

FEMINISTS ASSAULT KEN KESEY

(1935-2001)

“To the Editor: In response to Walter Kerr’s belated review of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*: I too saw the show after it had been running for quite a while, in San Francisco. I was shocked at what I saw (though I should have known better, having read the book) because, in the long time the play had been running, never once had I read a review which warned me of the *blatant sexism* I was to witness onstage, or even asked some of the most obvious questions about the political statements of the play.

Kerr finally raised the key question: Why is Nurse Ratched, the omnipotent, omni-malevolent villain of the play, a woman? Kerr didn’t speculate why, but he did note parenthetically that ‘There are other such women in the background of the play.’ The truth is that every woman in the background is such a demonic figure, and the play is full of false yet dangerous cliches about their *power over men*.

The most striking example is Chief Bromden’s mother: she has made his father small, she has grown to twice his size. It is largely because of her power to threaten male virility that the Chief is now in a mental institution. Of course, she is *only a symbol*; as a white woman married to an Indian man, her emasculation of her husband only *represents* the *White Man*’s brutal destruction of all cultures other than his own.

Why is white racism depicted in these terms? It should be remembered that this white woman’s singular unforgivable act was her refusal to take on her husband’s name! Somehow, in the confused vision of the author and playwright, the refusal of *women, an oppressed class*, to utterly submit to male-oriented social structures is identified with the attack of white men, the oppressor class, on peoples of color.

The whole play is constructed from such a muddled vision. It pretends to challenge all the reactionary institutions in our society—prisons, mental hospitals and the Federal Government itself, which has destroyed the Indian reservations. But it never once challenges the *completely inhuman sexist structure of society*, not does it make any attempt to overthrow sexist or racist stereotypes. The only blacks in the play are stupid and malicious hospital orderlies. And the only right-on women in the play are mindless whores. In fact, in this play, if a woman is *not* totally mindless, she is a direct threat to (male) life.

Thus the play offers us this basic sexist dichotomy: women are either dumb and silly (like the quivering young nurse, terrified of McMurphy; like the squealing, wiggling prostitutes who come to build up the men’s egos) or they are shrewd, conniving, and malicious (castrating wives, dominating mothers, and a super-powerful domineering nurse). Every man in the play has been psychologically mutilated by a woman, from the guilt-ridden Billy Bibbit, whom his mother and Nurse Ratched are in cahoots to destroy, to the cynical Harding, whose ‘wife’s ample bosom at times gives him a feeling of inferiority.’

It goes without saying that, just as there are no positive, fully human female figures to identify with, there are likewise no strong, healthy male figures. Of course, we are *supposed* to believe in McMurphy, the super-male macho hero who equates strength with sexual parts and whose solution to every problem is sex. We laugh and cheer as McMurphy humiliates the young nurse by sticking a banana up her skirt, manhandles his girl friends as he passes them around (confident of his masculinity, he can afford to be generous), and generally bullies everyone in his social sphere.

If *that* represents the healthy exercise of the human spirit, then the *White Man* too was healthy as he *stole from the Indians everything they had, raping their culture and treating them as objects not worthy of human respect*. [These false exaggerations are racist and *sexist*. Did women have no responsibility for all these sins? The Homestead Act entitled them to half the property if they went West and got married. Unmarried white women often had slaves instead of husbands to do heavy work. White women owned more slaves than white men because they usually outlived husbands and in the South they inherited plantations. That is why Twain made Jim’s owner a spinster, Miss Watson. As for stealing land, Indian tribes had been stealing land from each other for thousands of years. Many sold their land to whites. Many lost their land when they fought with the French or British against Americans. This Feminist is ignorant of

the fact that there were Indian wars and Indian atrocities. On the other hand, many white men and women converted Indians who became Christian ministers, and so on.]

Kerr points out that *Cuckoo's Nest* is a play about conditioning in this society, and that young people identify with it because it exposes that threat to human freedom. This play is not *about* conditioning nearly so much as it *is* a dangerous piece of conditioning itself. With a pseudo-radical posture, it swallows whole hog all the worst attitudes toward women prevalent in our society and delivers the pig right back to us, suitably decorated and made righteous.

If you do not perceive exactly how destructive this work is, imagine for a moment the effect it must have on a girl child watching it. Who, in this play, can *she* grow up to be? Where is *her* place in the struggle for human freedom? At best she can mature into a good sex object, equipped to build the egos of emotionally crippled men by offering a 'liberated' attitude toward sex! Above all, she learns from viewing this play that any aggressiveness, intelligence, strength, or potency on the part of the female is always dangerous, evil, and ugly. She learns to hate women who dare to try to be as powerful as men. She learns to squelch her own potential for strength, or she learns to hate herself. She is, after all, destined to become a woman, and women are hateful and fearful things.

The answer to Kerr's question seems to be that Nurse Ratched is a woman because Ken Kesey hates and fears women. And apparently Dale Wasserman, along with everyone else who helped adapt Kesey's novel and engineer it into a piece of theater, are so thoroughly conditioned by the basic sexist assumptions of our society that they never even noticed, or cared to question, the psychic disease out of which the book's vision was born." "[Ms. Falk has requested that her original wording be noted here. In paragraph 7, lines 5 and 6, 'balls,' should be substituted for 'sexual parts' and 'to get a good fuck' for 'sex.' Likewise, in the penultimate paragraph, line 5, 'sex object' originally read 'piece of ass.']" Italics added.

Marcia L. Falk
English Department, Stanford University
Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times* (1971)

Kesey was a graduate fellow at Stanford 1958-59. In 1971, the year of the letter above, Wallace Stegner at Stanford quit the university in disgust at student radicals and older ones like Kesey and Professor Falk. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) is a "masculinist" work--a male reaction to radical Feminism. Falk is mostly right about the male sexism. If it is okay for Feminists to be sexists and express their feelings of oppression by men, it is inevitable and fair that some men should express their feelings of oppression by women. They have been doing this to an increasing extent since this novel was published, in reaction to the ongoing destructive effects of the gender war on both sexes. *Oleanna* (1992) by David Mamet, dramatizing the fascism of Feminists like Falk in higher education, is a powerful example. Falk is a hypocrite to be so self-righteous. She is a version of Big Nurse. As the following analysis sets forth, the novel/film is much larger than the Feminist mind of Professor Falk, who sees only what pertains to herself.

Michael Hollister (2022)

FILM

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962)

adaptation by Lawrence Haubern & Bo Goldman (1975)

ANALYSIS

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest is the most enduring novel of the 1960s counterculture and one of the rare novels that has become more pertinent with passing years. This is because its targets of attack have become far more oppressive: Government and Feminism. A national poll in 2014 showed 82 percent of Americans fear our own federal government more than any external threat. A national poll in 2015 showed that 49% believe the government is "an immediate threat" to the rights and freedoms of the ordinary

citizen. Feminists on campuses have by now imposed nationwide a fascist regime of Political Correctness that suppresses free speech, denies males due process, and persecutes anyone with nonconformist beliefs. This adaptation is faithful to the novel, entertaining and powerful.

The film opens with a prolonged shot of Wilderness and ends with an iconic Indian busting out of the mental hospital and running away from civilization back to the Wilderness, in the literary tradition of Huck Finn and Ike McCaslin. The mental asylum is a metaphor of society with its almighty government controlling everyone. When the *head* nurse arrives in the morning she is identified with a big red light over the doorway and she is authorized by the government to stop Nature in men with medications, shocks, and lobotomies. Her name, Ratched, evokes the functioning of a machine. Her adversary, the hero Randall P. McMurphy, embodies Nature. As soon as he is unshackled by authorities he whoops and dances around like an Indian. Unshaven with dark wild hair like an Indian, he wears the knit cap of a sailor and when he leads his fellow patients on an outing he steals a charter boat and takes them fishing out on the ocean. Sailors are typed as free spirits. He wears a black leather jacket outside that also associates him with motorcycle rebels. He wears blues and greens that identify him with Nature in contrast to the other patients who wear dingy white. After he has conformed somewhat, he shaves, slicks down his hair and wears a white hospital shirt over a blue or green shirt, maintaining his identity.

Society turns Nature upsidedown. The orderlies in the hospital are all black men in white clothes who do as ordered by the white head nurse. They are sadistic in compensation for their experiences of white racism and Big Nurse uses their violence to intimidate her white male patients, reflecting the political coalition of blacks and Feminists in society at large. The genteel white male psychiatrists who run the hospital would never be able to subdue McMurphy or dictate to their black orderlies out on the streets or in the Wilderness. Today, due to “Affirmative Action,” many institutions—especially in education and government—are now run by equivalents of Big Nurse Ratched. In this film she is shown a number of times looking down on the men from a high window like the commandant of a concentration camp. The Indian Chief is a visual joke, especially when Big Nurse leads the patients in doing aerobic exercises. He is so tall he can dunk a basketball without jumping and so strong he can tear up the plumbing, yet he is docile and pretends to be deaf and dumb. McMurphy rides on his shoulders when showing him how to dunk a basketball, elevated above the other patients just as he is elevated above them as a natural man. Later he stands on the Chief’s shoulders to climb over the high security fence around the hospital and go free.

All the patients except McMurphy are repressed white males. They are all defeated and fearful and kept that way by the medications of Big Nurse. In her “therapy” sessions she shames the men, subdues them verbally, and suppresses them with her rules of “the Ward.” She denies all of McMurphy’s requests—that the radio be turned down so the men can talk, that they be allowed to watch the World Series, that she give back Cheswick’s cigarettes. As McMurphy tells the head psychiatrist, “She ain’t honest. She likes a rigged game.” Most of the men are so dysfunctional they have committed themselves voluntarily. The most pathetic is cringing Billy Bibbitt, who stutters so much he can barely speak. Billy has been destroyed by his overbearing mother. After McMurphy brings in prostitutes one night and sends one in to help Billy lose his virginity, Big Nurse catches him in bed with her and says she is going to tell his mother—a dirty thing to do. Her white nurse’s hat falls off and gets dirty. She claims that she has to tell his mother because they are “old friends,” which implies that they are parallels as sadistic females. Billy begs her not to tell on him but she will not relent. Big Nurse knows that he has attempted suicide before because of his mother. He is so terrified of his mother that this time he slits his throat. The assistant nurse screams at finding his body and bumps into Big Nurse, smearing her with his blood.

Boys have killed themselves at an increasing rate in comparison to girls as they passed through the Feminist educational system: For ages 10-14 the ratio in 2001 was 3-1; ages 15-19 it was 5-1; ages 20-24 it was 7-1 (*familyfirstaid.org*, 2013) Feminists have actually held panel debates on whether the male gender should be eliminated entirely.

McMurphy is so outraged he tries to strangle Big Nurse, leading to his lobotomy. Later in the century, Political Correctness became a Feminist form of psychological lobotomy. Kesey suggests that McMurphy is a Christ-evoking figure in that he “saves” some of the patients and gets “crucified” by the established order. McMurphy does invoke the name of Jesus Christ half a dozen times—his only expletive. But he is

profane like unredeemed Nature, he indulges his lusts, he is violent and the only one he is able to save in the end is the Chief. Religious faith is not a part of Kesey's vision, nor is political faith.

Michael Hollister (2015)