

OF MADNESS AND MACHINES: NAMES IN KEN KESEY'S  
*ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST*

William A. Francis

Ken Kesey's first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, reflects his experiences as a young attendant in two California mental hospitals in which he was employed. Book reviewers spoke highly of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and recognized the authority with which Kesey captured the day-to-day routines and events in mental wards. Irving Malin observed that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a gothic novel, for it employs imprisonment, madness, violence and distorted reflections, but it does so in a new way which Malin calls new American gothic.<sup>1</sup> Joseph J. Waldmeir, in a long review-essay, considers *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* a novel of the absurd, "the first truly successful American novel of the absurd since World War II."<sup>2</sup>

The novel is transparently symbolic, chaotic in its absurdism, and, at times, gothic in its shockingly vivid scenes of inmate deaths and of psycho-surgical mental "adjustments" made in cinder block laboratories. The force of the novel turns on the polar juxtapositioning of spontaneous behavior that has been judged antisocial and threatening to order, and the institutionalized mechanistic adjustments of behavior through drug therapy, shock treatment, and lobotomies. Two kinds of power are at work for dominance, and the representatives of these powers are the protagonist, Randle Patrick McMurphy, and the antagonist, Nurse Ratched. In this paper I will explore the significance of their names as they contribute to the novel's theme, which is an indictment of modern psychological practices that reduce human joy to robotic boredom.

The central character of the novel is the richly-named Randle Patrick McMurphy, a drinking, brawling, red-headed and much-tattooed drifter, who is in and out of jail for his nose-thumbing conduct on the periphery of proper society in the late 1950's. He is comical, rude, sensual, inquisitive, and, blessedly, a natural teller of stories. The inmates of the mental ward to which the court sent McMurphy are alert to his electrically-charged laughter and cunning spontaneity. He flashes his deck of pornographic playing cards and struts through the ward in black undershorts decorated with red-eyed white whales. The shorts are a gift from a literary major at Oregon State who told him that he "was a symbol."<sup>3</sup>

With such a magnetic personality and dynamic freshness it is inevitable that he will come into conflict with the force of authority in the ward, a fifty-year-old large-breasted woman named Big Nurse. We never learn her given name. She is addressed as Miss Ratched, or Nurse Ratched. She has exercised control over the ward for many years. Even the staff psychiatrist and interns yield to her wishes in the management of the ward and of the patients. It is clear that she has the final word on discharging patients from her ward. She sends difficult and unruly patients to the Electro-Shock Therapy unit, or EST, and the most disruptive of the Disturbed are lobotomized. Nurse Ratched's attendants on the ward are absolutely obedient to her, and they are sometimes sadistic in carrying out her orders. They call the EST unit the Shock Shop.

The contest between Randle Patrick McMurphy and Nurse Ratched is viewed against a motif of machines. There is a Fog Machine which the mentally disturbed narrator, an American half-breed Indian named Chief Broom, recognizes as a control device spewing a chemical fog throughout the ward. Under the influence of this fog time either stops or races forward. Bodies appear to be frozen and silence descends. Also, Chief Broom believes that Nurse Ratched carries tools in her wicker basket so that she can make adjustments:

she's got that bag full of a thousand parts she aims to use in her duties today — wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter ... needles, forceps, watchmakers' pliers, rolls of copper wire .... (4)

Nurse Ratched is viewed as a “precision-made...expensive baby doll” (5), and is characterized by her “precise, automatic gesture[s]” (5). Her huge head “swivel[s]” (5), and in Chief Broom’s erratic perceptions she gives off the smell of overheated and overtaxed machinery. She epitomizes the dynamic force in society which Chief Broom calls the Combine, “a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she has the Inside.” She, therefore, is “a real veteran at adjusting things” (26). Her office is seen through a large glass wall, and in this office Chief Broom imagines her “in the center of a web of wires like a watchful robot” where “she dreams of...a world of precision efficiency” (27). On almost every page of the novel Nurse Ratched is seen as a manipulator, an evil “ball-cutter” (62), a cunning adversary who sends troublemakers to the EST or to the lobotomy unit.

The men in her ward who call her Big Nurse are capable of further name play, as seen when McMurphy says in mock cordiality, “Good morning, Miss Rat-shed! How’s things on the outside?” (93). McMurphy emphasizes the first syllable of her name, *rat.. Rat shed* is not very original word play, but it does suggest that Miss Ratched has created a shelter for rats rather than a home for the mentally ill, the sun struck who come into the shade of her ward only to discover the perverse therapy and cruel nursing.

The name Ratched is a homonym of the word *ratchet*, a toothed wheel whose teeth slope in one direction so as to hold or catch a pawl, thus preventing a backward rotation. The mechanical devices of the ratchet and the pawl are part of the mechanical images of the novel and expand upon Chief Broom’s concept of the Combine, which is actually a farmer’s harvesting and threshing machine. The word *ratchet* is derived from the French *rochet*, meaning lance head, and is related to the Italian *rocchetto*, meaning a bobbin or spindle, and to the Old High German *roccho*, a spindle or distaff.<sup>4</sup> The distaff literally means a flax staff, the staff on which the flax is wound for spinning. Because spinning was essentially woman’s work, the word *distaff* became synonymous with *woman*. In onomastic terms, therefore, Nurse Ratched is a female controller of men, ensuring that the wheels of social and sexual order turn in only one direction. The wheels of psychological and spiritual healing in the mental ward she presides over have become synonymous in Chief Broom’s often-fogged mind with restraint, inhibition, and punishment. Nurse Ratched is neither nurturing nor guiding. Rather, she inhibits the return of mental health in her ward, which, for Kesey, is a microcosm of the society of the late 1950’s, one characterized by fear and repression, as so often seen in American fiction since World War II.

Randle Patrick McMurphy is the rare hero in the fiction of the fifties. He brings to the ward a zest for life and an insistence upon individuality and exploration. Change, novelty, spirit, sensuality and, most of all, laughter, are presented as potentially rehabilitating and revitalizing. Yet, from Nurse Ratched’s perspective, they are not approved, for they cannot be controlled. From their first meeting, Nurse Ratched knows that she must restrain McMurphy, even if she must send him to the Shock Shop, to the Disturbed ward, and, ultimately, to the lobotomy table. McMurphy’s name identifies his powers and his spirit. His initials, R.P.M., are indicative of his power, for *rpm* means revolutions per minute, and in a pun revolution is what he is about. On the Outside he wore a motorcycle rider’s cap, which he refuses to remove on the Inside, so that to the inmates he looks like a motorcycle racer, the motorcycle a symbol of his independence and defiance of authority. A man of action, McMurphy won the Distinguished Service Cross in Korea for leading an escape from a Communist prison camp. But he was dishonorably discharged from the service, not surprisingly, for insubordination.

The name McMurphy, complete with its patronymic prefix, means “sea warrior,” one of the many early Irish or Celtic names expressing the warlike attitude of the Irish.<sup>5</sup> McMurphy served in the military as a modern sea warrior, as indicated by his tattoo of the fighting leatherneck, the Marine. The tattoo and the white whales on his shorts become comic testimonials to his sea warrior attitude. The sea image expands, for at the hospital he organizes a fishing expedition aboard the *Lark*, the boat appropriately named for the memorable frolicsome spree shared by a number of the patients whose lives, until McMurphy’s appearance, had been grounded and joyless. Chief Broom says at the conclusion of the *Lark* chapter that McMurphy, in

his “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” (245).

The name Patrick comes from the Latin *patricius*, which means patrician, or nobleman. Furthermore, *patricius* is a form of *pater*, or father, and in this sense the name Patrick connotes both nobility and paternal authority. McMurphy, commoner, possesses a paternal power as well as a political power. He enters the ward as a potent force, “all two hundred and ten red-headed psychopathic Irishman pounds of him” (147). He conducts himself as though he were on a royal inspection tour, like a Prince of Whales, with his authority residing not on his crown but in his white-whale shorts. “I’m accustomed to being top man” (19), he shouts, as he makes his rounds, shakes hands, and inquires about the inmates’ backgrounds. One of the staff doctors says of McMurphy: “This man is a Napoleon, a Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun” (146). “We’re not dealing with an ordinary man” (148), he concludes.

Kesey makes McMurphy larger than life, a potential “martyr” (149) for the cause of inmates. When McMurphy is finally taken to the lobotomy room, he is stretched out on the table, arms extended, as though he were on a cross. “Do I get a crown of thorns?” (270) he jokes, before the treatment begins. The treatment appears to have no effect upon him. Later, in leaving for the fishing expedition aboard the *Lark*, Chief Broom observes that “McMurphy led the twelve of us toward the ocean” (227). The picture is of the Savior and his motley apostles at the water’s edge. McMurphy, the sea warrior, will tame the ocean for the inmates by showing them how to fish. When an inmate pulls a fish from the water, McMurphy praises him: “God bless you, Fred, you got my blessed fish!” (236).

The name Randle is also significant. It comes from two Old English words: *rand*, or shield, and *wulf*, or wolf. The name Randle is an onomastic coat of arms symbolizing the cunning of the wolf and the protective shield. At the center of the conflict between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, however, McMurphy shields the men in his ward from Nurse Ratched, who is identified as a “strong wolf” (62) who uses her strength to keep the inmates, the rabbits, in their place. Mr. Harding, the intellectual in the ward, observes that “all of us in here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping though our Walt Disney world. Oh, don’t misunderstand me, we’re not in here *because* we are rabbits ... we’re all in here because we can’t *adjust* to our rabbithood” (62). Harding goes on to say that he needs “the nurse to make me *happy* with my role” (62). Later, Harding says that McMurphy himself “may be a wolf” (65). McMurphy is angered, and he responds, “Goddammit, I’m no wolf and you’re no rabbit” (65). McMurphy’s message for the men is that they cannot “sit back and let some old blue-haired woman talk you into being a rabbit” (62). McMurphy proves that he is no wolf who threatens the men’s sexuality. Rather, on the *Lark*, and later in an orgy in the ward, it is McMurphy who introduces the men to sweet sensual girls with the twin names of Candy and Sandy, and who ushers Billy Bibbit, whose name mimics his stuttering, to sexual passion. McMurphy, as the name Randle promises, shields the men from the wolf, Nurse Ratched, and assists them in finding confidence in their own masculinity.

When McMurphy’s final lobotomy puts an end to his powers, they are transferred to some of the other men who consciously imitate his voice and behavior. Some leave to return to as normal a life as they can find. There is hope for them thanks to the lessons of McMurphy. But McMurphy, now a martyr, who “doled out his life for us to live” (245), dies at the hands of Chief Broom, who cannot allow him to be a vegetable trophy for Nurse Ratched to point to whenever another McMurphy comes along. McMurphy lives on in them who followed him, the men who listened to his stories aboard the *Lark*, stories for all of them to dream themselves into.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Irving Malin, *Critique* 5 (1962): 81–84.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph J. Waldmeir, "Two Novelists of the Absurd: Heller and Kesey," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 5 (1964): 204.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking, 1964) 81. Subsequent page references in text.

<sup>4</sup> "Ratchet," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Brian de Breffny, *Irish Family Names: Arms, Origins, and Locations* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982) 139.

<sup>6</sup> E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 239.

<sup>7</sup> Withycombe 249.

The University of Akron  
Akron, Ohio