

PAPER TOPICS

What kind of roles do women play in this story; how are they portrayed? We seem to have only two types of women here – “ball-cutters,” like Ratched and Harding’s wife and Bromden’s mother, or whores, who are relatively submissive, whose main purpose seems to be giving pleasure to men. But Kesey’s intention here is not a sexist agenda. I would suggest that this book is primarily written on a mythic level, not a realistic one. The huge polarities between good and evil, between mechanical and natural, between civilized and wild, between male and female, are very clearly delineated in a way that they are not in the real world. In this mythic system, masculinity is associated with nature, spontaneity, rebellion against the socialized influences of the Combine. And mythically, women tend to be forces for order, fertility, the family unit, continuation of the status quo. Kesey deliberately invokes the spirit of the other great mythic struggle between good and evil by describing McMurphy a couple of times in his white whale boxer shorts, and making the obvious connection to Herman Melville’s epic and mythic novel about good and evil, *Moby-Dick*. And in the film version of this novel directed by Milos Forman, Ratched has an unusual hairdo. If you look up **Images** on Google of “Nurse Ratched”, she has what look like, from some angles, horns that are suggestive of the devil. Clearly, she is a symbol for a number of social evils.

And the reference to the whale and to *Moby Dick* is also related to the water imagery we might become aware of here – the showers, the pool where Cheswick drowns, the fishing trip, the tub room where they play cards, even McMurphy’s job of cleaning the latrines.

We also see a fair amount of religious imagery. When they are going on the fishing trip, Ellis tells Billy to be a fisher of men, referring to the words of Christ. In Matthew, chapter 4, verse 19, Jesus comes upon Peter and his brother Andrew, casting their nets into the sea, and says to

them, "Follow, and I will make you fishers of men." The apostles, then, become his followers so they can continue to spread the word of God. Like Jesus does, McMurphy tests them on that trip, teaching them to take care of themselves when he is gone. Some other obvious ones include McMurphy on the electro shock table, with his arms outstretched, asking the attendant if he gets a crown of thorns. When Bromden and McMurphy are (p. 264) up on the disturbed ward, one of the patients says to McMurphy, "I wash my hands of the whole deal" which may remind us of what Pontius Pilate said regarding the fate of his prisoner, Jesus. And McMurphy may be seen as a Christ figure on a certain level, in that he sacrifices everything, even his life, for his friends, for the greater good.

On p. 304, Ratched accuses McMurphy of playing God after Billy Bibbitt kills himself, and Bromden notes on the same page that "It was OUR need that was making him do this," again suggesting that McMurphy is deliberately sacrificing himself for them.

And when Bromden finally breaks the window, Kesey says, p. 310, "The glass splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth," a suggestion of Bromden's rebirth. And his recovery is central to the story because he is a highly symbolic figure. He's been here the longest, and based on that, we might assume that he is the inmate farthest from recovery. He is, as a Native American, the one most closely identified with nature, and this idea of nature versus civilization is a running theme throughout the novel. And because Bromden is part of an ethnic minority, he is the one most subject to victimization, of society's repression of natural impulses. Yet he is also the one with the most potential strength, just by virtue of his physical size, and we see that strength enabling him to finally escape.

There is also the theme of real versus metaphoric size and what that really means. Bromden describes Ratched several times in terms of her strength and size; early in the text, when she gets

angry, Bromden describes her as “big as a tractor.” But we have no actual physical description of her as anything more than an average sized woman. So her size has something to do with her power, her influence.

Also the recurring motif of invisibility – Bromden’s sense that he is invisible because he appears to be deaf and mute; McMurphy telling of a similar experience he had a child; McMurphy breaking the window, claiming it was so clean it was invisible, and Ratchet’s invisible power to start the ward every morning like a machine.

We also have a fair number of bird images. What kind of bird is the title bird, a cuckoo? What sort of habits does a cuckoo display? Why would it be chosen for the title? McMurphy uses the slang term “you birds” to refer to the men several times; we have McMurphy’s assessment of this as a “pecking party” involving chickens; we have the epigram at the beginning of the text, and Bromden’s very different version in chapter 27. What does this add up to as a theme?