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Take This Cup From Me

In Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, we see a progression of events transpire, centered around the main character Randal Patrick McMurphy, a loose-tongued and fiery-tempered red head. Immediately on arriving in the ward of the psychiatric hospital McMurphy sees that there is an oppressive air, inflicted primarily by the head nurse, Nurse Ratched. Believing to have escaped the troubles of the work farm, McMurphy is bold in his actions and pushes back against her strict and "ball-cutting" rules. As he gets to further know his fellow patients and their situation he begins to understand the repercussions of his actions and what it would require to change his and the other patients' situation. There comes a time when he realizes that it is he alone that has the strength to enact change, but it is his life that would be on the line. As with many of the western heroes, he has to decide if he will drink from the cup given to him or back down to save himself. Throughout the novel it is difficult to differentiate McMurphy's actions as either psychopathy or clear and intentional altruism, but by the end it seems clear that he assuredly in his right mind.

In the beginning of the novel we see McMurphy entering the ward and attempting to cause superficial change. He soon sees the deep injustice and the sad state of his fellow ward mates. Not understanding the potential consequences he begins standing up to Nurse Ratched and encouraging the ward to think and stand up for themselves. We can initially see some level of selfish motivation in that he is doing things simply for the fun and more as a gamble. He believes there is little risk and is quite bold in his actions. When McMurphy talks to the lifeguard he realizes that his situation is not what he assumed. He finds out that because he is committed it is nurse Ratched's prerogative to determine if he is to leave the ward or not. He realizes that the hospital "wasn't better [than the work farm] to the point that he's want to spend a couple of years here" (171). When he realizes this, he begins to keep his head down and simply look out for himself. He stops egging on nurse Ratched and stops encouraging the

ward. During a meeting Cheswick stands up for himself and then “looked at McMurphy and got no look back, and went down the line of Acutes looking for help. Each time a man looked away and refused to back him up, and the panic in his face doubled” (173). Bromden notes that “He was giving in because it was the smartest thing to do. Not because of any of these other reasons the Acutes were making up” (174). In this period of submission we see the sanity in McMurphy. He proves to the reader that he is not a psychopath but is a perceptive and shrewd person that is not simply one to gamble everything for no reason. Even Bromden sees that McMurphy isn't a psychopath and describes how “I was seeing more to him than just big hands and red side-burns and a broken-nosed grin. I'd seen him do things that didn't fit with his face or hands” (162) and describes his thoughtfulness and emotion in painting and writing letters. McMurphy, however, seems to sink into a period of self-absorption.

During this period of pacifism and caginess we see that McMurphy is being tormented with guilt. He tells Harding that during this period he had been having bad dreams and restless nights. This bottled up guilt emerges in the library when he exclaims, “ 'Alla you! Quit *bugging* me, goddammit!’ ” (185) when in fact “Nobody's been bugging him” (185). You can see that his conscience is nagging him and that he knows he has the power to make a difference but is scared to take the risk of ending up on the ward permanently. This can be compared to Christ in the garden of Gethsemane asking for the cup to be taken from him so that he doesn't have to suffer to be savior, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me” (Luke 22: 42). McMurphy goes through a time of introvertedness, possibly even being called fear.

The turning point of the novel comes after McMurphy talks to the men and finds out that most of them are voluntary patients. Their fear and weakness shakes him. He becomes confused and asks Billy “Why? You're just a young guy! You oughta be out running around in a convertible, bird-doggin girls” (195). He is clearly upset by what he is told and it is most likely pity and confusion that cause a change of mind. Bromden sees this change immediately after and notes “He wasn't fiddling with a deck of cards or dozing into a magazine like he had been during all the meetings the last two weeks. And he

wasn't slouched down. He was sitting up stiff in his chair and with a flushed, reckless look on his face as he looked back and forth" (198). It is at this moment that McMurphy accepts the task before and begins pursuing it with resolution.

A fairly clear comparison can be made between McMurphy and John Russel in Martin Ritt's film *Hombre*. John Russel is an Apache-raised white man who serves as the hero in the film. In the beginning of the film you see him as a fairly reserved but brash character, smashing a glass in a cowboy's face in reparation for how he treats Russel's Native American companions. He keeps his head down when the antagonist Grimes terrorizes passengers on the stagecoach. Later on in the story after their stagecoach is robbed by a gang he seems to keep to himself and doesn't appear to aid his fellow travelers. The rest of the travelers believe he is pursuing Grimes, the leader of the gang to steal back Dr. Favor's money, that was embezzled from the Apache tribe, for himself. In the end of the film we see Russel go down to negotiate for a hostage, although being hesitant, despite his clear knowledge that he could easily end up dead. Right before his self-sacrifice he is hoping another option will present itself so he can avoid putting himself in harm's way. In the end, like McMurphy, he sacrifices himself for the safety of his companions and the whole time intended to steal back the money so he could return it to the Apache tribe. Both McMurphy and Russel appear to be self-serving characters, but in the end gamble their lives and sacrifice themselves for their companions. Neither of them is very keen to jump into this role of savior, but when they see that there is no other option and they are the only characters strong enough, they are willing to put their life on the line for others.

The image of McMurphy as a savior is often compared to the iconic image of Christ. Although there is almost no comparison that can be made to the morals or purity of Christ, many of their actions and motivations are comparable. In the Bible Christ calls people to sacrifice themselves for others. We even see uncanny parallels with McMurphy being punished on the electroshock table shaped as a cross. The two prostitutes in the novel are treated well and he seems to love them as Christ did prostitutes and tax collectors. He especially seems to care about the outcast and neglected, the people on the fringe of

society like the men on the ward. His battle with Nurse Ratched and the aids is parallel to Christ's rejection of the Pharisees and their outwardly pious, yet hypocritical ways. The Pharisees, as with Nurse Ratched, have an obsession with rigid laws and rituals, but Christ came to teach them to understand the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. It is the strict and often oppressive laws of Nurse Ratched that McMurphy is pushing against. Like McMurphy, Christ was often called a lunatic or heretic and there were many attempts to imprison or quiet him. Unlike Christ, McMurphy clearly cares about his own personal gain but is not secretive about it. Harding describes McMurphy saying, "he's a shrewd character with an eye out for a quick dollar. He doesn't make any pretense about his motives, does he?" (266). McMurphy does not appear to be trying to trick the patients. Finally, the most obvious parallel between Christ and McMurphy is their sacrifice on a cross and to a lobotomy, respectively, for the sake of those they love and care about.

When comparing McMurphy's actions to the philosophers there are several ideologies that shed the most light on his actions. When we look at Nietzsche's idea of the overman it would line up quite well with McMurphy's character, apart from his apparent concern for people beneath him. McMurphy doesn't seem to give much heed to other worldly things and is in constant pursuit of earthly pleasures and gain, seen through his gambling and sexual exploits. McMurphy is a character who finds strength in himself and doesn't look for support in other's opinions or in the notion of serving a greater purpose. Like the overman, McMurphy is willing to undergo suffering to create and as Nietzsche says, "there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators" (199). McMurphy is pursuing happiness for himself and others and as Nietzsche says "man has felt too little joy: that alone, my brothers, is our original sin" (200). McMurphy pursues this happiness in whatever form he sees fit, regardless of expected social morality, but as Nietzsche says, "Better for you to rear up your devil! Even for you there is still a way to greatness!" (201). McMurphy indeed seems to be seeking greatness regardless of what method he employs.

McMurphy's actions would also seem to line up with Mill's advocacy for the greatest good for

the greatest number. We see that in his fight against Nurse Ratched and encouragement of the patients he is not basing his actions on the rightness of the action itself, for many of his actions are categorically wrong, but instead to benefit as many people on the ward as possible and even for institutionalized people elsewhere. We see this in his “petition in the mail to somebody back in Washington, asking that they look into the lobotomies and electroshock that were still going on in the government hospitals” (263). Whether or not this is to protect himself from the possibility of these treatments or not he is still benefiting the greatest number. As Mill says, “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (Mill 581). McMurphy promotes happiness especially in the form of laughter. His encouragement of the patients to laugh is an almost constant and very prominent theme throughout the novel. Mill would be hard pressed to argue that this indeed was a promotion of happiness.

In the end of the novel we see the culmination of what McMurphy sees coming. After the party was held on the ward and Nurse Ratched shames Billy for sleeping with Candy, Billy commits suicide. It is this last straw that causes McMurphy's final act of strength and defiance. It could easily be said that McMurphy was acting out of psychotic behavior but instead Bromden calls his movements “slow, mechanical gestures” (318) as he moves to Nurse Ratched and begins to strangle her. It was clear to everyone that no one would be able to stop him, but he eventually relinquishes his hold. Although Bromden says that it then might appear that he is “anything other than a sane, willful, dogged man performing a hard duty that finally just had to be done, like it or not” (319), but that is indeed what McMurphy seems to be. Although it was an action performed out of hatred it was also a calculated move that McMurphy realizes is his duty to do, just as Christ subjected himself to the torture of crucifixion.

In the end McMurphy proves Nurse Ratched wrong about her thinking that “As a psychopath, he's much too fond of a Mr. Randle Patrick McMurphy to subject him to any needless danger” (158). McMurphy puts himself in harm's way to save those he cares about and in doing so, shows that he is

not a psychopath. As Ratched says earlier, that “I believe if he were sent to Disturbed now it would be exactly what the patients would expect. He would be a martyr to them” (157). This is indeed what happens, and is the last push that many of the men need to finally leave the ward. As Bromden says , “McMurphy can't understand, us wanting to be safe. He keeps trying to drag us out of the fog, out in the open where we'd be easy to get at” (128). That is what McMurphy was trying to do the entire time. He was trying to stop them from hiding and to stand up for themselves. As with many western heroes, McMurphy comes to a point where he knows what his choice is, and though much rather having that cup taken from him, he musters his strength and carries out a task, knowing well what the end result may be.

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