

**The Power Struggle Between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched in  
Ken Kesey's: "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest"**

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**LICENCIATURA EN LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS INGLÉS – FRANCÉS**

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## INTRODUCTION

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a novel by Ken Kesey published in 1962, is considered one of the most important works of American fiction in the 20th century. It was included in the list of "100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005" compiled by *Time Magazine*<sup>1</sup>.

The novel tells the story about a group of mentally ill patients and the medical treatment they receive at a psychiatric hospital. The ward of hospital is managed by Nurse Ratched, who exercises near-total power over them, restricting their access to medication and basic human necessities. The patients are controlled to the point where they never question her authority.

Early in the novel Randle Patrick McMurphy, the protagonist, is admitted to the ward and immediately creates unrest among the other patients by promoting radical changes. Besides making them laugh, he demonstrates that he can influence the imposition of power. He arranges activities and an excursion that the patients enjoy, earning their respect, and he quickly becomes the leader of the group. In addition, he gives them confidence and shows them that they can have more control over their circumstances, empowering them and making them happier and stronger.

Nurse Ratched is a symbol of the system of control in the hospital, through the utilization of traditional and often inhumane psychiatric treatment. McMurphy is a figure who shows that "being humane" with such patients can be more effective in the treatment of their mental disorders. The novel offers the possibility to reflect upon the concept of insanity and its treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> List made by the critics Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo in 2005 and published in *Time Magazine* on October 20, 2005.

This novel integrates both psychological and literary aspects which will be analyzed in this thesis. The analysis will be based on techniques from New Criticism and the Psychological Critical Approach. In addition to the literary analysis of the characters and their struggles, it will explore psychological topics such as the limits of the human mind, the problem of human freedom in a repressive society, and the treatment in a psychiatric hospital.

## KEN KESEY BIOGRAPHY

Ken Kesey (1935–2001) was born on September 17<sup>th</sup> 1935, in La Junta, Colorado and lived there until 1946 when he and his family moved to Springfield, Oregon. In both high school and at the University of Oregon, Kesey participated in wrestling and theater. He got married in 1956 and had three children. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Oregon's School of Journalism in 1957, he attended Stanford University's Creative Writing program, where he was tutored by Wallace Stegner, an acclaimed novelist and short story writer.

In 1959, while at Stanford, he volunteered to be a subject in MKULTRA, a U.S. Army project which studied the effects of hallucinogenic drugs LSD and mescaline. This experience had a dramatic impact on Kesey's life, influencing and inspiring his future writing. Towards the end of these experiments, he started to work night shifts in a mental asylum in Menlo Park, California. There he was able to interact with the patients and observe the way they were treated. He deduced that were not really "crazy" but more individualized than society was able to accept.

While he was working there, he wrote his novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which was published in 1962. In 1964, he published his quintessential Oregon novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Both novels elaborate on Kesey's ideas about the conflict between individuality and modern industrial society and about conformity versus freedom. Parts of his novels were written while Kesey was under the influence of LSD and peyote, as he turned to psychedelic drugs trying to find his personal and spiritual liberation.

Kesey began to promote drug use as a path to individual freedom and he was considered one of the founding fathers of the counterculture in 1960s. He started a group known as the Merry Pranksters in 1964. He and his group travelled around the

country in a day-glow painted school bus. In 1965, Kesey's drug use resulted in a six month jail sentence. After his release, he moved to a farm near Eugene to live with his family.

His writing underwent a transformation as he changed from fiction to autobiographical prose, although in later years he returned to fiction with *Sailor Song* and *Last Go Round*. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, considered his masterpiece, has been widely read by college students. In 1975 a film adaptation won all five major Academy Awards, including best picture and best actor in a leading role for Jack Nicholson. Kesey lived in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, until his death on November 10, 2001.

## ANTECEDENTS

To talk about the events and people that influenced Kesey's evolution as a writer, it is necessary to start by analyzing his socio-cultural context and its influence on his works. His tendency to incorporate nature in his writing is a result of some of his childhood excursions, as well as hunting and fishing activities that he used to share with his father. His focus on writing about the social phenomena of his time comes from the fact that he was an intermediary link between the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the hippie movement of the 1960s. He is one of the best known writers who integrated elements of both movements in his literary works. He, like the other Beat writers, questioned their society and its customs. He used his own personal experiences in order to educate readers about the social issues and faced the society of that time without fear. In addition, as a member of the hippie movement, he also defended the ideas of "peace and love," living in a community, using drugs, having sexual experiences, and exploring altered states of consciousness. He tended to use a language distinctive of the hippies, with words such as: *bummer*, *acid*, *heads*, etc.

Kesey was influenced by Thomas De Quincey, author of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), who was one of the first writers to show through his works a deep fascination for the mental states induced by drugs. Another influence was Aldous Huxley who, in his essay called *The Doors of Perception*, (1954), described the hallucinogenic experiences of taking mescaline and commented on the mental state of schizophrenics. Huxley wrote that the human brain filters reality to keep out all the impressions and images that otherwise would be impossible to be processed. According to this point of view, drugs can reduce this filter or, as he puts it metaphorically, "open the doors of perception."

In addition, it is possible to identify the influence of Kesey's favorite writer William Faulkner. A common element appears in Faulkner's work, *The Sound and the Fury*, and Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*, as both reflect family pressure on identity. Similarities can also be found between Faulkner's *Light in August* and Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Both reveal how a community's past can form or deform the behavior of an individual. Also, Chief Bromden from *Cuckoo's Nest* and Lee Stamper from *Notion* are similar to some of Faulkner's main characters, such as Benjy from *The Sound and the Fury* and Joe Christmas from *Light in August* in the sense that they are also unable to live their lives at the beginning of the story because of their fixation on past experiences, which pushes them away from present reality.

It is also interesting to analyze how Kesey adopts in his writing of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, elements that are similar to those found in the works of Ernest Hemingway. One of these similarities is that Hemingway often allows the reader to make certain assumptions about situations in the story that are not tacitly explained, leaving to the reader the work of deducing the background of the situation, connecting the elements, and drawing conclusions. This is the case in Hemingway's story "Indian Camp," where Hemingway never explains why the husband commits suicide. Likewise, in *Cookoo's Nest*, the author never specifically explains why patients are in the mental hospital and leaves the reader to decide if they are really mad or not. Both Kesey and Hemingway also include presence of women who play the role of controlling figures or matriarchal authority, as seen in Hemingway's character of the wife in "The Happy Life of Frances McComber" and Nurse Ratched in *Cookoo's Nest*.

*Cookoo's Nest* also shows similarities to George Orwell's novel *1984*, which tells the story of a totalitarian and controlling society dominated by "Big Brother." Winston, the protagonist of Orwell's novel, and McMurphy, the protagonist of Kesey's novel, are

involved in a struggle against their societies in which they rebel against the authority figures. However, while Winston ends up assuming a conformist attitude, McMurphy loses his life by refusing to do so.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In the field of literary analysis different kinds of methods and patterns have been used, starting with the traditional methods applied until the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the newer approaches of analysis and interpretation of literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> century until today. The new methods of literary criticism include the following perspectives: formalist perspectives, biographical perspectives, historical perspectives, psychological perspectives, sociological perspectives, reader-response perspectives, mythological perspectives, structuralist perspectives, deconstructive perspectives and cultural studies perspectives (DiYanni, 2008). This thesis is based on the approaches of New Criticism and the Psychological Criticism.

New Criticism as a literary movement emerged for the first time in the late 1930's with Professor John Crowe Ransom from Vanderbilt University. He, along with a group of his former students Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks decided to join forces to promote the revitalization of literary criticism and legitimize it in academic contexts. The critique of John Crowe Ransom was aimed at academic criticism that was more concerned about historical scholarship than the art of poetry. Traditional literary criticism was limited predominantly to using historical or biographical data of the author to interpret literature in general and poetry in particular.

New Criticism emerged as an interpretive approach that does not define literature essentially as the self-expressive product of the artist or as an evaluative reflection permeated by its cultural history. It interprets a work of literature by evaluating and exploring its meaning through the analysis of its formal unity. This formal unity is demonstrated by the New Critics by showing how every image, every word, every element, every part of a work, contributes to a “central unifying theme.” (Hickman, 2012). Instead of relying on biographical or historical data, New Criticism

focuses on the work as a self-contained object, giving it the attribute of being completely autonomous and self-determining, so that it is publicly accessible and verifiable. In this sense, the meaning of a literary work is not determined by the intention of the author, nor by the reader's perception, nor by culture, but by its own content. As a result, the reader does not need to have specialized or detailed background knowledge in order to understand the meaning of the literary work.

The Psychological Approach to literary analysis is comprised of three main schools: the Freudian, the Lacanian, and the Jungian. The first is based on the proposals of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), focusing on the author's and characters' psyche and unconscious. Freudian criticism uses what is called a “psychoanalytic reading” which means understanding that there is a latent or real content that the literary work represses behind the manifest or obvious content. DiYanni, R. (2008) explains that through this kind of approach it is possible to analyze: internal processes of characters such as intellectualization, repression, sublimation, projection, isolation, denial, displacement, and/or reaction formation in their actions; internal conflicts that can cause difficulties for the characters to fit into society or to be happy; unconscious expressions of the characters: their actions, creative acts, dreams, voices, jokes, comments, etc.; descriptions of unconscious factors, patterns or repeated behavior in the text; how characters develop their identity.

The other school is based on the ideas of Jacques Lacan's (1901–1981), who proposed that it is important to take into account that the unconscious has a structure like a language and operates by the same processes that generate metonymy and metaphor. He makes a parallel between unconscious desire and language by explaining that a word is used to represent an absent object that is not possible to make present, just the same as an unconscious desire that cannot be fulfilled. For this reason, this school

agrees with Freudian theory in analyzing the author's life to fill interpretive gaps generated in those who not only want to understand the work but also understand the mind of the writer.

Finally, the Jungian school has based its criticism on the proposals of Carl Gustav Jung's (1875-1961), the founder of analytical psychology. Its emphasis is on the individual and the collective unconscious, with its archetypes of the human experience or universal patterns and images. For this school, a literary work is based on a central myth or unconscious mythology that is part of the collective unconsciousness and is common to all literature, and not on the personal unconscious of the writer as other schools propose.

The character is one of the most important elements in a novel because it is the representation of a "person" with different characteristics to take into account. According to Abrams a "character is a person presented in dramatic or narrative work," who has "moral dispositional qualities" (Abrams, 2011, p. 45) that are expressed in his dialogues (what he says) and through his actions (what he does). McGee agrees saying that "characters have moral and psychological features that make them human in some way or another" (McGee, 2001, p. 5).

In that sense, it is important to underline that a character may be presented in different ways in a literary work. But in most of the cases it can be flat or round. McGee (2001) defines a flat character as a one-dimensional one that acts stereotypically or expectedly, while a round character is defined as a more complex one in relation to different aspects: his make-up, his actions (reacting in contradictory or unexpected ways), experiences, etc.

For this second kind of character, the work of the author is even more demanding, as he has to present the information of each of his characters by observable

aspects such as behavior, speeches and appearance. This process is called characterization.

Characterizing is, according to Abrams “establishing the distinctive characters of the persons in a narrative by showing and telling” (Abrams, 2011, p. 47). He explains that the author characterizes by showing, when the characters appears talking and acting, and it is the reader who has to infer the dispositions and motives that are behind what they say and do. Telling is when the author makes authoritarian interventions to describe and evaluate the dispositions and motives of the characters.

## **The Power Struggle Between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest***

*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* explores the power struggle between its two main characters: Randle Patrick McMurphy and Nurse Ratched. This struggle involves their ways of exerting power, their roles inside the ward, their distinct personalities, their actions, and even their ideas about life, especially what constitutes sanity and insanity.

The novel is narrated by Chief Bromden, “a half Indian” from a “defunct Columbia Gorge tribe,” whose “father was the tribal leader, hence this fellow’s title ‘Chief’” (27). His mother, Mrs. Bromden, was a white “woman from town,” which explains where his last-name comes from. He is one of the patients committed to the ward, who pretends to be mute-deaf and does not relate with people around him until the moment that McMurphy appears and decides to communicate with him and the other patients. He narrates from his point of view and vividly depicts the main characters, whom he presents in the following way:

Nurse Ratched or “Big Nurse” is a character whose personal information is exclusively limited to general facts related to her profession: She is a “highly regarded psychiatric nurse with twenty years in the field” (56); an ex-Army nurse, a friend of her superior boss and a figure who has a very important position in the psychiatric ward. She is never without her “wicker bag” where, according to Bromden, “there’s no compacts or lipstick or woman stuff, she’s got that bag full of a thousand parts she aims to use in her duties” (10).

Randle Patrick McMurphy is a character that is described in-depth throughout the novel. In general, he is an “Irish rowdy from a work farm where he’d been serving time for gambling and battery” (220). His medical history says that he was “committed

by the state from the Pendleton Farm for Correction. For diagnosis and possible treatment. Thirty-five years old. Never married” (44). He lived in a little town not far from the ward during his childhood and, after that, changed his location several times because of the problems he encountered in each place. He started to work, have sexual experiences, and get into trouble from a young age. He likes playing cards, gambling, drinking, and his medical history shows how his aggressive behavior leads to his constantly being involved in conflictive situations. In addition, his records shows: “Distinguished Service Cross in Korea, for leading an escape from a Communist prison camp. A dishonorable discharge, afterward, for insubordination. Followed by a history of street brawls and barroom fights and a series of arrests for Drunkenness, Assault and Battery, Disturbing the Peace, *repeated* gambling” (44).

The physical description of the characters is another way to characterize them and shed light on their attitudes, reactions, and personality. Both characters are very well described in the novel:

Nurse Ratched is a “middle-aged lady,” whose “face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel, blend of white and cream and baby-blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils –everything working together except the color on her lips and fingernails.” (p. 11); “her fingers trail across the polished steel – tip of each finger the same color as her lips. Funny orange. Like the tip of a soldering iron. Color so hot or so cold.” Nurse Ratched’s “calculated” face reflects her tendency to control herself, and measure every single move she makes; her “baby-blue eyes,” and her white and small features represent her need to be considered as a “good person” or someone who always does the right thing; and finally, her lips show the impact of her words on other people, and her fingernails, the impact of her actions.

Randle Patrick McMurphy is described as “redheaded with long red sideburns and a tangle of curls out from under his cap, been needing cut a long time, and he’s broad ... across the jaw and shoulders and chest, a broad white devilish grin, and he’s hard in ... a way a baseball is hard under the scuffed leather. A seam runs across his nose and one cheekbone where somebody laid him a good one in a fight” (16). His physical description could be also interpreted as a way to represent some characteristics of his personality: his hair that needs a cut suggests that he does not care a lot about his appearance; his long red sideburns are a representation of his masculinity; his “broadness” refers to his strength and athletic physical condition; his “devilish grin” shows his cunning and naughtiness; his “hardness” suggests his toughness; and his scarf shows that he likes to fight or to go against the rules.

One could argue that both main characters, Nurse Ratched and McMurphy are power hungry, but while Nurse Ratched assumes the role of a totalitarian leader who wants others to submit to her wishes, McMurphy is the rebellious, defiant character who tries to challenge authority.

Nurse Ratched exercises near-total power over the patients in her care, making them follow the “ward policy,” utilizing the regulations to control even in the way they access basic human necessities. One instance of this occurs when one of the “the black boys,” the orderlies, after trying to explain to McMurphy why the toothpaste is locked in the cabinet, simply concludes that “it’s the ward policy, Mr. McMurphy, that’s the reason” (85). Another is when one of the black boys tells McMurphy that “it ain’t allowed for the help to eat with patients,” (93).

Nurse Ratched is also responsible for the patients’ access to medication, and it is clear that she uses the administration of medication as a means of controlling their lives. This is evident, for example, when she is calling for “medications” over a loudspeaker

and tutoring the other nurses; she sits behind a window that separates the nurse's station from the patients. She even arranges their pills in a highly ordered manner, ensuring that the patients are lined up at the window in the order she determines: first the Acutes, then the Chronicles, the Wheelers and finally Vegetables. All the patients have to follow this order and take their medication at their designated time. In the case of patient Mr. Taber, who refuses his medication, she says: "you can go, Mr. Taber, if you don't wish to take your medication orally," (35) there are other ways. In another scene one of the black boys follows McMurphy with Vaseline and a thermometer. In extreme cases electroshock treatment is used and the patients are aware of this.

Through these means Nurse Ratched is able to manipulate the patients and control them to the point that they never question her authority. They follow her orders and, with the exception of McMurphy and the Chief, they believe that her procedures are the best for them. They even help her with her job by writing in her log book what they hear from other patients: "If you hear a friend say something during the course of your everyday conversation," she tells them, "then list it in the log book for the staff to see. It's not, as the movies call it, "squealing," it's helping your fellow" (48).

Nurse Ratched is actually conceived by the patients as a mother. The man in charge of Public Relation explains to the ladies' club: "She's girls, just like a mother. Not that I mean age, but you girls understand..." (37) and Cheswick refers to the ward as the "Ol' Mother Ratched's Therapeutic Nursery," (107).

McMurphy rejects these characterizations and calls Nurse Ratched a "ball-cutter." He says, "She may be a mother, but she's as a damn barn and tough as knife metal." (57) From the moment he enters the ward, McMurphy tries to defy Nurse Ratched's power. As Bromden describes it: "He's no ordinary Admission. I don't hear him slide scared along the wall, and when they tell him about the

shower he don't just submit with a weak little yes, he tells them right back in a loud, brassy voice that he's already plenty damn clean, thank you" (15). It takes the staff a while to make McMurphy wear the green uniform that all patients must wear and understand the rules.

McMurphy immediately shows that he can affect the application and hierarchy of order in the ward. For example, he starts talking with all the patients, going from one side to another, even though the policy states patients must remain separated according to category (Acutes, Chronics, etc.). Not only does he try to talk to them, he also wants them to participate equally in ward activities, independent of the "label" they have been given. For example, when he needs more votes in order to watch The World Series on TV, he tries to convince some of the chronic patients to put their hand up.

Indeed, it is McMurphy who also affects the therapeutic sections when he proposes to the other patients to vote during these sessions, as shown when McMurphy and nurse Ratched are discussing it:

"remember that vote we had a day or so back –about TV time? Well, today's Friday and I thought I might just bring it up again, just to see if anybody else has picked up a little guts."

"Mr. McMurphy, the purpose of this meeting is therapy, group therapy, and I'm not certain these pretty grievances–"

"Yeah, yeah, the hell with that..." (123)

In addition, he influences order when trying to reach his goals, regardless of the consequences. One example of this is when he is looking for toothpaste and after realizing it was locked up, he takes soap powder from one of the black boys' cans and brushes his teeth with it; or when he talks to the doctor about the loud music in the dayroom and asks him to turn the volume down, going against Nurse Ratched's wishes.

He also contravenes the system when he proposes gambling for money and teaches other patients how to do it. This happens even when the Nurse Ratched suspects it. Bromden narrates: “She’s been watching him play poker all morning and though she hasn’t seen any money pass hands she suspects he’s not exactly the type that is going to be happy with the ward rule of gambling for matches only” (43).

McMurphy proposes new activities that the patients enjoy, such as playing sports and using the tub room as a space without surveillance where they can interact freely and spontaneously. He also takes them on an excursion and engages in spontaneous games and jokes.

In the end he becomes the leader of the entire group and “the other Acutes were beginning to follow his lead. Harding began flirting with all the student nurses, and Billy Bibbit completely quit writing what he used to call his ‘observations’ in the log book” (177). McMurphy makes them feel more secure and shows them that they could have control over themselves and their environment. Even more so when he discovers that “there are only a few men on the ward who *are committed*,” (167) like Scanlon, himself and some of the Chronics; the other patients, most of McMurphy’s friends, are in that place voluntarily. McMurphy knows he could help them somehow, and he actually does it with Chief Bromden, Billy and George.

Chief Bromden feels that he is very small, and that everyone is bigger than him; which means that he considers himself a weak person, without importance, and rejected by society; and all his fears push him to be stuck in that point. McMurphy discovers that Bromden wants to change this when the two of them talk for the first time. So McMurphy proposes him a deal: “I want to know can you *promise* to lift it if I get you big as you used to be? You promise me that, and you not only get my special body-bildin’ course for nothing but you get yourself a ten-buck fisih’ trip, *free!*” (p. 189).

Thus, McMurphy starts motivating him. By inviting him to participate in his plans, talking to him, and teaching some “life lessons,” he helps Bromden to rediscover his potential, the person he really is and his lust for life. Ultimately Bromden finally succeeds in doing so, when he says: “I wanted to be myself. I caught a look at myself in the mirror. He’d done what he said; my arms were big again, big as they were back in high school, back at the village, and my chest and shoulders were broad and hard.” (p. 226).

The character of Billy is a man in his thirties, and the son of a nurse who works in the same ward, and who happens to be one of Nurse Ratched’s close friends. Billy’s mother is in complete control of his life. Every time Billy tells her about his dreams of being independent, going to college or looking for a wife, his mother tells him: “you still have scads of time for things like that.” (p.247), and represses him. As such, he is a person who, “in spite of him having wrinkles in his face and specks of gray in his hair, he still looked like a kid” (p. 246), because everyone around him, not only his mother, has treated him in that way throughout his entire life. He is shy, nervous and with a huge lack of self-confidence; a problem that was shown by the fact that he stutters when he talks. McMurphy questions why he is voluntarily in the ward: “You’re just a young guy! You oughta be out running around in a convertible, bird-dogging girls. All of this.” (p. 167). But McMurphy finds himself unable to help him until the moment he realizes that Billy likes his friend Candy (a prostitute he has invited on the fishing trip), and he starts encouraging him to meet her again. Meanwhile he teaches Billy how to dance, sets him up on a date with Candy, gives him some vitamins to help him prepare for her and helps him gain some confidence with his comments such as: “I’ll tell you what: I got five dollars here says you burn that woman down; all right?” (p.249).

George, a “big toothless knotty old Swede the black boys called Rub-a-dub George, because of his thing about sanitation,” (193) besides being terrified of getting dirty; is a man with twenty-five years of experience working in the fishing industry, who McMurphy needs for the fishing trip. In the beginning, George had not signed up on the list, because he has a phobia of uncleanness. As he says: “Those boats awful *dirty* any more –everything *awful* dirty” (194). But McMurphy is able to convince him by giving him the certitude that there would be good conditions and emphasizing his importance for the group: “You won’t get dirty, George, ‘cause you’ll be the captain. Won’t even have to bait a hook; just be our captain and give orders to us dumb landlubbers – how’s that strike you?” (194) Finally, as the captain, George does such a good job that he is able to save their lives at the crucial moment when the weather conditions become too rough out at sea.

Harding is described as an attractive “flat, nervous man,” with “wide, thin shoulders and he curves them in around his chest when he’s trying to hide inside himself.” As he “he has a paper that says he graduated from college,” he is “the president of the Patient’s Council,” (23) the reason why he is considered the leader of the patients before McMurphy arrives. From his discourse, it is possible to deduce that he is an intelligent man, with a very critical point of view about different subjects. What surprises McMurphy is the fact that he is also a voluntary in patient the ward, because he has a conflict with his wife and he feels that he is not able to be out of the ward facing her and their relationship. At the beginning Harding believes that he has to be in the ward because he needs the help he gets in there and he does not even consider the possibility of leaving that place. McMurphy constantly talks to Harding and makes him reflect about the inefficiency of the therapies he receives in the ward, the skills he has and the tools he can use in order to overcome any situation he could face back in the

society. He also shows him that being ready to be out of the ward is just a decision he can make and at the end Harding is able to say:

“I’ll be ready in a few weeks. But I want to do it on my own, by myself, right out that front door, with all the traditional red tape and complications. I want my wife to be here in a car at a certain time to pick me up. I want them to know I was *able* to do it that way.” (257)

However, Nurse Ratched also takes advantage of her position of power, as the therapist, and tries to stop that huge influence McMurphy has on them by showing them the motives of McMurphy to do all that he does:

“Look at some of these *gifts*, as devoted fans of his might call them. First, there was the gift of the tub room. Was that actually his to give? Did he lose anything by acquiring it as a gambling casino? On the other hand, how much do you suppose he made in the short time he was croupier of his little Monte Carlo here on the ward? How much did you lose ... I think you all have some idea what your personal losses were, but do you know what his total winnings came to?” (222)

And even when she starts making the patients mistrust McMurphy for a while, he does something “heroic”. This happens when the Nurse decides to take the patients to a “cautionary cleansing” after their trip out of the ward. A procedure that Bromden explains: “We lined up nude against the tile, and there one black boy came, a black plastic tube in his hand, squirting a stinking salve an’ bend over an’ spread your cheeks<sup>2</sup>!” (227). In general, the patients accept the procedure and face it in a funny way, by making jokes; except from George, who “never used soap when he showered [and] wouldn’t even let somebody hand him a towel to dry himself with,” (228); that is to say,

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<sup>2</sup> It is to say, their buttocks.

a patient that would never accept that cautionary cleansing. The black boys oblige George to do it, while he suffers to avoid it. Then, McMurphy defends George and starts a fight in order to stop them. With this, McMurphy gets again the support of the other patients for his courage and camaraderie. Because of his actions, Nurse Ratched punishes him with electroshocks and isolation from the others. A fact that helps him to become even a stronger figure for the others, a kind of “legendary character,” whose stories start spreading in the whole ward. As it is shown with one of the questions they ask Bromden once he is back from the place McMurphy is treated:

“Was it true, what was being rumored over at the gym, that they’d been hitting him every day with EST and he was shrugging it off like water, makin’ book with the technicians on how he could keep his eyes open after the poles touched.” (243)

In order to better understand the roles they assume and the dynamics that power implies, it is important to propose a definition of the concept of order. Foucault (1990: 94) defines power as “something that is acquired, seized, or shared; something that one holds onto or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations.”

Based on Foucault’s definition, Nurse Ratched is a character who has acquired power and held power until McMurphy arrives on the scene and begins to threaten it. Her power is evident, even over doctors and other male characters, as Harding says: “the doctor doesn’t hold the power of hiring and firing. That power goes to the supervisor, and the supervisor is a woman, a dear old friend of Miss Ratched’s; they were Army nurses together in the thirties. We are victims of a matriarchy here, my friend, and the doctor is just as helpless against it as we are” (59).

McMurphy's case is different, as he has a pursuit to conquer "a position of respect" inside the ward, which is not necessarily as "powerful" as its connotation, but at least he wants to gain some kind of "leadership." In his case, he acquires it by gaining trust and support from the other patients. From the beginning he wants to become "the biggest loony" in the place, which would be considered a powerful position among the patients, as they are precisely psychiatric patients, or "loony" people. He also demonstrated the strength needed to fight for and obtain his goals: watching the TV series, changing the rules of the playing space, going to a fishing trip, and bringing prostitutes inside the ward, etc.

However, it is important to take into account that the first power relationship McMurphy and Ratched have is nurse versus patient. This generates a great deal of friction, hostility and, aggressive situations. In that sense, Ratched uses all her resources to control McMurphy as a patient and McMurphy defeats those controls with his attitudes.

Ratched, as a psychiatric nurse, has a more powerful role than the one assumed for a general care nurse. Not only does she have the responsibility to organize the conditions of the ward and providing psychiatric medication, physical care, and support; but also, she is in charge of leading the therapeutic sessions of the patients. It is important to clarify that this responsibility should be assumed by a psychiatrist, but the psychiatrist of this ward is subordinate to her during the sessions. With this, her power over patients is increased, as Harding says: "She's impregnable herself, and with the element of time working for her she eventually gets inside everyone. That's why the hospital regards her as its top nurse and grants her so much authority; she's a master of forcing the trembling libido out into the open." (68)

Another power relationship which is developed in the novel could be called “the locked-up man versus the free woman.” McMurphy arrives at the ward because he “performed violent acts,” or “planned violent acts,” as the staff suggests, “for the sole purpose of getting away from the work farm and into the comparative luxury” (133) of that ward. As he explains to the other patients: “I’m in this place because that’s the way I planned it, pure and simple, because it’s better place than a work farm. As near as I can tell I’m no loony, or never knew it if I was” (69). In fact, McMurphy considers that being in the ward is much better than going to jail, but once he talks to the lifeguard that takes care of the patients at the swimming pool, he discovers that “for one thing, being committed ain’t like being sentenced,” as the lifeguard explains: “You’re sentenced in a jail, and you got a date ahead of you when you know you’re gonna be turned loose,” (147). That is how McMurphy depends on doctors’ considerations for him to be released from the ward, and it is actually Nurse Ratched who has the final word. McMurphy gets angry at the other patients for not warning him: “Why didn’t you tell me she could keep me committed in here till she’s good and ready to turn me loose?” (166).

Nurse Ratched, on the other hand, is a free woman. She is able to go out of the ward and return at the moment she has her shift. Besides, she has a comfortable position. She is the boss, and she has a staff to obey all her orders.

That difference is another trigger for certain reactions Ratched and McMurphy have: While Ratched takes advantage of her comfortable position to restrict the little freedom the patients have, McMurphy reacts aggressively every time she does it. An example of that is when Nurse Ratched imposes “certain rules and restrictions,” with the excuse that they imply “a great deal of thought about their therapeutic value;” (171) and McMurphy defiantly reacts against them. She starts giving them a small number of

cigarettes so that they stop gambling for getting them and she takes away “the privilege of the tub room” that they use for “card games during the day” (171). McMurphy reacts the following way:

“He stopped in front of her window and he said in the slowest, deepest drawl how he figured he could use one of the smokes he bought this mornin’, then ran his hand through the glass.

The glass came apart like water splashing, and the nurse threw her hands to her ears. He got one of the cartons of cigarettes with his name on it and took out a pack, then put it back and turned to where the Big Nurse was sitting like a chalk statue.” (172)

Another important aspect about power is that it needs a control center or an operative base, which is the place where the totalitarian leader (Nurse Ratched in the novel) feels secure and monitors his or her control procedures. From her position of power in her office behind a window, she operates what Bromden calls “The Combine,” all the machinery of power that handles everything in the ward: “She’ll go winning, just like the Combine, because she has all the power of the Combine behind her. She don’t lose on her losses, but she wins ours... Nobody can help that” (101).

Both Bromden and McMurphy discover that “power control center” but in different ways. Bromden expresses his perceptions of it by talking about his feelings and fears and by descriptions with very rich images and symbols; while McMurphy shows the others how the nurse operates controls over them all.

Bromden relates power to a fog machine: “She’s got the fog machine switched on, and it’s rolling in so fast I can’t see a thing but her face, rolling thicker and thicker, and I feel as hopeless and dead as I felt happy a minute ago” (101). This is the way he perceives such power, as thick as fog that does not allow one to see something different

than the person who controls it. He believes it is so strong that people become blind, their memory affected and it pushes them to get lost in it. He adds, "I believe the fog affects their memory some way it doesn't affect mine. Even McMurphy doesn't seem to know he's been fogged in" (104). However, he explains that there are two possibilities for a person that is "being fogged," or affected by a controlling person: he or she can identify what is happening in this kind of situations or, he or she can ignore it and get lost inside of power: "You had a choice: you could either strain and look at things that appeared in front of you in the fog, painful as it might be, or you could relax and lose yourself" (117).

McMurphy, on the other hand, is less afraid and passive. He is on a mission to discover and disclose that Nurse Ratched only wants to control other people and that is why the patients can't "be free," rehabilitated, or leave the asylum for good. He takes advantage of the moments when Nurse Ratched manages power in a very negative way marshalling evidence to the other patients so they react in a certain way. For example, when the patients had the vote process to watch the World Series on TV, they were in a majority but the nurse still decided to defeat the vote without giving second or third chances, using the excuse that McMurphy took too much time to get the last vote he needed. It was so apparent to the patients that Nurse Ratched's procedure was unfair that they ended up joining McMurphy in front of the blank TV: "And we're all sitting there lined up in front of that blanked-out TV set, watching the gray screen just like we could see the baseball game clear as day, and she's ranting and screaming behind us" (128).

In this way and by doing other kind of actions, McMurphy keeps on showing that the Combine has not an unbreakable power, it also has its weaknesses. As Bromden discovers the night of the party inside the ward:

“Drunk and running and laughing and carrying on with women  
square in the center of the Combine’s most powerful stronghold! ...  
We had just unlocked a window and let it in like you let in the fresh  
air. Maybe the Combine wasn’t all-powerful. What was to stop us  
from doing it again, now that we saw we could? Or keep us from  
doing other things we wanted?” (255).

The setting also reveals certain dynamics of power that were present at that time and in that place. The novel is set in the early 1960’s, during a time when the methods to help psychiatric patients had a lot of influence from EST (electroshock treatments), lobotomy, and similar types of psychosurgeries that despite the start of criticism against them, were still practiced in some cases. This psychiatric ward is a place that, in order to operate well, requires the presence of authority figures to watch over the execution and management of the methods to help psychiatric patients overcome their symptoms.

In his book *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud explains that the function (task) of civilization is established when: “man’s self-regard, seriously menaced, calls for consolation; life and the universe must be robbed of their terrors; moreover his curiosity, moved, it is true, by the strongest practical interest, demands an answer.” (1927: 16). He goes on to explain that, in order to get over anxiety, feel less defenceless, helplessly paralyzed, and able at least to react; it is necessary to take a first step called “the humanization of nature,” which is the recognition of those forces of human nature in order to relate to them and ultimately influence them.

In this sense, the novel uses the representation of the modern society as a machinery, described by Chief Bromden in his visions as: “a huge room of endless machines stretching clear out of sight, swarming with sweating, shirtless men running up and down catwalks, faces black, and dreamy in firelight thrown from a hundred blast

furnaces” (79). It is also a representation of a society or system and its way to gain control of and suppress individuality and natural impulses by mechanisms and machines.

The hospital in this context is the representation of society: the aides and Nurse Ratched are described as being made of motley machine parts. Bromden realizes that the hospital treats human beings in an unnatural fashion. Also of significance is Bromden’s background. As the son of an Indian chief, he is described as “a combination of pure, natural individuality, and a spirit almost completely subverted by mechanized society.”

In this context, Nurse Ratched has absolute authority, but she also needs to rely on other people to whom she can delegate some responsibilities. Within this dynamic, her staff plays an important role in maintaining the power structure. This kind of delegation happens when Nurse Ratched, as a powerful agent, subordinates the right to manage the procedures and rules of the hospital. Delegation of power requires that those who are in positions of authority, as well as their subordinates, understand and know how to handle the relations of power.

In this sense, Nurse Ratched takes time to groom her staff, as she needs hateful people to work with her. She acquires them “after more years of testing and rejecting thousands ... They come ... hating her chalk doll whiteness from the first look they get. She appraises them and their hate for a month or so, then lets them go because they don’t hate enough” (31). Until she finally finds her “three daytime black boys,” who are “...sulky and hating everything, the time of day, the place they’re at here, the people they got to work around” (9). They are the ones who “hated enough” to be able to do the job by projecting their hatred towards the patients and in that way controlling them.

She also has some assistant nurses, who are described as weak people and who are always depending on the instructions Nurse Ratched gives them. Finally, she counts on the presence of a doctor, who also has undergone a “selection process,” which was carried out when other doctors who couldn’t stand the pressure ended up leaving the ward, and whose authority is notably inferior to Nurse Ratched’s, as Harding says: “Doctor Spivey... is exactly like the rest of us, McMurphy, completely conscious of his inadequacy. He’s frightened, desperate, ineffectual little rabbit, totally incapable of running this ward without Miss Ratched’s help, and he knows it” (59).

To this point, it is useful to be reminded of Foucault’s definition (1990) of power relationships. He sees them as something not so different from other types of relationships (economic, academic or sexual relations), because they are the immediate consequences of the divisions, disequilibriums, and inequalities that happen. Following Foucault’s definition, it is possible to find how his views on power relationships do not merely represent a dynamic of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a “directly productive role, wherever they come into play” (94). In other words, relations of power become “a capability of getting others to do something they would not otherwise do” (94).

It is possible to see, in many parts of the novel, that Nurse Ratched knows how to take advantage of that “directly productive role.” For example, in the therapeutic sessions when the patients have to follow the dynamic that is led by the “Big Nurse,” the result is that they all go against their own “friends.” McMurphy defines this as a “pecking party” where “The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to *peckin’* at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood, and bones and feathers” (55).

This dynamic of power relationships could be also analyzed in the context of the relationship between power and civilization. On this topic, Freud (1927) points out that when man has to live inside a civilization, he has to face the fact that his imperfections push him to live a life full of privations (instinctual renunciation) and cultural prescriptions (coercion). As a consequence, his life becomes very difficult to stand and finally he develops a corresponding degree of resistance to the regulations of civilization and of hostility to it”.

In Kesey’s novel, this “resistance to regulations” can be seen not only in McMurphy, but also in Bromden. He resists the ward’s regulations in many ways: he shows himself as a deaf mute, he is constantly involved in hallucinations that show the ward as a *combine* and the staff as killer machines and, he has inner monologues where he’s always reacting against domination.

It is evident that when Bromden pretends to be a mute-deaf, he’s trying to resist being submitted to impositions of power, due to the fact that, by doing this, he closes his perception channels to the outside world and becomes impossible to communicate with. His case is even stronger because he’s also trying to be perceived as person without many possibilities and that is the way other people see him. Billy defines him the following way: “His n-n-name is Bromden. Chief Bromden. Everybody calls him Chief Buh-Broom, though, because the aides have him sweeping a l-large part of the time. There’s not m-much else he can so, I guess. He’s deaf” (26).

Another important contrast between McMurphy and Ratched is their ideas about three behaviors: sexuality, laughter, and socializing; which also determine the way they affect other patients in the ward.

For McMurphy sexuality is a basic human need that he begins to experience from a very early age. As he narrates to his friends: “The first girl ever drug me to bed

wore that very same dress. I was about ten and she was probably less, and at the time a lay seemed like such a big deal” (217). From then on, he continues having different sexual experiences: he becomes, as he denominates himself, a “dedicated lover.” He faces one “arrest for rape” (44) according to his records and he keeps on fiddling with a deck of cards with images of naked women. Not only does he have prostitute friends but he manages to have sex during the fishing trip with one of them. He talks about his sexual tendencies openly with his friends, as when he says: “my fuckin’ tendencies? ... All thet whambam-thank-you-ma’am. Yeah, that whambam, that’s probably what makes me a rabbit” (63). As he gives a lot of importance to this, he encourages people to not deny their sexuality and to assume it as something natural. This is how McMurphy not only helps Billy have his sexual date with Candy, but also convinces Mr. Turkle, the aide responsible for the night shift on the ward, to be an accomplice. He also finds his ways to “maneuver” the doctor for him to order “subscriptions to *Playboy* and *Nugget* and *Man* and getting rid of all the old *McCall’s*” (220), while Nurse Ratched considers it “the *dirt* that had been brought into the hospital” and that which is responsible for the “pathetic state the ward had allowed itself to fall into” (221).

As such, Ratched is the one who wants the patients to be sexually repressed. McMurphy describes her as a ‘ball-cutter’, that is to say, a person who practices castration: “Right at your balls. No, that nurse ain’t some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter” (57). This term is also related to repression of sexual impulses in Freudian psychological theories. In fact, she insinuates that the patients are not able to have sex and makes them feel guilty when they have it. The most evident case is when she discovers that Billy has had sex with Candy, an action that was therapeutic for him as it is obvious that one of the main causes of his problems was the sexual repression imposed by his mother. After having sex, he seems to be very

confident and stops stuttering for first time in all those years he had been in the ward, and probably in his life. But Nurse Ratched does not pay attention to the advantages of the fact, she reacts by saying: “Oh, Billy Billy Billy –I’m so ashamed for you;” (263) in a very extreme way, as if having sex were the worst thing a person could do: “she was so disappointed she might break down and cry” (263). She continues, not only judging his actions, but also his partner, when she calls her: “A woman like this. A cheap! Low! Painted” (263), trying to make him to feel guilty. And far from being the professional that helps her patient, she starts attacking and destroying him as much as she can. So, in order to break Billy down, she continues threatening him with his most sensitive topic, his mother:

“Mrs. Bibbit’s always been so proud of your discretion. I know she has. This is going to disturb her terribly. You know how she is when she gets disturbed, Billy; you know how ill the poor woman can become. She’s ’ery sensitive. Especially concerning her son. She always spoke so proudly of you.” (264)

However, despite their different points of view about sexuality and their power struggle, it seems that McMurphy and Ratched develop a sort of physical attraction or sexual curiosity. As the ancient Greeks’ proposals about magnetic interactions says that "opposites attract," there are some indicators about it in some parts of the story. “He finally winks at the nurse and shrugs and unwraps the towel, drapes it over her shoulder like she was a wooden rack. I see he had his shorts on under the towel all along. I think for a fact that she’d rather he’d of been stark naked under that towel than in those shorts” (90). McMurphy intimidates her: “When he tips his head back and winks at her she gives that little sideways jerk of her head.” (127)

In regard to laughter, McMurphy realizes that the patients don't laugh, which he sees as indication that they don't feel themselves anymore: "the rest are even scared to open up and laugh. You know, that's the first thing that got me about this place, that there wasn't anybody laughing. I haven't heard a real laugh since I came through that door, do you know that? Man, when you lose your laugh you lose your *footing*" (65). He extrapolates that controlling laughter is a way to manipulate others and to show them your superiority, in this specific case, it is about the control of a woman over a man. He says that a man can't let a woman "whup him down till he can't laugh anymore, and he loses one of the biggest edges he's got on his side. First thing you know he'll begin to think she's tougher than he is" (65). He wanted the other patients to discover that "he's safe as long as he can laugh" (104) because he knows "you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy" (212). That is why since the beginning: "he was joking and talking and trying to get the players to laugh along with him. But they were all afraid to loosen up" (74). Laughter for him, is also a representation of self-confidence and strength, as Bromden says:

"I think McMurphy knew better than we did that our tough looks were all show, because he still wasn't able to get a real laugh out of anybody. Maybe he couldn't understand why we weren't able to laugh yet, but he knew you can't really be strong until you see a funny side to things. In fact, he worked so hard of pointing out the funny side of things that I was wondering a little if maybe he was blind to the other side, if maybe he wasn't able to see what it was that parched laughter deep inside your stomach." (203)

Apart from being a powerful weapon that McMurphy is always promoting inside the ward, laughter for him has another connotation, as he is also trying to show it is something natural for human beings. And that it is something the ward tries to suppress in patients with all its restrictions, and by the example given by Nurse Ratched, who always has the “same doll smile crimped between her chin and her nose and that same calm whirl coming from her eyes, but down inside of her she’s tense as steel” (30). McMurphy tries to show that laughter is something that every person needs to express in order to be fine, in order to feel alive. The patients start discovering that when McMurphy arrives on the ward, but they really feel it when they set that laughter free out of the ward on the fishing trip, as Bromden narrates: “I could look down and see myself and the rest of the guys . . . see McMurphy surrounded by his dozen people, and watch them, us, singing a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, father and father, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, in wave after wave after wave.” (212). There are actually many theories about the therapeutic power of laughter, so McMurphy, without knowing them, is again helping patients with their recovery somehow. Even more than what Ratched does by promoting the opposite.

Socializing is also assumed in a very different way. On one hand, McMurphy promotes the conformation of different kinds of groups: a team for practicing basketball, a group of gamblers for playing cards, a crew for a fishing trip, and a kind of club whose meetings are held in the tub room. This is part of his nature, as he is the kind of person that likes to talk and make friends everywhere he goes. He also shares his life as if he were an open book; not afraid to be read or judged. He is constantly telling his stories for the others to see what they are missing if they decide to continue living in the ward isolated from the outside world: “While his relaxed, good-natured voice doled out his life for us to live, a rollicking past full of kid fun and drinking buddies and loving

women and barroom battles over meager honors—for all of us to dream ourselves into” (218). Besides, he teaches the other patients the importance of being a supportive group of friends that help each other, due to the fact that they are living in the same place and sharing the same conditions. He makes them reflect about the huge mistake they make when “they spy on each other,” (19) and write on Ratched’s log book what they see, just looking for an individual benefit, as “the guy that wrote the piece of information in the log book, he gets a star by his name on the roll and gets to sleep late the next day” (19).

These kinds of actions are the ones that Nurse Ratched promotes. As for her, the condition of her patients affects their capability to socialize beyond their therapeutic group sessions and implies a continuous surveillance for them, such as the rule “that men had to be together in therapeutic groups of eight whenever they went somewhere” (220). In addition, their mental condition, according to Nurse Ratched, makes them vulnerable to be manipulated and that is why she goes against any “apparently group idea” they defend, because she knows McMurphy is behind it. And then, she actually takes advantage of that vulnerability to be manipulated in different opportunities. One of them is when she tries to scare them about going to the fishing trip, with “her stories of how rough the sea’d been lately and how many boats’d sunk” (193). And the other one is when she takes advantage of their therapeutic sessions to question McMurphy’s actions and tries to make them mistrust him.

However, the fact that their condition does not impede them from leaving the ward, enjoy the open space, and behave without causing any trouble to other people, shows that they do not need to be isolated in a ward all the time as if they were in a prison. And the fact that after the trip they felt happier, more secure, and dynamic is a proof of the therapeutic benefits of it. This also brings the additional benefit of making the therapist better understand his or her patients and finding some other tools that could

help them with their problems. This happens with “the doctor, who was much closer to the patients since the fishing trip.” (220)

Additionally, the participation of the patients in those groups that are promoted and conformed by McMurphy in the ward, seems to bring some benefits. The doctor underlines this when he says: “A number of players, Miss Ratched, have shown marked progress since that basketball team was organized; I think it has proven its therapeutic value” (175).

As it is possible to deduce from this analysis, the power struggle between Ratched and McMurphy is also assumed as a challenge or a competition. From the beginning, McMurphy starts asking for information about her and, after deciding that he has “never seen a woman” who “was more man than” him (68), traces his goal by making a gamble with the other patients. He proposes to them:

“Any of you sharpies here willing to take me five bucks that says that I can get the best of that woman before the week’s up without her getting the best of me? One week, and if I don’t have her to where she don’t know whether to shit or go blind, the bet is yours.” (68)

McMurphy wants to discover Nurse Ratched’s weaknesses and decides to beat her, but the other patients, doubting his skills, say: “She always wins, my friend, always!” (67) A situation that, far from pushing him back, motivates him to show they are mistaken. That way, he considers he wins a small battle every time she gets angry about one of his actions, or when he accomplishes one of his caprices. One of the first things he does is to take advantage of the time she is out to intimidate one of the nurses on the night shift. He notices this nurse is scared of him, as “she’s probably been warned about him by the Big Nurse,” (75) by telling her that she has a “reason to believe he is a sex maniac,” (75) as Bromden explains. He realizes “how she’s looking

so scared and big-eyed at him, so he sticks his head in the station door where she's issuing pills, and gives her a big friendly grin to get acquainted on" (76). This scares her so much, that she drops the water pitcher and one of the night pills she was giving to one of the patients. He catches the pill in the air and gives her back the water pitcher while she stands there, paralyzed and pale, as she thinks she is closed to getting raped by him. Then, she closes the door of the nurses' station and stops giving medication for that night. McMurphy keeps the pill as a prize for his small victory.

In this competition for power, it is possible to identify some tools or weapons that the opponents use and that can make them win or lose: being cunning, handling information, being strong and having a powerful position and becoming an important figure or symbol for the others.

About this first weapon, McMurphy knows how to use it very well for his own benefit. With it, he finds a way to get what he needs inside the ward, as Harding describes him: "He's making the most of his time in here. Don't ever be misled by his back-woodsy ways; he's a very sharp operator, level-headed as they come. You watch; everything he's done was done with reason" (224). His cunning gives him the possibility to put people to his side, reaching that even one of the most influential members of Ratched's medical staff, the doctor, helps him with his plans.

Ratched, on the other hand, is a woman who handles the information of the patients and, by doing that, she can have them in her hands. She uses her weapon not only in her therapeutic sessions but also at the moment she feels that she is being attacked. That is why, she uses the knowledge she has about the patients' vulnerability in order to try to force them to stop following McMurphy, and not being very successful in this endeavor. In extreme cases, she also uses the information she has from the

patients' condition records to make them feel weak, guilty, and less worthy than what they really are. She does this with Billy.

Not only does McMurphy use his physical strength to impose his wishes, be respected, and defend himself or his friends, but also he teaches the others how to do the same. As Bromden says: "He'd shown us what a little bravado and courage could accomplish, and we thought he'd taught us how to use it" (203). On the contrary, Ratched is not that physically strong. Actually, she always depends on her three black boys to protect her if something happens. If they are not around or if they decide not to help her, she is vulnerable. This is evident at the end of the story, when McMurphy becomes enraged at her for what happens to Billy, "smashed through that glass door ... ripped her uniform all the way down the front" (267) in order to strangle her.

Ratched's strength is more related to her position on the ward, and that's the weapon she uses to compete and even to win. She, for example, defeats McMurphy when she gives the order for his lobotomy:

"The ward door opened, and the black boys wheeled in this gurney with a chart at the bottom that said in heavy black letters, MCMURPHY, RANDLE P. POST-OPERATIVE. And below this was written in ink, LOBOTOMY." (269)

Nurse Ratched becomes a symbol of the whole system, controlling patients by utilizing antiquated psychological treatments, McMurphy is the only one who shows that "being humane" to such patients can be even more effective in the treatment of their mental disorders. The novel offers the possibility to reflect on the concept of power-submission in the context of mental "insanity" and "sanity". "Sanity" or "insanity" can be a label that appears when a person has right judgments or reasoning processes. A good example of this can be seen in the incident when McMurphy is

talking with Harding and the other patients about Nurse Ratched, they are expressing their points of view about her personality; then McMurphy concludes: “Damn it, Harding, I didn’t mean it like that. You ain’t crazy that way. I mean, hell, I been surprised how sane you guys all are. As near as I can tell you’re not any crazier than the average asshole on the street” (61). After a while, McMurphy also starts questioning the fact that most of the Acute patients are in a psychiatric ward voluntarily, without being insane; he said: “...how can you stand this place, can’t stand the nurse or anything about her, and all the time you ain’t committed. I can understand it with some old guys on the ward. They’re nuts. But you, you’re not exactly the everyday man on the street, but you’re not *nuts*.” (168)

All the time he talks to them and includes them in his plans, McMurphy is doing his best to show them that they are not “crazy” or insane as they are capable to go out without a lot of surveillance to the fishing trip and participate in those activities they are deprived of by being committed to the ward, such as boating fishing, drinking beer, and having a good time with other people around. Indeed, it is at the moment they are out of the ward when some of them start considering that they could be out of the ward again and take advantage of their condition. As Harding tells McMurphy: “Never before did I realize that mental illness could have the aspect of power”. He actually makes jokes about this:

“We can even have a lobby in Washington,” Harding was saying, “an organization NAAIP. Pressure groups. Big billboards along the highway showing a babbling schizophrenic running a wrecking machine, bold, red and green type: ‘Hire the Insane.’ We’ve got a rosy future, gentlemen.” (204)

On the other hand, McMurphy is also showing that a “sane” person is the one that is capable of being free and having control over his or her own life. That’s why he keeps on giving chances to the patients to be “free,” at least in some respects, and shows them that they could have control over themselves: Thanks to McMurphy, Bromden is able to realize that he is big and strong and that with those characteristics he is capable of escaping, when at the beginning he didn’t believe he was. In fact, at the end of the book he does it: “I ran across the grounds in the direction I remembered seeing the dog go, toward the highway. I remember I was taking huge strides as I ran, seeming to step and float a long ways before my next foot struck the earth. I felt I was flying” (272). Actually, these last words are the proof that he could finally feel free after all the oppression he felt inside the ward.

Nurse Ratched’s characteristics can be useful to demonstrate an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCD). This is due to the fact that she is a person who does not express her emotions openly and tends to calculate all her actions to the point of always looking for extreme perfection. She is someone who feels comfortable assuming power positions and who needs to impose order by doing her best to fight with those who go against it. With established habits or elements in her life, such as her impeccable uniform and always organized wicker bag. She maintains the same schedules with an exact precise time for every activity. With her very punctual and trained staff, her folders and very neat “glass nurses’ station”. Besides her enormous preoccupation for neatness, an aspect that is reflected in the appearance of “her ward,” as the Public Relation’s man expresses: “look around, ... isn’t it clean, so bright? This is Miss Ratched ... it’s *her* ward” (37). A preoccupation that also appears in her requirements to her staff, as one of the black boys comments: “We got a thing posted called a *Job* Description, say cleanliness is a *twenty-hour job!*” (183) Besides, she has a

compulsion to make lists, as when she posts “work assignments” on the bulletin board; and to organize things in a very scrupulous way, as when she “prepares a neat drug tray with pills arranged orderly,” (33), works with a ledger with the names and records of the patients listed alphabetically, and a basket with folders that contain ordered information of her patients.

Another indicator of her OCD is her necessity to eliminate everything that can make her seem vulnerable or sensitive. That way, she not only tries to neutralize her facial expressions and calculate her reactions, but also intensifies her power over other people. She utilizes this power as a way to compensate her hidden weakness, and that is her psychological defense mechanism. That is why she struggles so hard when something seems out of her control or beyond her understanding. Because if her power is defeated, she risks showing her vulnerability to other people, or breaking down like one of her patients.

Finally, if Nurse Ratched has a serious personality disorder, but is the person in charge of the place for treating mental disorders, the question is: is she the most adequate person to assume the role she has? And if all her actions are just an extension of her need to control everything outside as she is incapable of controlling herself inside: where then is her professionalism and authority to help her patients?

The fact that Nurse Ratched is described less than McMurphy is a way to portray her as less human than him. The personal information about her is not well detailed, not even her age. She is presented as “a middle-aged lady.” However it is possible to access almost all McMurphy’s personal information from his medical records, his conversations where he tells his stories of his past and the way the narrator talks about his actions. The way that the narrator describes their physical characteristics is also another way to humanize McMurphy and dehumanize Nurse Ratched. Nurse Ratched is

described as a calculating, mechanical, and emotionless woman, just the same as if she were a machine.

This idea is reinforced by the fact that McMurphy is an “open book” that people can easily read and interpret; he’s a real person with hopes and dreams, fears, and feelings, just as human as the rest of the patients. While Nurse Ratched is presented surrounded by a certain mist (as Bromden says), trying to hide herself; a character who so often appears and disappears and one who is there only to control and repress others; she herself is a contradiction in that she is a therapist, whilst also suffering from obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. The mere fact that they both have different natures, one humanistic and one mechanical, and one more real than the other, is another explanation of why they can never have a good relationship and why they are always in conflict, to the point of wanting to destroy each other all the time.

Now, the fact that Nurse Ratched is presented most of the time as a non-human character and that her most humanistic quality is that she suffers from OCD, something that questions her professionalism and the ethics of her job: how can a person with these characteristics analyze and treat other people? And, taking into account all of her failings, this question could be even greater: If a person like her cannot understand basic human needs such as sexuality, laughter, and socializing, how can she help others solve their problems? Maybe to try to understand the complexity of human behavior it is important to really live as a human with all those needs already mentioned. That is why McMurphy, without being an expert and in spite of his “personality problems,” is able to help them even more than Nurse Ratched can.

It is also possible to observe that those patients who are considered crazy or insane are just the reflection of the way society judges them: different, incomprehensible and “out of control.” As a matter of fact, the cases of “acute” patients in that psychiatric

ward are not serious enough for them to be committed. However they are still considered “nuts” and they are rejected by their own families so they are there voluntarily. Things of course would be different if they had been given the opportunity to receive alternative treatments in a more professional and effective way, rather than being locked away in a ward and being given the wrong types of treatment.

It is important to note that McMurphy and Nurse Ratched are the representatives of the health system as a whole and its treatments of psychiatric patients: McMurphy as the recipient of humanistic therapies, and Ratched of another type that goes against human rights, such using “treatments” such as psychosurgeries, electroshocks, isolation, and unprofessionally guided group sessions. It also questions the efficiency of those treatments; in the novel it shows that McMurphy is truly able to help the patients, whereas Nurse Ratched does not allow them to overcome their problems, and in some cases she actually conduces terrible break-downs that ultimately end in the demise of the patient (Billy’s and McMurphy’s ending).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the power struggle between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy is deeply rooted and contains different connotations that make it much stronger than merely a common conflict between a nurse and her patient.

One factor is the fact that the characters are completely different. Not only regarding their physical and psychological characteristics, but also in the way they are characterized. Nurse Ratched is described with general facts relating to her profession and suggestions of a non-human nature, while McMurphy is described in-depth, throughout the novel, becoming an “open book” with very human characteristics. One of their biggest differences is the way they live their lives in relation to sexuality, laughter, and socializing. As it has been analyzed in this essay, the characters’ ideas about these three behaviors, determine not only the decisions they make, but also the way they affect other patients in the ward.

Another determinant of their conflict is their position in relation to authority and due to it, the role they assume and defend in the ward. In this case, Nurse Ratched is the biggest figure of authority and that’s why she plays the role of a totalitarian leader. She does her best to have near-total power over everyone in the ward. She controls and manipulates patients, doctors, other nurses and even the directors of the ward, in order to make them do her bidding. McMurphy on the contrary, is totally against authority. He is the rebellious and defiant character who is always challenging anyone who tries to exert control over his life.

And the last factor is their different levels of facility to exercise power. Nurse Ratched is a character who has acquired power and held power inside the ward since the beginning of the story. She has her own “power control center” known as “The Combine” and her trained staff to follow her orders. On the other hand, McMurphy

arrives on the ward and begins to threaten the whole Combine but, as he is a new element, he has to achieve a position of respect. Besides, he has to deal with the fact that he is in disadvantage in relation to their power relationship of nurse versus patient and locked-up man versus free woman.

As a result, McMurphy and Nurse Ratched have to use different weapons and strategies in order to win and, in the middle of this battle, they have to face different consequences. Ratched mainly uses her handling of information and her powerful position; while McMurphy mainly uses his cunning, physical strength and his status as an important figure or symbol for the others.

As for the consequences, during the power struggle between these two characters, they not only affect the development of the events in the story, but also the ideas, decisions and behavior of other people around them in the ward.

For example, the patients used to consider Nurse Ratched as “a mother”, however they then start to discover her characteristic of a “balls-cutter”. McMurphy arrives on the ward as a “selfish unusual new patient”, but with time, he becomes, “a hero” who does his best to help others regardless of the consequences.

At the beginning, the patients are submissive and limited to the activities proposed by the staff of the ward. In contrast, under McMurphy’s leadership, they get involved in a variety of new activities, making them more active and less monotonous than what they used to be. This aspect is also directly related to their change of attitude about life, from fear and weakness, to happiness and strength.

As the patients are at the heart of the battle between Ratched and McMurphy struggle, they are forced to make decisions to support one side or another. In most cases, McMurphy’s side is victorious. This is a key example of how their behavior changes from the beginning of the story to the end. In general, they become more

rebellious and spontaneous, and happier than they were before. In that sense, McMurphy is also the one that is able to help them, while Nurse Ratched does not allow them to overcome their problems.

Not only do the patients show a transformation, but this is also true of Doctor Spivey. He begins as a subordinate of Nurse Ratched who follows instructions very carefully and never shows disagreement, in order to keep his job. Gradually he begins to help the patients with the plans that Ratched disagrees with and becomes much closer to them.

In conclusion, the power struggle between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy provides the “main column” of the story. It is a constant in the story from beginning to end. With the lobotomy that Ratched orders to be performed on McMurphy, she, in one sense, ends up victorious, since she has rendered him helpless and totally subdued. In another sense, McMurphy is the victor since he wins the hearts of the patients and, with his martyrdom, inspires and empowers them to seek their personal growth and freedom.

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