BR#84-57

THE CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

P.O. Box 2008 • New Britain, Connecticut 06050 • (203) 827-7700

RESOLUTION

AUTHORIZING

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY TO REPRINT AN

ARTICLE FROM CONNECTICUT REVIEW

April 6, 1984

RESOLVED, That, whereas Mr. Barry H. Leeds has agreed to the reprinting of his article entitled, "Theme and Technique in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" which was originally published in the Connecticut Review, Volume 7(2) dated April, 1974, and provided the original locus of the publication is identified, permission is granted to Northern Illinois University to reprint two copies of the said article.

A Certified True Copy:

James A. Frost
President

THE CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

P.O. Box 2008 • New Britain, Connecticut 06050 • (203) 827-7700

April 10, 1984

Ms. Tobie Miller
Reserve Department
Northern Illinois University Library
Dekalb, Illinois 60115

Dear Ms. Miller:

We are enclosing copy of a resolution passed by the Board of Trustees for the Connecticut State University granting you permission to have reproduced an article entitled, "Theme and Technique in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", originally published in THE CONNECTICUT REVIEW, Vol. 7(2):35-50, written by Mr. Barry H. Leeds. We also enclose your original request dated March 9, together with Mr. Leeds' letter of March 27, confirming your request.

Sincerely,

Betty Higgins

E. A. Higgins
Associate for Board Affairs

encl.

A unit of The Connecticut State University
CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY
1615 Stanley Street • New Britain, Connecticut 06050

March 27, 1984

Ms. Tobie Miller
Reserve Department
Northern Illinois University Library
DeKalb, Illinois 60115

Dear Ms. Miller:

You're welcome to reprint my article, "Theme and Technique in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

If you're not already aware of it, you may be interested in my subsequent book, Ken Kesey (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), which incorporates and expands upon that article, as well as dealing with Kesey's other work and his life.

Thanks for your interest in my work.

Sincerely,

Barry H. Leeds

Barry H. Leeds
Professor of English

Northern Illinois University

The University Libraries
Reserve Department
De Kalb, Illinois 60115
March 9, 1984

Permissions Department
The Connecticut Review
Board of Trustees of Connecticut State Colleges
P.O. Box 2008
New Britain, CT 06050

Gentlemen:

We would like permission to duplicate the following material:

Author: Leeds, B.

Title (Book, Journal): "Theme and technique in One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest" from Connecticut Review, Vol. 7(2):35-50. April, 1974.

Copyright holder: ©1974, Board of Trustees for Connecticut State Colleges.

Type of duplication: Photocopy for noncommercial, supplementary class reading.

No. of copies: 2

Distribution: For library reserve room use.
Class: English 104 - Gage

A self-addressed envelope is enclosed for your convenience.

Please let us know what your fee will be for this permission.

Sincerely,

Tobie Miller

Tobie Miller
Reserve Department

TM: nn
Encl.

THE CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

P.O. Box 2008 • New Britain, Connecticut 06050 • (203) 827-7700

March 20, 1984

Professor Barry H. Leeds
133 Jerome Avenue
Burlington, CT 06013

Dear Dr. Leeds:

Per your phone conversation with Miss Higgins of my office, we are attaching a copy of the request from the Northern Illinois University to reproduce your article "Theme and Technique in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" from Connecticut Review, Vol. 7(2):35-50.

Since the editorial board for the Connecticut Review has been disbanded, we request you sign below granting the Board of Trustees for the Connecticut State University approval to authorize the reproduction of your article. For your information enclosed is a draft copy of a resolution so authorizing this transaction.

Please call me or Miss Higgins if you have any questions regarding this matter.

Sincerely,

James A. Frost
President

encl.

Barry H. Leeds
Professor Barry H. Leeds

THEME AND TECHNIQUE IN *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST*

by

BARRY H. LEEDS

Ken Kesey's first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), has been a massively popular favorite among students and teachers for some time. It is a book which holds the interest of the undergraduate who can say with a straight face, "I'm not *into* reading." Yet it is by no means a simple book. It is well worth close critical analysis; and such study illuminates the depth of Kesey's technical mastery of such aspects of novelistic form as symbolism and structure.

If these are essentially academic concerns, the success with which technique serves theme in this work is not. A careful reading of several central symbol patterns and an understanding of the narrative devices used to present them both enhance an appreciation of Kesey's art and show clearly that the central thematic thrust of this novel strikes even closer to the heart of the American experience now than it did at the time of its publication, more than a decade ago.

Within a highly disciplined form, Kesey has dealt with issues which loom prominently today in the minds of those whose primary criterion for any idea or pursuit is its "relevance." The questioning of a monolithic bureaucratic order; the rejection of stereotyped sexual roles and the simultaneous awareness that healthy sexuality and a clear sense of sexual identity are prerequisites for survival in the human condition; the recognition and rejection of hypocrisy; the devotion to the expression of individual identity: all of these leap into sharp focus through a study of Kesey's technique.

Randle Patrick McMurphy, the protagonist of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is a man whose resistance to the strictures of society brings him to a climactic confrontation with the "Big Nurse," a representative of the matriarchal aspects of American society. Big Nurse is backed by the power of a mechanistic "Combine," a central agency for that society's repression of individuality. Although he is ultimately destroyed by these forces, McMurphy is not defeated; even after his lobotomy and death it is clear that he has beaten Big Nurse and hurt the Combine.

It is not only McMurphy's own struggle which is at issue in this novel of a mental ward in a government hospital. For one thing, McMurphy comes to represent the only hope for salvation open to his fellow inmates, a salvation which he brings about through the tutelage of example, making them aware of their own manhood in the dual senses of masculinity and humanity. For another, the novel's first-person narrator, Chief Bromden, assumes during the course of the novel a rebel role similar to that of McMurphy.

In a narrative structure analogous to those employed by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* and Robert Penn Warren in *All The King's Men*, Kesey places Chief Bromden in a pivotal position. In each of these novels, the narrator is a man closely associated with the protagonist, torn by ambivalent feelings of disapproval and admiration for him, who, during the course of the novel, learns and develops through the tutelary example of the protagonist's life and ultimate death; and who, in recounting the story of his friend's life, clarifies his own development to the point where he takes on both the strengths of the protagonist

and an awareness of how to avoid the downfall that ended his life. Bromden, Nick Carraway and Jack Burden all become syntheses of their own latent strengths and abilities and the best aspects of McMurphy, Gatsby and Willie Stark. This narrative structure provides the novelist with the advantages of both the first person point of view (within which the narrator can be revealed in terms of his own internal cerebration) and a third person (hence more credibly objective) view of the novel's central figure.

The progressive character development of McMurphy and that of Bromden cannot be said to parallel one another; a more accurate geometric metaphor is that of two intersecting oblique lines: as McMurphy's strength wanes, Bromden moves toward the ascendant. But the two developments proceed simultaneously and are integral to one another, until the transfer of power from McMurphy to Bromden is complete.

Bromden is an American Indian, a 280 pound, 6'8" former high school football player and combat veteran of World War II who has been robbed of identity and sanity by the combination of pressures brought to bear on him by twentieth century American society. At the outset of the novel, he is literally cut off from even the most rudimentary communication. He is so fearful of the dangers of dealing with people that he has learned to feign total deafness and has maintained absolute silence for years. Considered incurable by the medical staff, he is forced to perform menial janitor work by the orderlies, who ridicule him with the title "Chief Broom."

The nickname has an obvious significance: defined by his menial function, Bromden is no more than an object to the staff, a tool. But even his legal name, Bromden, represents a false identity, one imposed upon him by others. Ironically, Chief Broom really is the son of a tribal chief, a once powerful leader whose Indian name meant The-Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-on-the-Mountain. Bromden is the maiden name of his mother, a white woman; and the fact that his father allowed himself to be henpecked into adopting it is invested with great significance by Kesey. The loss of pride in the Indian heritage brought about by the pressure of white American society (especially its matriarchal element as represented by Mrs. Bromden) lies at the heart of the twentieth century problem of Bromden, his father, and their people. Further, the plight of the American Indian comes to represent, for Kesey, that of the American individualist in highly distilled form. The artificial identities of "Mr. Bromden" and "Chief Broom" imposed upon Bromden by the matriarchal and mechanistic elements of society, respectively, diminish him enormously. The first robs him of his masculine pride and his racial identity; the second of his very humanity. Kesey forces us to abstract from this extreme case the realization that our own identities as self-determining individuals have been considerably eroded and are further threatened by our computerized civilization.

The experiences which have undermined Bromden's strength and sanity are revealed later in the novel, in brief flashbacks, each precipitated by McMurphy, as he persists in forcing Bromden to leave his fortress of silence and forgetfulness and to reenter by stages the external world. As McMurphy makes friendly overtures toward him, Bromden begins to remember and understand episodes

from his own past. In persistently attempting communication with Bromden, McMurphy functions as a sort of combination lay psychiatrist and confessor (although he himself would laugh at the idea of such a role), precipitating more and more painful and traumatic memories out of Bromden's mind, until the Chief is able to face his own problems and to begin the trip back to manhood.

These flashbacks help to establish for the reader an acceptance of Bromden as a sympathetic and fully-developed character of considerable potential, so that his later resurgence of power is both credible and emotionally charged. In addition, these passages are thematically useful to the author, introducing graphic substantiation of his central indictment of the Combine-controlled American society and its capacity to crush both individuality and communication among men. Chief Broom is the tangible representation of the human alienation produced by the system.

What is particularly impressive about *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as a first novel is the highly credible integration of prose style and metaphorical patterns with the character of Bromden. Early in the book, Bromden's perceptions and the very rhythms of his speech are both informed and limited by his disturbed mental state. As he moves toward sanity and effective communication with others, Bromden perceives and articulates more clearly, and the prose style of the narrative reflects this development precisely. For example, fairly late in the novel, Bromden, who has been subject to frequent hallucination, takes the significant step of drawing a clear distinction between illusion and reality:

> There was little brown birds occasionally on the fence; when a puff of leaves would hit the fence the birds would fly off with the wind. It looked at first like the leaves were hitting the fence and turning into birds and flying away.[1]

Bromden's hallucinations during the earlier part of the novel serve to establish and support the central aesthetic of the book, based on a fascinating subjectivity within which Kesey masterfully commands a suspension of disbelief. This is brought about largely through absolute candor on Bromden's part: he admits his own subjectivity and the extent of his alienation from our societal "reality"; but in a crucial statement which sums up precisely the relationship between the rich metaphorical structure of his hallucinations and the central truths they elucidate, Bromden tells us (referring to the entire McMurphy story): "It's true even if it didn't happen" (p. 13).

Thus, the truths Bromden forces us to recognize are not dependent for their validity upon drawing a distinction between which of the events he recounts "really" happened and which proceed entirely out of his own labyrinthine imagination. When, for example, Bromden crushes a tranquilizer capsule and sees (in the split second before it self-destructs upon contact with the air and turns to white powder) that it is a miniature electronic element, intended by the Combine to control the man who swallows it, it is not necessary for the reader to determine what is illusion and what is "reality." The truth lies in the metaphor of the hallucination: the capsule, no matter what its ostensibly beneficial effect,

[1] Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking Press, 1962). Paperback edition published by Signet (New American Library of World Literature, New York), p. 199. All page references are to the Signet edition.

is a device intended by society to control the inmates, to render them docile and bovine, and to rob them of any individual trait which might threaten the homogeneity and mediocrity of the established order.

Each of Bromden's hallucinations forms part of a complex system of recurrent symbols, and each is ultimately shown by Kesey to grow naturally out of Bromden's previous experiences. The transistor metaphor becomes part of a more comprehensive theory of Bromden's that the Combine exerts direct control over the citizenry through electronic devices, so the reader is not surprised when Bromden later remarks in passing that he has studied electronics in the army and in his one year of college. When old Pete Bancini, a man so mentally retarded that the Combine has been unable to exercise control over him, physically resists the orderlies' efforts to subdue him, the hallucination Bromden creates of Pete's fist pumping up into the form of a huge steel ball ties into a recurrent series of references to hands as symbols of potency. The psychological verisimilitude employed by Kesey in establishing these image patterns as natural outgrowths of Bromden's experience is so painstakingly precise that even the briefest metaphors used by Bromden can be traced to their source. For example, one morning Bromden is served "a canned peach on a piece of green, torn lettuce" (p. 33). Later, relating the story of how the orderlies forcibly administered medication to an inmate, Bromden describes the scene in the same terms: "One sits on his head and the other rips his pants open in back and peels the cloth until Taber's peach-colored rear is framed by the ragged lettuce-green" (p. 36).

Perhaps the most frightening product of Bromden's hallucinatory perception is the Combine itself. He defines it as "a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as [the Big Nurse] has the Inside" (p. 30). The Inside, as Bromden sees it, is different from the Outside world only in the *degree* of control which must be exerted over its inhabitants. The Combine, committed as it is to the supremacy of technology over humanity, extends its influence by dehumanizing men, making them machines. But as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Kesey envisions emasculation as a preliminary step in the dehumanization process. Ultimately, a pattern emerges: the Combine functions on two levels, mechanistic and matriarchal. The two are fused in the Big Nurse, Miss Ratched, who is "a high ranking official" of the Combine.

The Big Nurse herself is conceived in mechanistic terms. Even her name, Ratched, sounds like a kind of wrench or machine component, and the association with "rat" makes its very sound unpleasant. Bromden sees her as an expensive piece of precision-made machinery, marred in its functional design only by a pair of oversized breasts. Despite her annoyance at being forced to carry them, and despite Bromden's feeling that they mark an obvious flaw in an otherwise perfect piece of work, their presence is not inconsistent with the symbolic irony intended by Kesey. Miss Ratched's breasts are ironical reminders of the sexuality she has renounced. At the novel's end, they will be exposed by McMurphy as the palpable symbol of her vulnerability. Finally, they are her badge of membership in the Smothering Mother cadre of the Combine.

Nurse Ratched is frequently referred to, in varying degrees of admiration or irony, by the hospital's public relations man and by the inmates themselves as

the "mother" of the men on her ward. As Kesey presents it, the role is an evil one. The problems of many of the men on the ward are largely sexual in origin; and in a number of cases an overbearing mother has contributed largely to the problem. Big Nurse, under the guise of compassion, perpetuates, through the role of solicitous "mother," the debilitating environment which has already emasculated the inmates.

Enter McMurphy, who has decided it is preferable to feign insanity rather than labor on the county work farm, where he has been serving a sentence for assault and battery. Although Kesey renders McMurphy's character in such a way that his sanity never seems questionable to the reader, it is significant that his cunning but unschooled ruse is so readily acceptable both to prison authorities and to the medical staff of the hospital. Upon his arrival at the ward, McMurphy tells the inmates, ". . . the court ruled that I'm a psychopath . . . Now they tell me a psychopath's a guy fights too much and f - - - - too much . . ." (pp. 17-18). The central issue seems to be that the two areas in which McMurphy's animal vitality manifests itself, rage and sexual energy, form a two-pronged threat to the dual repressive roles of the Combine: mechanistic order and matriarchal emasculation. Having classified brawling and promiscuous sexual activity as "antisocial" forms of behavior, the authorities make the easy assumption that a man who sees such behavior as a desirable and valid form of life must be insane.

From the outset, McMurphy pays more attention to Bromden than anyone has in years. Where others have belittled the Chief, McMurphy marvels at his size and recognizes the latent strength it represents. Almost immediately McMurphy begins to establish contact with Bromden, although it is at first superficial and unarticulated. In a passage which significantly prefigures the central thematic process of the book, the transfusion of power from McMurphy to Bromden, McMurphy offers to shake hands with Bromden, who, unwilling to relinquish the protection of his feigned deafness, remains passive and stares dumbly at the outstretched hand. McMurphy picks up Bromden's limp hand, with the result that ". . . my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power. It blowed up near as big as his, I remember" (p. 27). The pumping up of Bromden's hand is an erectile image, parallel to that of Old Pete in the steel ball hallucination, which progresses to an explicit genital reference later in the book when Bromden experiences his first erection in years. The pattern is repeated throughout the novel, with hands as a symbol of male potence introducing the more crucial issue of emasculation.

McMurphy's hands are of primary importance. Immediately before McMurphy shakes Bromden's hand, the Chief is impressed enough to give the reader a lengthy description of McMurphy's offered hand. It is a record of his tough, nomadic life, with various scars, tattoos, and stains detailing the occupations, struggles, and general life style of the man. Bromden concludes, "The palm was callused, and the calluses were cracked, and dirt was worked in the cracks. A road map of his travels up and down the West" (p. 27). Not only is this hand a map of the land which Bromden will later find his way back to; it quite literally carries in its cracks some of the earth from that land outside the ward.

The experience and power which repose in McMurphy's hands are repeatedly emphasized. Later, on the ward fishing trip, he is able to intimidate two surly service station attendants without striking a blow, by showing them the calluses and scars on his palms.

The symbolic value of hands is important in other characters as well, notably Dale Harding, a slender, sensitive, almost effeminate man who has retreated behind a shield of intellectual irony because he feels unable to cope with his big-breasted, sexually demanding wife. Harding's hands are an index of his character: ". . . hands so long and white and dainty I think they carved each other out of soap . . . it bothers him that he's got pretty hands" (p. 23). Harding's feeling of shame at his "pretty" hands is reinforced when his wife, on her visit to the hospital, derides the male friends who have visited their home in his absence for their "limp wrists." More obviously and crucially, when the world series vote approaches, McMurphy prods Harding by asking,

> "You afraid if you raise your hand that old Buzzard'll cut it off."
>
> Harding lifts one thin eyebrow. "Perhaps I am; perhaps I *am* afraid she'll cut it off if I raise it." (p. 107)

Harding is too intelligent a man not to be aware of the dual significance of his own statement; and the admitted fear of symbolic castration ties into another obvious manifestation of the theme of sexual identity. All of the men have been to one degree or another emasculated; but the horror of the situation is dramatically underlined by a literal castration, when an inmate commits suicide by amputation: "Old Rawler. Cut both nuts off and bled to death, sitting right on the can in the latrine . . ." (p. 115).

It should be made clear that the polarity established between the externally effeminate hands of Harding and the more obviously masculine hands of McMurphy is not a simplistic one. Although Harding's "pretty" hands are a symbolic manifestation of his confused sexual identity, it is Harding himself who sees them as shameful, not McMurphy or Bromden. The brand of manhood admired by Kesey and represented by McMurphy is not exclusively limited to brawny men with scarred hands, as is shown by the fact that Harding grows to manhood by the novel's end under McMurphy's tutelage without changing his physical appearance, and by Bromden's revelation that McMurphy is no stereotyped beer advertisement he-man:

> I'd see him do things that didn't fit with his face or hands, things like painting a picture at OT with real paints on a blank paper with no lines or numbers . . . He hadn't let what he looked like run his life . . . (p. 140).

Being a man is more than being physically strong, or even brave. It entails sensitivity and a commitment to other people, because manhood as Kesey sees it is not merely the quality of being male, but of being human. What McMurphy teaches the inmates is not merely how to be aware and proud of their sexual identity, but how to be human beings as well, responsible for one another.

As his determination and influence increase, McMurphy introduces pornography, gambling, and finally two whores into the ward. The threat posed by the sexual vitality which he brings to the sterile ward is so clear that even the most superficial accoutrements which attach to McMurphy are condemned by the

Nurse as disruptive and "dirty": the sound of laughter and song, the smell of sweat. Ultimately, the issue is that McMurphy is opposed to sterility, in both its medical and symbolic implications. What makes this opposition particularly effective is that he is not susceptible to the Combine's most insidious weapon: guilt. When Miss Ratched assigns McMurphy the job of cleaning toilet bowls, he turns the menial task into a humiliation for her rather than for himself, writing an obscene word backwards inside the rim of one bowl, so that when she inspects it with a hand mirror she is startled. She tells McMurphy that his job is to make the place cleaner, not dirtier. The humor of the incident does not detract from the serious thematic implication, the polarity between the mechanical sterility of the Nurse and the fertile animality of McMurphy.

The barrier between the two is a tangible as well as a symbolic one: the glass shield which surrounds the nurses' office, separating the Nurse from the men but allowing her to spy on them. McMurphy calls the office a "hothouse", an intuitive metaphor which strikes at the heart of the issue, for the office is the center of a sterile environment which makes the inmates dependent and thus unable to survive in the outside world. One of the crucial events of the book is McMurphy's breaking of this barrier, by deliberately running his *hand* through it. The breaking of the protective barrier, the Nurse's horror, the presence of blood, the recurrence of the hand as symbol, emphasize the sexual implications of the act, and the movement from sterility to fertility represented throughout by McMurphy.

The Big Nurse has a number of allies and subordinate satellites, notable among them the supervisor of the hospital, another old Army nurse and lifelong friend of Miss Ratched. A second friend and ally is the hospital receptionist, mother of Billy Bibbit. Billy is a particularly sympathetic character who, under the double load of two mothers, his own and Miss Ratched, is ultimately broken. On the other extreme of the female hierarchy is Candy, a whore friend of McMurphy who is feminine in the most attractive way. She likes men, enjoys sex, and ultimately holds out the only hope Billy Bibbit has ever had to become a man. Associated with Candy are several similar women, including her companion Sandy and the sexually open women who come alive in McMurphy's tales of his past.

The clearest example of the American woman caught indecisively in the untenable position between these two extremes is Vera Harding, Dale's wife. Like Nurse Ratched, she is big-breasted and garishly disguised by cosmetics; and like Ratched, she has subtly contributed to the erosion of her husband's masculinity. Nonetheless, Vera Harding still possesses the potential to move toward the camp of Candy, as Kesey shows in a scene where she meets and flirts with McMurphy. Although Vera uses her sexuality as a weapon of subjugation, she is at least aware and proud of it. In her conversation with McMurphy, Vera reveals herself as a person who moves instinctively and desperately in search of a viable heterosexual relationship; and despite her perverse methods and her own lack of awareness of the true significance of her plight, her harsh qualities are mitigated somewhat. Although Vera has damaged her husband's sense of sexual identity, he has failed her in similar fashion, by abdicating too readily the responsibilities of the male role. It is one measure of the qualified

hope Kesey offers for future male-female relations in America that by the novel's end Dale Harding is able to accept some of this responsibility and to sign himself out of the hospital to try again, armed with a new honesty derived from his contact with McMurphy.

We have said that the Combine robs the inmates of their manhood, in the dual senses of masculinity and humanity. Those who are totally irreclaimable by society for use as tools are, significantly, termed "vegetables." But there are intermediate steps in the dehumanizing process; and in their regressive development toward their ultimate roles as machines or vegetables, the inmates, brutalized by Big Nurse and her orderlies, are pointedly and repeatedly compared by Kesey to various animals.[2] In addition, several extended patterns of animal imagery are employed by Kesey. Early in the book, Harding expresses to McMurphy his own metaphor for the situation in the ward. He sees himself and his fellow inmates as rabbits incapable of surviving without the repressive supervision of a wolf, such as Miss Ratched. He suggests that McMurphy, too, may be a wolf. Although McMurphy rejects Harding's metaphor, annoyed that the patients can consider themselves anything but men, he has already ventured an analogy of his own, describing the first group therapy meeting he attends as a "Bunch of chickens at a peckin' party" (p. 55). Other bird images occur as well. When Bromden first attempts to laugh, he sounds "like a pullet trying to crow" (p. 185). Miss Ratched is often compared to a buzzard. The novel's title makes use of a slang connotation of "cuckoo". But the image pattern which is set in direct opposition to the pejorative connotations of the chicken simile is that which attaches to the wild goose. Although early references to the goose are humorous and deprecating (McMurphy and Harding argue over the dubious honor of who is to be the "bull goose looney" and later Harding evaluates McMurphy's sensitivity as no more than that of a goose), this bird comes to represent the pride and self-determination to which men should aspire. When, on his way to recovery, Bromden looks out of the dormitory window at night, viewing the outside world clearly for the first time in many years, he sees a young dog excitedly exploring for new experiences. Then, both Bromden and the dog are entranced by the majestic passage of a flock of wild geese:[3]

> . . . I heard a high, laughing gabble . . . . Then they crossed the moon—a black, weaving necklace, drawn into a V by that lead goose. For an instant that lead goose was right in the center of that circle, bigger than the others, a black cross opening and closing . . . (pp. 142-143).

This passage suggests an interpretation of the novel's title. McMurphy, "bigger than the others," wild and free and migratory, is like the lead goose, pulling his followers in the direction he has chosen. Never truly trapped and grounded by the ward's restrictions, McMurphy does fly over the "cuckoo's nest". In addition, the "laughing" sound of the geese's gabble, and the metaphor of a cross echo patterns which attach to McMurphy, as does the fact that in the center of the moon's circle, the lead goose wears a sort of halo.

---

[2] Random examples include references to a dog (p. 88), a bug (p. 112), a gorilla (p. 148), a mare (p. 167), a moose (p. 186), a mustang (p. 187).

[3] The dog is referred to again at the end of the book when Bromden, in his escape, runs "in the direction I remember seeing the dog go" (p. 272). This reference strengthens the implicit parallel between Bromden and the dog in the episode quoted above, where both experience the awakening of new sensations.

The credibility of McMurphy's character stems largely from the fact that several times in the escalating struggle with Big Nurse he falters, backing off before taking the painful step to the next plateau of courage and commitment. Bromden's growing personal involvement in McMurphy's battle is emphasized by the fact that his narration is clearly influenced in tone and content by McMurphy's behavior. When McMurphy succeeds in a particularly absurd practical joke at the Nurse's expense, Bromden recalls similar situations perpetrated upon white bureaucrats by his father and other tribesmen, in the happier time before Pine-Who-Stands-Tallest-On-The-Mountain was beaten by Mrs. Bromden and the Combine. During periods of victory by McMurphy, Bromden's perceptions become clearer, and he recognizes the therapeutic effect of laughter and of sheer animal vitality upon the ward.

The most obvious indication of Bromden's reaction to McMurphy's successes is the temporary shutting down of the fog machine, a nonexistent device palpably real to Bromden, which grows out of his experience with real fog machines at an English airfield in World War II. Kesey uses it as a recurrent metaphor which serves to elucidate Bromden's ambivalent attitude toward his own madness. The fog machine provides Bromden an excuse to remain camouflaged in a docile role which, because it presents no threat to the Combine, allows him some measure of security. McMurphy's function, which Bromden resists at first, is to draw the Chief out of that refuge into open resistance to the Combine.

When McMurphy does falter momentarily, the possibility that he is little different from the other inmates is seized upon by Bromden with ostensible relief. The word he uses most often to describe McMurphy's behavior during such quiescent periods is "cagey". Bromden sees "caginess" as a necessary and perhaps even admirable trait, the capacity to survive through cunning. He is correct to a very limited extent, and it will be his Indian "caginess" which, combined with physical courage transmitted to him by McMurphy, will enable him to survive as a man rather than a machine or a vegetable. But the word as applied by Bromden in the earlier stages of the book to the total abandonment of struggle in favor of passive acceptance of the Nurse's rule is no more than a euphemism for cowardice. Bromden affects relief at McMurphy's first setbacks and resultant caution, because any success on McMurphy's part exposes Bromden to the painful awareness that struggle against the Combine is possible, and to the heavy responsibility to try to be a man. More introspective than ever, Bromden has, under McMurphy's influence, begun a painfully honest reappraisal of his own identity problem:

> . . . I'd take a look at my own self in the mirror and wonder how it was possible that anybody could manage such an enormous thing as being what he was . . . It don't seem like I ever have been me. How can McMurphy be what he is? (p. 140).

By accepting society's evaluation of him, Bromden has abdicated the frightening responsibility of defining himself. Forced by McMurphy's example to face this responsibility, he is understandably ready to grasp at any rationalization which will once again free him from it. Seeing McMurphy acting cagey provides such a rationalization. No matter how much Bromden protests his admiration for caginess, however, he betrays his disappointment subconsciously by an immediate retrogression from his progress toward rehabilitation each time McMurphy seems

beaten or stalemated. His memories of the tribe become unpleasant ones, and he remembers how his father, under pressure from society and his wife, slipped from bold resistance to caginess to alcoholic defeat:

> "My Papa was a full Chief . . . . He was real big when I was a kid. My mother got twice his size."
>
> • • • •
>
> "He fought [the Combine] a long time till my mother made him too little to fight any more and he gave up." (pp. 186-187)

The metaphor of physical size is one which grows naturally out of the erectile imagery introduced in the first McMurphy-Bromden meeting. In this hallucinatory understanding of his father's downfall, Bromden remembers him shrinking in size, and although he himself is still a physical giant, he conceives himself as small and weak. In an irony so painful that it loses all humor, Bromden stands on the floor of the swimming pool while McMurphy treads water next to him and blithely tells the reader that McMurphy "must of been standing in a hole" (p. 147). Again, Bromden tells McMurphy later, "You're . . . lot bigger . . . 'n I am" (p. 186). It is McMurphy's stated task to make Bromden "big" again, by making him aware of his own identity.

The swimming pool episode has more far-reaching ramifications as well. In conversation with the lifeguard, McMurphy learns for the first time that he, unlike most of the other inmates, is committed, and that his release from the hospital can be withheld indefinitely. A major faltering point for McMurphy follows, with the result that Cheswick, an inmate who had begun to develop resistance to the Combine in emulation of McMurphy, loses all hope and commits suicide by drowning, on the next swimming day. This marks the second in a group of three progressively more significant suicides in the novel. The first was the self-executed castration of Rawler; the third will be that of Billy Bibbit.

McMurphy's reaction to Cheswick's death and to the concomitant loss of hope by the other patients is not long in coming. After a period of unprecedented personal anguish, McMurphy makes the clear moral choice to abandon self-interest and to fight the Combine once again. This decision is marked by his deliberate shattering of the glass barrier enclosing the nurses' station.

For a time, McMurphy is again in the ascendant. The patients begin to gain confidence and Big Nurse returns to her frighteningly patient biding of time. It is during this period that McMurphy conceives of the fishing trip.

The patients' fishing trip is an hilarious sequence, significant in the further development of the central characters. Its humor intensifies the tragedy to follow, and the primary symbol which informs it, that of McMurphy as Christ-figure, lends substance to the progressive series of moral steps still to be taken by McMurphy. The parallel is drawn most explicitly, and with a wry awareness of its overt quality, in a conversation between Harding and McMurphy, during which the former explains the procedure of Electro Shock Therapy: "A device that might be said to do the work of the sleeping pill, the electric chair, *and* the torture rack . . . You are strapped to a table, shaped, ironically, like a cross, with a crown of electric sparks in place of thorns" (pp. 64-65). And toward the book's

conclusion, when McMurphy has willfully brought EST upon himself, he echoes the comparison:

> Climbs on the table without any help and spreads his arms out . . . . A switch snaps the clasps on his wrists, ankles . . .
>
> • • • •
>
> "Anointest my head with conductant. Do I get a crown of thorns?"
>
> • • • •
>
> Put on those things like headphones, crown of silver thorns . . . (p. 237).

These are by no means isolated instances of the Christ metaphor. Before the fishing trip, which is attended by twelve followers of McMurphy, including Candy who is decidedly Magdalene-like in her sweet, generous compassion, Billy Bibbit is advised by his fellow inmate Ellis to "be a fisher of men" (p. 198).

The more significant aspects of McMurphy's role as savior lie, however, not in such simple symbolic leads, but in the moral circumstances of his situation. He is, to begin with, fated. Bromden has shown us that no man can meet the Combine head on and escape retribution. Yet McMurphy, a cunning man who prides himself on playing the percentages, and on gambling boldly only for personal gain, chooses again and again to fight Big Nurse in increasingly overt ways, until his doom is sealed and his victory assured. Kesey takes pains to make us aware, moreover, that McMurphy becomes fully aware at an early stage of the conflict that he is dooming himself, an awareness which is echoed (in an almost humorously melodramatic flamboyance) by one of the tattoos on McMurphy's arm: aces and eights, the "dead man's hand." Finally, given an easy opportunity to escape from the hospital near the end of the novel, he refuses by making a transparent excuse of fatigue and allowing himself to be trapped by oversleeping. Even when offered a chance to escape further shock treatments and lobotomy by admitting that his actions (and hence his teachings and his morality) were wrong, McMurphy refuses.

The significance of McMurphy's hands looms still larger when it begins to coincide with the Christ imagery. McMurphy's hands, already scarred by experience, are cut repeatedly in the course of his hospital stay. One such instance, that of the glass shield, has already been mentioned. Another, the attempted lifting of the control panel, is particularly worthy of note because it is a pivotal episode in the development of the men's loyalty to McMurphy.

At a point when the men are still unwilling to take the risk of voting with McMurphy for the privilege of watching the World Series on television, he maneuvers them into a discussion of possible escape methods, and then into a bet on whether he is capable of lifting a massive, obsolete control panel, formerly used to regulate water therapy and resembling a torture device. It is four hundred pounds of steel and concrete, no longer of any use to the Combine; but during McMurphy's attempt to lift it (and finally in Bromden's successful use of it as a battering ram in his escape), it comes to represent the monolithic weight of the Combine, a machinery which claims to be invulnerable to the efforts of any single man to move it.

The men, all of whom have lost money to McMurphy gambling, seize gleefully

on the sure bet he offers them. As at the end of the book, McMurphy fails physically, but wins a clear moral victory:

> His whole body shakes with the strain as he tries to lift something he *knows* he can't lift, something *everybody* knows he can't lift.
>
> • • • •
>
> Then his breath explodes out of him, and he falls back limp . . . There's blood on the levers where he tore his hands . . . .
>
> • • • •
>
> "But I tried, though," he says. (pp. 110-111).

The attempt provides an insight into McMurphy's character for the inmates as well as for the reader. The lesson that one must strive to be and do more than one thinks he can is one of the more important parts of the legacy with which McMurphy will leave them. Further, he has given the lie to his often proclaimed policy of shrewd self-interest and at the same time given the others a taste of victory by letting them win back their money. The immediate result is that those present do vote for the World Series proposal, including Bromden, for whom it is a daring step back into the world.

Bromden has said only a giant could lift the control panel. Later, he sees McMurphy as ". . . a giant come out of the sky to save us . . ." (p. 224). By the conclusion of the novel, Bromden has come to realize that this is a false evaluation and a false hope. McMurphy is not a giant but a man; and Bromden's salvation will come from within. McMurphy's function is to teach the inmates how to be men, and thus how to save themselves.

Bromden has idealized McMurphy, but Nurse Ratched makes an equally great error in underestimating him. In a meeting with the medical staff (whom she dominates), the Nurse defines McMurphy pejoratively in terms of his humanity: " 'He isn't extraordinary. He is simply a man and no more, and is subject to all the fears . . . that any other man is subject to' " (p. 136). McMurphy is most certainly subject to human fears and weaknesses. The difference between him and the rabbit/chickens who have hitherto comprised the Big Nurse's experience with inmates is that he refuses to be governed and debilitated by these limitations. Despite his recognition of his own vulnerability and mortality, he sets himself to a constant testing of the limits of the human condition, as in the control panel incident. Although he is not superhuman, he does show himself to be extraordinary.

The Nurse has smugly dismissed McMurphy as "simply a man and no more," but by the climax of their confrontation, he will have shown her that being a man, truly being a man, is enough. In addition, he will demonstrate that she is no invincible machine, but simply a woman, with all the attendant human vulnerability and fallibility.

At one point, during McMurphy's temporary absence from the ward, Big Nurse asks the patients whether they consider him "a martyr or a saint" (p. 222). They agree that he is neither, and in pressing her point (the essential self-interest which she feels is McMurphy's constant motivation) she reiterates these terms several times. The consummate irony, of course, is that McMurphy, for all his pretensions to the role of cunning con-man, is to rise to heights of selfless

sacrifice bordering on the saintly, while the Big Nurse, smugly confident of her own moral superiority, reaches the nadir of her function as agent of repression. And by underestimating the commitment and courage of which her adversary is capable, she undertakes a struggle which is to end in a true martyrdom for him, and in her own irrevocable defeat.

Other references to Christ and Christianity in the novel which seem at first to bear no consistent relationship to the pattern which attaches to McMurphy, emerge finally as part of a sophisticated statement on organized religion. One of these is the inmate Ellis who, his sensibilities bludgeoned by repeated EST treatments, stands perpetually in the attitude of crucifixion. One of the Combine's most bizarre failures, Ellis is a clearly symbolic example of the atrocities it commits in the name of society. McMurphy, like Christ before him, makes a clear moral issue of such victimization by offering himself up.

Still more revealing of Kesey's intent is the treatment of another peripheral character, an anxiety-ridden nurse named Miss Pilbow. A devout Catholic, she has a morbid fear of sex and a hatred of her patients, especially McMurphy, whom she considers a sex maniac. The tangible representation of Miss Pilbow's repressed sexuality is her hideous purple birthmark, which is itself the subject of one of Bromden's hallucinatory perceptions of truth. Miss Pilbow persists in the attempt to externalize evil. Her denial of her own sexual instincts has resulted in hatred and fear rather than love and acceptance. Her rigidly proscriptive morality, when held in ludicrous juxtaposition to McMurphy's guiltless, relaxed, and fertile pleasure in life, suggests that the organized church has failed to bring the essential Christian message of love to the people. And in perpetrating the kind of rigid morality which has scarred not only Miss Pilbow but most of the inmates, organized religion has become an arm of the Combine. McMurphy, in opposing this, as every other aspect of the Combine, is performing a function similar to that of Christ: attacking an outmoded morality and sweeping away its hypocrisies while assimilating and perpetuating its good aspects in a new moral code. Thus, although McMurphy espouses an apparently amoral sexuality, he infuses his followers with a brotherly love which is distinctly Christian, and which a mechanistic society has forgotten.

What keeps the contest between McMurphy and Big Nurse from becoming either morbidly dull or unbearably terrifying to the reader is Kesey's capacity to render absurd humor. Towards the end of the book, Harding says of the farewell party for McMurphy, "It isn't happening. It's all a collaboration of Kafka and Mark Twain . . ." (p. 254), and one gets the idea that Kesey extends this judgment to the entire world of the Combine.

It is in this spirit of easygoing humor that McMurphy begins to break through Bromden's defenses and to draw him back into the world of men. Although the central improvement in Bromden is psychological, its outward manifestations are tied to the metaphor of physical size and potence. Thus, Bromden's first positive act in years is to raise his hand out of the fog to cast the decisive vote in favor of McMurphy's World Series proposal. Later, when the partially reclaimed Bromden lies awake anxious to go on the fishing trip, McMurphy talks to him and offers to make him "big" again. After listening to McMurphy describe the

two whores who are coming on the trip, Bromden experiences his first erection in many years; and McMurphy, pulling back the blankets, bawdily puns, "Look there, Chief. . . . You growed a half a foot already" (p. 190). The pun is significantly close to literal truth, for sexual potence is shown as both a symptom and a function of masculine identity; and Bromden's new self-awareness will result in a fearsome potence which thwarts the Combine and its agents, combined with a commitment to his fellow inmates which spells hope for all men.

After the fishing trip, events proceed rapidly and inexorably to a conclusion. Although the trip is a great success for the men, who return to an awareness of a more primitive, active, fertile world and bring that awareness back to contaminate and erode the sterility of the hospital, McMurphy pays a high personal price. Pushing and carrying them back to life drains his own stores of vitality.

The battle lines are drawn by the agents of the Combine; but instead of demoralizing the men, this pulls them closer together. In defense of another inmate, and with resignation rather than anger, McMurphy allows an orderly to goad him into a fist fight which he knows will provide Big Nurse the excuse she needs to bring more formidable weapons into play. Perhaps more significant is the fact that Bromden, accepting responsibility for his fellow man, steps in to help Mac when he is outnumbered.

From this point on, Bromden is his own man, growing in strength as McMurphy declines. The two go together to the EST room, but not before McMurphy, like many martyrs before him, is offered the chance to escape punishment by recanting. For Bromden, this shock treatment, his last ever, is a turning point. With McMurphy as an example, he fights his panic, takes his treatment, and then works his way back out of the fog never to hide in it again. Bromden returns to the ward to be greeted as a hero by the other men, largely assuming McMurphy's former position, while the latter, the focus of the Big Nurse's vengeance, undergoes repeated shock treatments.

With no end to the treatments in sight and the Big Nurse considering more drastic methods, it is decided that McMurphy's escape from the hospital must be engineered. McMurphy agrees, but insists on postponing his departure until after a secret midnight visit from Candy which turns into a farewell party, fueled by cocktails made of codeine-based cough syrup and a few friendly tokes of marijuana with Mr. Turkle, the easygoing night watchman.

The party is a success on every level. Billy Bibbit loses his virginity to Candy in the seclusion room, the men draw closer together and begin to entertain hopes of overcoming the control of the Combine, and McMurphy's escape before dawn with Turkle's key to unlock a window is assured. Bromden articulates the full significance of the rebellion: "I had to keep reminding myself that it had *truly* happened, that we had made it happen. . . . Maybe the Combine wasn't all-powerful" (p. 255). But although they have in the past over-estimated the strength of the Combine and the Big Nurse, this time Bromden and the others have underestimated it. It is only McMurphy who still recognizes the extent of the control held over the men, and who understands the fact that his own complete sacrifice is necessary to effect their freedom. He decides to take a nap before

leaving, "accidentally" oversleeps, and is discovered by the morning staff.

In retrospect, Bromden is able to understand McMurphy's motives and the inevitability of the events to follow:

> . . . it was bound to be and would have happened in one way or another . . . , [McMurphy] could [not] have . . . let the Big Nurse have the last move . . . he'd signed on for the whole game. . . (p. 260).

When Billy Bibbit is discovered asleep in Candy's arms (a scene notable for its childlike innocence), the Nurse proceeds to barrage him with recriminations until the old habit patterns of guilt and dependence are reawakened. Moments later, Billy commits suicide by cutting his throat (an echo of Rawler's suicide).

The Nurse's reaction is typical of her smug assurance of the infallibility of her own Combine-sanctioned values. She lays the blame immediately at McMurphy's feet. Bromden watches him

> . . . in his chair in the corner, resting a second before he came out for the next round. . . . The thing he was fighting, you couldn't whip it for good. All you could do was keep on whipping it, till you couldn't come out any more and somebody else had to take your place (p. 265).

Bromden is the man who will take McMurphy's place, and because of this he understands what McMurphy must do. He is acting as an agent for all the men, and as Bromden realizes, "We couldn't stop him because we were the ones making him do it" (p. 267). In his final, physical attack on Miss Ratched, McMurphy rips her starched uniform off, tearing down her insulation as he did with the glass wall, exposing her large, fleshy breasts, and making it clear that she is just a woman, and vulnerable, rather than an invincible machine. She will never again command the absolute power she has held in the past over the inmates.

The aftermath is the complete disintegration of Miss Ratched's rule. Most of the men sign themselves out, but Bromden postpones his own departure because he suspects the Big Nurse may make one last play, and he is correct. One day, McMurphy, now a vegetable after undergoing a lobotomy, perhaps the ultimate castration, is wheeled back into the ward. In a scene characterized by an intense intimacy, Bromden performs a merciful service for McMurphy, smothering him to death, and the transfer of power is complete. Bromden picks up McMurphy's hat, tries it on and finds it too small. He feels "ashamed" at trying to wear it, because he knows McMurphy has taught him one must find one's own identity. Then, he picks up the control panel, smashes it through a window, and makes his escape.

Bromden is McMurphy's most successful disciple. It is not until the very end of the novel, however, that it becomes clear that Bromden has surpassed his teacher in the capacity to survive in American society, maintaining personal identity in spite of the Combine. It must be remembered that Bromden is a half-breed, and that this mixed heritage was a major contributing factor to his severe alienation and identity problems. But Bromden shows that his half-breed status also represents a capacity to combine the strengths of both the Indian and the white man. From his father, he inherited (among other Indian skills) a functional cunning, a patient caution which in its original form was conducive

to both survival and pride. Although this quality has been perverted into the fearful "caginess" which he once practiced and professed to admire, it is, in a less extreme form, a valuable attribute.

From the first page of the novel, it is clear that Bromden has long practiced the tactic of evasion against the onslaughts of the Combine. The price he has paid in loss of pride and identity obscures for a time the undeniable fact that he is the only man who has *fooled* the Combine successfully: the Big Nurse and her staff believe that Bromden is a deaf-mute, and he is able to eavesdrop safely on their most private dealings. McMurphy, because he fights the Combine head-on, dies; but Bromden, who learns to practice a fusion of evasive cunning and sheer courage survives as the hope for the future.

It is clear that one need not have the physical prowess of a McMurphy or a Bromden to renounce rabbithood and become a man. Kesey suggests that someone like Dale Harding has a very real chance to thwart the Combine; and even Billy Bibbit was able to go part of the way. Despite Billy's failure, Kesey's feeling is clear: it is better to be destroyed in the attempt to fight the Combine than to accept the role of rabbit for life.

Randle Patrick McMurphy is a compelling figure. Into the sterility of Bromden's world and the stifling American society it represents, he brings a breath, a breeze, a wind of change. In the wasteland of the ward his fertile sexual vitality makes him loom as a figure of mythic proportions. Yet the most important part of the legacy he has left Bromden and his fellows is that he was just a man. And that, finally, is enough.