicates that Kesey did not

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want women to be merely objectified.

Similarly, some have called the novel racist because of the decidedly negative portrayal of the black wardens. This accusation is likewise unfounded because of the presence of the Negro night warden Mr. Turkle, who "unties the sheet from across [the Chief] if it's so tight I squirm around" and participates in McMurphy's midnight party.

The theme of sexuality in "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest" is central to the novel. It is McMurphy's primary weapon against Nurse Ratched's cold rule, culminating in the successful toppling of the evil matriarch and the subsequent liberation of the patients. On the other side of the spectrum, it has the power to render men insane when wrongly used, as is the case with many of the hospital's patients. Sexuality can even cause men to do horrific things, as when Billy Bibbit ends his own life. The novel is woven with intricate sub-plots: castration and the subsequent dehumanization, the emasculation of men, and sexual violence as a solution. Many have criticized Ken Kesey as offensive and misogynistic, but I believe that he is a visionary able to infuse inflammatory themes with elements of pure truth.

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