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Sanity Plea:

A Defense of the Sanity and Heroism of McMurphy in Ken Kesey's

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

R.P. McMurphy from Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is many things: he's characterized as being a drifter, grifter, gambler, lover, fighter, cowboy, and a psychopath. Is he a psychopath, though? This may be what the Big Nurse Ratched in the novel is trying to convince the staff and the patients of, but is this truly consistent with his character throughout? Though Nurse Ratched may want to depict McMurphy as a psychopath with only self-interest at heart, it appears to be much more consistent with the character's actions and changing demeanor throughout the novel that he is not just a wheeling-and-dealing gambler here to rob the other patients of all their money and have a few laughs along the way. McMurphy ends up being a savior to the ward and the patients, taking on Christ-like qualities of self sacrifice and, with iron in his heels, adorns the persona of the heroes of the West. McMurphy exhibits human qualities and shortcomings, but he is no crazier than “the average asshole on the street” (Kesey 58). Even if he is, for all intents and purposes, he is the sane Western hero of the ward, there to fight for the people and free them from the Combine's oppression.

George Graham, in his paper “Recent Work in Philosophical Psychopathology,” touches on the subjectivity of psychological diagnosis. He points out that psychological disorders are based on a set of semantic norms based on a prototypical form of that condition. These semantic norms are then used as a list of symptoms, and when a patient displays a certain number of those symptoms they are diagnosed

with that condition (Graham 113-14) . It is largely an arbitrary system open to exploitation by certain parties for illicit purposes. Rosenhan, a psychologist well-known for his study “Sane People in Insane Places,” demonstrates how easy it is to become falsely committed to an asylum in his study by sending sane “patients” to a mental hospital for a diagnosis. All of these pseudo-patients sent by Rosenhan feigned schizophrenic auditory hallucinations and all were committed to the hospital. So, on a very practical level, it is not inconceivable that McMurphy would be able to land a spot on the ward so that he might finish out his prison sentence at a “better place” than the work farm he was at (Kesey 67). Now, the question remains of whether or not McMurphy truly is a “psychopath,” as McMurphy’s doctor puts it, only acting for his own self-interest or if he is a sane, shrewd conman who has found himself with that he ends up wanting to and succeeding in helping.

Though Chief Bromden often describes McMurphy in an overwhelmingly positive light, the readers are still privy to the thoughts of Nurse Ratched and the rest of the staff on McMurphy’s condition. Throughout the course of the novel it is quite evident that Nurse Ratched makes a point to characterize or diagnose McMurphy as a psychotic in need of treatment. At the very least, she desires to break the view of McMurphy as a hero and depict him as a purely self-centered entity intent on only his personal gain. This is most evident starting after the World Series incident in the staff meeting. After the residents pinball theories of what type of psychological condition McMurphy suffers from, Nurse Ratched makes it clear that she does not see McMurphy as any sort of “extraordinary being” or “super psychopath.” He is simply a man. She will not move him to Disturbed or back to the work farm not because she thinks him to be insane and in need of her help and expertise,-- the film’s Nurse Ratched uses that version of the argument-- but he is simply thought too highly of in her ward and moving him out would simply cast him as a martyr in the eyes of the other patients and would not undo the “harm that he has done to [the] ward.” Soon after she states “as a psychopath, he’s much too fond of a Mr. Randle Patrick McMurphy to subject [himself] to any needless danger” (136-37). Her goal seems not to

be to cure this man, but to humble him in front of his idolaters.

The Nurse is not without examples of his self-interest and psychopathy, if we are to take self-interest and violent tendencies to be indicators of this condition, either. In the very beginning, McMurphy decides to “get [the Nurse's] goat” for the purpose of a bet with the other patients (67). Throughout the novel, he gambles with the other patients and takes their money and cigarettes. Nurse Ratched makes mention of the fact that McMurphy's account has been growing ever since he arrived and the other patients accounts have been slowly becoming more and more barren (228). There is also evidence of his selfishness not directly affiliated with the Nurse. After finding out that he is a committed patient of the ward meaning he is not simply serving out his prison sentence, he becomes much less rebellious in the ward, leading to Cheswick's suicide. Later, he makes the bet with the other patients that Bromden could lift the console in the Tub Room with full knowledge of his abilities, he does so with full knowledge of the outcome. McMurphy's confidence schemes are fairly consistent throughout the novel. Yet, with every con job, there is another example of McMurphy's sacrifice for the group, and these acts of sacrifice cannot be justified on the sole premise that McMurphy is merely trying to keep his cover with the patients for future exploitations.

If a close look is taken at some of McMurphy's sacrifices and demeanors throughout the novel, they are not at all times consistent with a selfish nature. For every negative act he commits, there is usually a greater positive act that comes with it. When McMurphy finds out he is committed, he reacts by shutting down his rebellion. This is a fairly rational reaction to his situation, in his defense. Even the other patients do not really blame him for the way he is acting (150). However, after Cheswick drowns himself and Harding's wife comes to visit, he realizes how much he means to the other patients, and also sees that the patients really do need him. When he realizes this, knowing his full situation and the Nurse's power, he puts his hand through the Nurse's window and the rebellion continues (172). A similar event happens after the fishing trip when the patients think McMurphy has only been acting in

their favor out of his own self-interest and personal gain. At this point, McMurphy has learned about the “Shock Shop,” and with this knowledge, he defends George in the shower from the black attendants (236-37). He does not only defend the patients either. He is also an active force in their rehabilitation and the primary reason they have the courage to leave at the end.

At the very beginning of the novel, during McMurphy and Harding's conversation about the Nurse and the therapy sessions, McMurphy tries to convince the patients that they are men and ought not take the Nurse's anti-rehabilitative sessions. Harding replies telling McMurphy that they aren't men, they're “rabbits” and are their so they can “adjust to [their] rabbithood” in society (58). McMurphy the entire novel then works to help the patients turn from rabbits to men. On the fishing trip is one of the key points in the novel where this transformation begins to happen. McMurphy has been able to convince the doctor once again that he thinks something might have therapeutic value and he should let the other patients take part in such an activity. While on the fishing trip, McMurphy has the men fish and work the boat themselves. He vaguely supervises, but for the most part, the men are left to their own devices to sail and fish like men. When the patients ask him for help on the boat, he just stands and laughs allowing them to work things out for themselves. He allows them to grow away from dependence to independence. There is no personal gain for him to do these things. In fact, the patients independence is most definitely a negative for McMurphy if he was merely a self-motivated psychopath. McMurphy takes electroshock torture for the sake of the others. He does it for the group he has made a point to defend. His actions on the ward have even been so detrimental to him, that it begins to visibly show on his face after the fishing trip. He looks “dreadfully tired, strained, and frantic.” He is not a psychopath but a man in a hero role. A hero role that he sees as his doom, but one that must be carried out. Similar to Christ in Gethsemane, he sees the sacrifice that he must make and it scares him to death, but he must make the sacrifice despite this fact.

McMurphy is not just any standard hero. He is typecast from the moment he walks into the

ward. R.P. McMurphy is straight out of an old western film: “he's got iron on his heels and he rings it on the floor like horseshoes. He shows up in the door and stops and hitches his thumbs in his pockets, boots wide apart” (10). This is essentially a cowboy ringing his spurs as he walks and stops to stand in the saloon doors before he enters. He takes on the cowboy persona to such an extreme, it is comical at times. During his conversation with Harding at the beginning he uses classic western phrases like “this hospital ain't big enough for the two of us,” he better “be outta town by sunset,” and “I'll meet him in the main hall at high noon.” It is quite obvious the connection Kesey is trying to make. He does it in a fairly ham-handed way, but it's effective and seems to work with the novel. Furthermore, McMurphy is not a Western hero in just a superficial respect either. McMurphy, similar to Tom Doniphon from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* or Shane from *Shane*, he takes on the role of defender of his town/people. McMurphy defends the ward from the Nurse and her staff similar to Tom's protection of the people of Shinbone from Valance and Shane's protection of the homesteaders from the Ryker gang. He also sacrifices himself similar to these two characters as well. In the end, he died so that he could save the people from their present state. Tom Doniphon shot Liberty for the good of the town and Shane took out the Ryker gang to save the homesteaders from trying and, most likely, failing to do it themselves. Towards the end of the novel, McMurphy became even more than a typical Western hero. Unlike Tom and Shane, McMurphy, as a symbol at least, did not simply fade into the night when he was no longer needed. He became a Christ figure by dying for the cause of the ward and through the symbol he created, the patients were able to muster the strength to leave the ward and become Men.

Ken Kesey creates a deep character in the conman cowboy R.P. McMurphy. From the point of view of society and the ever present Combine, he is a menace and a psychopath that needs assimilation. However, to the patients of an oppressive ward in a psychiatric hospital, he is the hero they need to conquer their oppressors and become not rabbits but men. Even if McMurphy were just a selfish, conman, for all intents and purpose, to the other patients, he was a hero. He is a blend of Christ-figure

and Western cowboy in their eyes, and that really is what matters in the end. He certainly has flaws and personality deficiencies, but he is a man. He is a man, and a man is what the patients needed in their savior.

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