Don’t Fly Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

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Fifty-seven years after Ken Kesey’s fictional novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* sent shockwaves with its unsettling critique of authoritarian control over individuals, the infighting among literary critics remains unsettled: is the ending a triumph or a tragedy? The story chronicles antagonist Nurse Ratched’s abuses of her patients, protagonist Randall McMurphy’s efforts to liberate them by undermining her rule, and the final confrontation between the two that precipitates each other’s downfall. After the nurse’s command over the ward collapses, Chief Bromden, the story’s narrator, kills McMurphy out of mercy. Soon after, many of the patients leave the ward. To some readers, the empowered liberation of inmates and the fall of Nurse Ratched’s tyrannical regime are sufficient to declare the ending a triumph. To others, the more diabolical fallouts from the events render the story a tragedy: McMurphy’s scheme on behalf of Billy Bibbit backfires with the latter’s suicide, and McMurphy all but predestines his own lobotomy before being killed by one of his own men. In my opinion, what tips the scale towards tragedy is the larger truth revealed when we zoom out from the particular dynamics of the ward and see them through the wider lens of society and American history: the pervasive existence of oppressive systems that Bromden refers to as “The Combine.”

Those who view the novel as a triumph point to the emergence of self-confidence among the inmates who extricate themselves from Nurse Ratched’s oppression. After McMurphy’s ill-fated final scuffle with the nurse, Bromden reports that “Sefelt and Fredrickson signed out together Against Medical Advice, and two days later another three Acutes left” (275). Upbeat readers would argue that these patients’ departures represent redemption for McMurphy’s sacrifice. The defiance exhibited in leaving “Against Medical Advice” shows how far they have come. By the time Nurse Ratched recovers from the fight and returns to the ward, “Harding had even got the tub room back open and was in there dealing blackjack himself” (276). Those who argue for a triumphant ending say that by entering a previously restricted space, Harding enters a new emotional space where he can begin “dealing” his own fate. Indeed, when asked about his future plans, Harding says, "I want to do it on my own, by myself, right out that front door, with all the traditional red tape and complications" (265). Optimistic readers see his emphasis on “my own” and “by myself” as indicators of confidence that he previously lacked. A sense of self-assured urgency fills the ward.

Another argument advanced by those who frame the ending as a triumph point to the decline of Nurse Ratched’s authority through the efforts of McMurphy. During McMurphy’s final attack on the nurse, Bromden recalls that “the three black boys weren't going to do anything but stand and watch” (275). Those who see the story as a triumph see their “stand and watch” passiveness as an act of insubordination to the nurse’s command. Furthermore, Bromden later notes that she “jumped back two steps when we approached, and I thought for a second she might run” when he and Harding approached (276). Those with triumphant views note that the formerly iron-fisted maiden’s retreat is an about-face from earlier when the inmates were the ones retreating from confrontations. Bromden also observes that Nurse Ratched’s uniform “could no longer conceal the fact that she was a woman.” (276). For most of the story, she had been

portrayed as an inhuman agent of the system. Now, those who see the ending as triumphant argue that unmasking her more human features symbolically levels the earlier power asymmetry between her and the inmates. Was it “happily ever after”?

Not entirely. Those who view the ending of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* as a tragedy argue that Nurse Ratched is ultimately the real victor, having put McMurphy into an inhuman, vegetative state of submission through lobotomy. Upon seeing McMurphy’s post-surgical body, Bromden explains that McMurphy “wouldn’t have left something like that sit there in the day room with his name tacked on it for twenty or thirty years so the Big Nurse could use it as an example of what can happen if you buck the system” (278). Those who support the view of a tragic ending argue that Nurse Ratched wins by condemning McMurphy to live a crippled life for “twenty or thirty years” and using his lifeless body to intimidate the remaining inmates. Standing beside the body, Martini notes "there's nothin' in the face. Just like one of those store dummies" (278). Throughout the story, Nurse Ratched had dehumanized the Acutes in a variety of ways but had been unable to contain McMurphy. Pessimistic critics argue that by ultimately turning McMurphy into “one of those store dummies,” Nurse Ratched not only put him in line with the rest of her inmates but also rendered an intelligent man into a mannequin-like figure.

Readers who argue that Kesey’s novel is a tragedy also point to the Acutes’ development of destructive behaviors towards themselves and each other. Billy Bibbit, the most infantile of the inmates, is domineered not only by Nurse Ratched but also by his overbearing mother. After McMurphy empowers Billy by helping him lose his virginity, the nurse threatens to tell Billy’s mother about the incident. Thereafter, Nurse Ratched says that Billy “opened the doctor’s desk and found some instruments and cut his throat” (274). Critics point out that Billy previously failed to commit suicide by cutting his wrists but now succeeds in killing himself; that is hardly the outcome McMurphy had intended. That the self-harm happens in the office of a doctor, a profession which is part of a system that professes to “first do no harm,” only adds to the irony. Later, after McMurphy is lobotomized, Bromden kills him out of mercy. In recalling that night, Bromden explains "I lay there on top of the body for what seemed days. Until the thrashing stopped." (279). Critics who view the ending as a tragedy point out that Bromden, a beneficiary of McMurphy’s grooming, ends up serving as his murderer—the final executioner for a ruthless system. That the execution lasts for “what seemed days” reveals Bromden’s turmoil about his role in McMurphy’s destruction.

In the ongoing debate about whether *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is a tragedy or a triumph, I believe it is important to take a bird’s-eye perspective on the story, which reveals the disturbing reality that the Combine’s existence is not limited to the ward. During the trip to sea, Bromden notices a group of school children wearing “green corduroy pants and white shirts under green pullover sweaters” playing “crack-the-whip” and scaring “the same little kid, over and over” (206). Through Bromden’s observation that the kids’ uniforms match those worn by the Acutes, Kesey suggests that these school children are mirroring the same game of power being played inside the ward. That the bully and the bullied are wearing the same color also hints at the larger, tragic truth that systems often pit people against one another, even those who should be on the same team. The analogy alerts the reader to the reality that life inside the ward is a microcosm of the larger world. Bromden had learned a similar lesson while observing his father’s experience. In reflecting on how the Combine wears people down, Bromden recalls that his dad “fought it a

long time till my mother made him too little to fight anymore and he gave up" (188). The portrayal of a female figure, his mother, diminishing a man to the point of surrender parallels the depiction of Nurse Ratched's emasculation of inmates. That someone who is supposed to be on your side is deputized to carry out the "castration" adds a dash of salt to an already salty wound—another tragic illustration of the Combine playing out in everyday life.

Indeed, when viewed in this wider context of the overarching hegemony of institutions over people, the emergence of self-confidence among the inmates doesn't lead to true freedom. In the aftermath of McMurphy's final attack on Nurse Ratched, "Sefelt and Fredrickson signed out together Against Medical Advice, and two days later three Acutes left, and six more transferred to another ward." (275). While upbeat critics cite that some Acutes liberate themselves, the sad reality is that the majority of the patients end up in another ward. The numerical, impersonal description of the departures—which has all the flair of an accountant's spreadsheet—comes off as a dismissal of their humanity and a reinforcement of the sense of institutional supremacy. Even the named ones, Sefelt and Fredrickson, cannot seem to escape the truth: Harding says that "they've still got their problems, just like all of us. They're still sick men in a lot of ways" (265). Harding's claims that they're "just like us" and "still sick men" is a testament to the brutal reality that the patients' seeming growth in self-confidence may not translate into personal transformation. By suggesting that the inmates are merely running in place in a race to nowhere, Kesey conveys the tragic futility of fighting the establishment.

Furthermore, Nurse Ratched's downfall can be seen as a tragedy in a wider sense for humanity: she too is a victim, cast in the tragic role of an enforcement agent for the Combine, the real winner in this novel. By being pressed into uniformed service as a stock evil character, Nurse Ratched's humanity remains masked for most of the book. According to Bromden, she appears programmed to "sit in the center of this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend her network with mechanical insect skill" (25-26). Bromden's characterization of Nurse Ratched as a "robot" and an "insect" establishes her as an inhuman monstrosity. Yet, after McMurphy's final attack, Kesey's portrayal of her is very human. Bromden notes "her face was bloated blue and out of shape on one side, closing one eye completely" and that her new uniform "could no longer conceal the fact that she was a woman" (276). In contrast to the earlier characterizations, the features cited—the face, the eye, and the throat—are now anatomic rather than industrial. The reveal that "she was a woman" is a moment of awakening for the reader that she is merely a human pawn in the larger game—a servant of a system that puts her at odds against fellow humans, allowing the machine to win the match yet again. As a tragedy, Kesey nails it on the head.

Therein lies the most haunting element of Kesey's narrative: each triumph over tragedy is nested in a larger tragedy. In the context of the struggle of individuals against institutions, the defeat of Nurse Ratched turns out to be self-defeating; taking down an agent of the Combine while leaving two men dead and six transferred to another part of the coop is hardly a coup. Furthermore, any feelings of Bromden's heroic return to his homeland are muted by the larger tragedy of Native American history within the American Dream. Bromden's speechlessness is a far cry from the cries of Native American leaders whose speeches rallied a confederacy of tribes to rise up against abusive colonists. Yet, the Native Americans' former fight to protect sacred territory is a faded glory, replaced by today's fight to build more casinos on desecrated land. Similarly, the

former fervor of America's resistance against mind-control, led by long-haired revolutionaries of Kesey's era, has been cut back in modern times. While mindless cat videos and other forms of digital self-lobotomies assault our forebrains, our lives today are more than ever influenced by powerful economic and political institutions. To miss that recurring tragedy is to let the larger message of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* fly over your head.