

WR 121

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Author's Note: I wrote this essay in response to a classroom assignment for an analytical essay. I read the book by Ken Kesey several years ago and loved the way that it was written, so it was interesting to closely examine the film version.

One Flew Over Nurse Ratched

The film adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* portrays a mental hospital where the patients housed within are constrained by use of medication and a controlling nurse who reduces the patients' wills to that of children. The patients continually berate one another, which effectively draws each one to further seclusion within himself. In an institution where no one seems concerned with curing patients, Nurse Ratched seems content to break the will of each patient, making them docile. In this manner, the hospital's day-to-day routine stifles all free will instead of creating comfort. The arrival of a new patient, R.P. McMurphy, creates notice immediately in the ward, as he acts animated and alive. Due to McMurphy's behavior, the other patients start to gradually wake up to their surroundings and to the methods that are used to control them. However, as Nurse Ratched feels her control slipping, she makes continued attempts to grasp on tighter. She uses fear to control her patients into submission, even as McMurphy gains control over the ward by disrupting the rules. A battle for control begins between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, which ultimately results in McMurphy's triumph and the Nurse's downfall, while changing the patients caught in the middle for the better.

Nurse Ratched conducts a uniform therapy session at the mental hospital, where she dominates the participating patients into submissive children. She seems to get off on her authoritarian rule over the patients as she propels them to reproach one another. As McMurphy enters these sessions, he is shocked to see what appear to be relatively normal men reduced to puppets, with no control over their own strings. Some streak of his rebellious nature is sparked by what he sees around him; this is the same rebellion against authority that has landed McMurphy in trouble with the law repeatedly. At first, he seems amused to see the patients yelling at one another, but as he takes the entire situation in, his attitude changes to one of horror. He observes how Nurse Ratched presides over the

sessions with a sly smile painted across her mouth. He sees how she appears to push and pull the patients to her own purpose. In response, he disrupts group therapy sessions by playing with a deck of cards; he stares at Nurse Ratched, and a silent challenge passes between the two. McMurphy not only challenges Nurse Ratched for her authority, but he also enjoys trying to break down those who control others.

From his first day on the ward, McMurphy questions the music and the medication that the hospital forces upon the inmates. When McMurphy enters the nurse's station and tries to turn down the music, Nurse Ratched reprimands him, all the while talking down to him in a slow, patronizing tone. Having been repeatedly incarcerated, McMurphy is used to being told what to do, but he is not used to being treated as if he is crazy. Although he is trying to pass some time hiding in a mental hospital, he is unwilling to give up control over himself as all the other patients have. Next, he asks about the purpose of his medication. He is informed that it is good for him and that he has to take it, as if he is a small child. When he refuses, Nurse Ratched suggests that if he will not take it orally, then she will just have to administer it another way. Here the nurse tries to snip his balls off in a way that she seems to have already mastered with the other patients. She uses her ultimate authority by threatening to humiliate him, insinuating that the medication will be administered anally. The threat works: McMurphy takes his medication, but spits it out when out of sight of the nurse's station. Another patient, Harding, seems outraged and lectures McMurphy on his lack of sensible behavior. McMurphy mimics the other patients' fear: "Oooh, oooh, God almighty, she's got you guys coming and going. What do you think she is? Some kind of champ or something?" He chooses to show the other patients how impervious he is to the control exerted over all of them by making a bet. "I bet that in one week I can put a bug so far up her ass . . . she won't know whether to shit or wind her wrist watch." With that promise, the battle of wills between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched grows more serious.

With the next group therapy session, McMurphy challenges Nurse Ratched to change her strict schedule so that he can watch the World Series. Nurse Ratched refuses to change hospital policy unless the majority of the patients agree. She knows that the patients are too much under her control to risk her displeasure, and to maintain her domination, she leaves no room for individuality under her close watch. Nurse Ratched

wants her patients to need her like a mommy because that feeds her power. McMurphy, feeling betrayed by the others after most refuse to vote to change the schedule, later suggests another bet: he claims that he will escape by throwing a heavy marble sink through a window. After he cannot lift the sink, as he walks away, McMurphy says, "But I tried, didn't I? Goddamit, at least I did that." McMurphy would rather try and fail than give up. McMurphy shows the strength of his personality in that he refuses to be ruled over by another human being. It is not in his nature to acquiesce; rather he challenges any authority that attempts to dominate his strong will.

The next day, another patient asks for a new vote to watch another Series game, and McMurphy once again takes up the cause. McMurphy's words the day before have obviously sparked some hope within the other patients, and for the first time, they realize that it is possible to maintain some control over their own situations. McMurphy's battle with Nurse Ratched have started to make them think about themselves and how they have so easily given up for so long. This time, everyone in the group therapy session raises his hand, but Nurse Ratched cheats them out of their victory by refusing to accept the final count. Again, McMurphy refuses to give up and finds a way to have his own victory: He sits in front of the black television screen and commentates an imaginary baseball game. As the other patients join him in defying Nurse Ratched, McMurphy gives them their first experience of what it is to be a man. He awards them a taste of freedom for their successful triumph, something that has been long denied them.

McMurphy's next rebellion is when he escapes from the hospital and hijacks a bus carrying many of the other patients on the ward. He takes them fishing on a commandeered fishing boat, giving them a day away from the hospital and from their problems. The patients get to fish, pilot a boat, taste the spray propelling from the water, and stare at a beautiful woman. He gives them an opportunity to make their own choices without enforcing rules upon those choices, a freedom which most of them have never known before. This outing gives the patients a chance to see what their lives could be like if they so wished. When they pull back into shore, they hold a freshly-caught fish up high like a badge of honor. Positive changes have begun within the patients, sparking the hope that their lives could be different. For once, they are not crazy; they are free men without fear. For this act of rebellion, Nurse Ratched fights to have McMurphy kept at the

hospital rather than transferred back to prison, so that she might have additional time to break him. She refuses to give up on the battle because she has not yet destroyed his spirit.

At one point, an orderly lets it out that McMurphy is confined to the hospital until Nurse Ratched decides to release him, something he hadn't counted on. He is horrified to recognize that he has been antagonizing the very person with the most power over him. This realization marks a change within McMurphy, as he comprehends how little power he holds over his own situation and the hopelessness of it all. At first, Nurse Ratched gets a winning smile on her face as McMurphy questions the other patients about why they have not told him that he has slowly been digging his own grave. But when Cheswick and Scanlon disrupt the nurse's control over the therapy sessions with insistent questions about ward policy, the first cracks are seen in Nurse Ratched's domineering façade: she slowly perceives that McMurphy's influence has changed the patients. They begin to challenge her authority and assert their rights to make their own decisions. The cracks in Ratched's armor begin to tear as she loses control, yelling at one of the patients to sit down. Even though McMurphy finds himself more imprisoned than he once believed, he gains more control over his surroundings as the patients find themselves empowered by their own free will. As the patients refuse to be suppressed by Nurse Ratched, a fight erupts, resulting in the Chief, McMurphy, and Cheswick being punished with electroshock therapy. When McMurphy is brought back into the ward, he captures everyone's attention and disrupts the therapy session once again by faking that he has been made a vegetable, then smiles, laughs, uses bad language and calls Nurse Ratched by her given name, Mildred. He stares the nurse down, announcing, "Next woman takes me on is gonna light up like a pinball machine and pay off in silver dollars." Then he tells her to proceed, as if to insinuate that she can shock him all she wants, but she will never break him and she will never win. He mocks both Nurse Ratched's and the hospital's methods of suppressing an individual's spirit and shows the other patients that no threat of punishment can dominate him. He has formed a plan to escape and take back control over his own life, and he believes this plan gives him a way to win his battle with Ratched.

The last great rebellion that McMurphy stages occurs on the same night as his planned escape attempt. McMurphy gives the other patients one final taste of freedom by initiating a drunken party in the ward, complete with women. All of the patients participate in getting drunk and then wreck the ward, effectively defying all the stringent rules that have been previously enforced by Nurse Ratched and the hospital. The nurse's station is a mess as the men throw off all of their bonds and act without restraint. After a night of debauchery, Nurse Ratched enters the ward and immediately tries to take control of the situation. Her hat lies on the floor, soiled, a symbol of her loss of authority. No one seems afraid of her any more, not even Billy, who has lost his virginity during the party. In a last-ditch attempt to re-establish her authority, Nurse Ratched belittles Billy and threatens to tell his mother about his indiscretion, ultimately (though probably unintentionally) driving him to suicide. Although he could still escape in all the chaos, McMurphy has begun to care for the other patients so much that he cannot leave without trying to suffocate the cause of so much pain. Instead of escaping, he tries to strangle Nurse Ratched without thinking of the consequences for his actions. This is his last act as a free man and his greatest attempt to overthrow Nurse Ratched's authority; after this, he is lobotomized.

There is one final glimpse showing the after-effects of the power struggle between Nurse Ratched and R.P. McMurphy. Ratched is last seen wearing a neck brace and sporting a subdued demeanor. She has lost the battle and been stripped of all her authority. Now, the patients see her as an equal: she has become someone unworthy of their fear. Through the struggles of McMurphy, the patients have recovered their balls, which returns them to the status of men, while Nurse Ratched has become ineffective. The men have finally taken some control over their own lives. In contrast, McMurphy is returned to the ward during the night in a vegetative state in Nurse Ratched's last attempt to prove some sort of victory. When the Chief discovers this, he smothers the shell of a human being that McMurphy has become, and escapes by throwing the sink McMurphy was unable to lift through the window. As the Chief runs from the hospital, the spirit of McMurphy escapes with him. The men all wake up and cheer as if they want to believe that McMurphy has finally finished what he began. In spirit, he has defeated Nurse Ratched by giving freedom to the Chief.

Although McMurphy dies, he has still won the battle against Nurse Ratched. She never broke him; instead, her domineering methods were ineffective when used on a man like McMurphy. Nurse Ratched has lost any control that she once had. The domination that was once hers is now gone as the patients no longer fear her. Now, she is an equal to men on the ward and her authority has been stripped. The patients have grown from children to men due to McMurphy's influence. They now have the ability to conquer the fears that have long kept them from integrating into the world outside the hospital. They have tasted freedom of life away from the mental institution, so that they can rejoin society if they so choose. Even McMurphy has found a type of ultimate freedom, in that no one, not even Nurse Ratched, was ever able to break him. Instead, he kept the essence of who he was until the escape of his soul and the death of his body.

Instructor's Note: *Students in this WR121 course were asked to formulate a thesis based on a "reading" of the film One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Based on a focus that they determined and put forth in a thesis statement, students had to carefully chronicle related scenes and analyze how they demonstrated that focus. Reayah's essay is exemplary in that it mixes an explanation of the film's key events with her own interpretation of how those events exemplify the battle between the two main characters. –Holly DeGrow*