

## **Degree Project**

Level: Bachelor's

### **A Destructive Myth of Masculinity**

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#### **Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* from a Men's Studies Perspective**

Author: Paula Boo  
Supervisor: Dr. Carmen Zamorano Llena  
Examiner: Dr. Billy Gray  
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## Introduction

Released in 1962, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has been lauded as a nonconformist bible and emblem of its time. Depicting the individual's fight against an oppressive society, it spoke to the 1960s anti-authoritarian Zeitgeist. It also criticized the American psychiatric system, of which Ken Kesey had some professional experience (Lehmann-Haupt). The novel has become a staple in many a literature course and remains popular to this day. Consequently, much has been written about *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, from a variety of angles. The protagonist, McMurphy, is frequently interpreted as a modern messiah and a true man's man, who tries to rescue his fellow patients from societal oppression and emasculation. The blurbs on the novel's cover reinforce this view, with The Guardian being quoted proclaiming it an "attack on all forms of authority and a celebration of the free spirit" (Kesey). McMurphy embodies a type of masculinity that the narrator, Chief Bromden, and many of the other men in the psychiatric ward admire and aspire to. Eventually, the patients come to regard McMurphy as almost supernatural and exalt what he stands for to the status of myth.

According to James D. Riemer: "The American literary tradition has presented us with men who embody any number of manly ideals and men who struggle, often unwittingly, under the burden and limitations of those ideals." (298) Keeping to that tradition, McMurphy's fellow patients see him as an ideal man incarnate, but trying to live up to that ideal ends up weighing him down. Literary tradition, whether American or not, is affected by the culture in which it exists. Darren Harris-Fain states that: "As much as we might valorize the originality of a particular artist, the work is not created in a vacuum" (31), and notes the

McCarthyistic America of the Cold War,<sup>1</sup> where the novel's narrative is set (34-5). This post-war period was one of social upheaval. Once the second World War ended, women were deterred from retaining the financial independence their entry into the labor force and army had meant (Evans 219). Traditional gender divisions were promoted by emphasizing women's femininity and roles as mothers (223-6). By contrast, an almost caricatural version of "hypertrophied masculinity" had been premiered on the war front (Gilbert and Gubar 216). Men's fear of not living up to this exaggerated standard of manliness was dealt with by "reconstructing a sexual mythos of separate spheres" (216), which meant outlining clear demarcations between what was socially acceptable as stereotypically feminine and masculine (Evans 243-6). This socially enforced gender dichotomy is portrayed in Kesey's novel. McMurphy and Chief Bromden have both lived through war, experienced its demands for an exaggerated form of masculinity, and have responded to these demands in very different ways. While McMurphy fits the manly ideal that Riemer describes, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* also depicts men who stand in sharp contrast to the novel's protagonist, and who "represent alternatives to those traditional ideals", even when not portrayed altogether favorably (Riemer 298).

In contrast to the popular view of the righteous McMurphy, feminist critics have seen him in a less singularly positive light, and have questioned McMurphy's methods for fighting the oppressive patriarchy that the novel's characters feel victimized by. Essays and articles detailing misogynist aspects and stereotypical gender roles in the novel are plentiful. Feminist critics such as Elizabeth McMahan, Theodora-Ann Hague and Michelle Napierski-Prancl have all done their part in

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<sup>1</sup> McCarthyism, named after senator Joseph McCarthy, is defined by Merriam-Webster as: a mid-20th century political attitude characterized chiefly by opposition to elements held to be subversive and by the use of tactics involving personal attacks on individuals by means of widely publicized indiscriminate allegations especially on the basis of unsubstantiated charges; *broadly*: defamation of character or reputation through such tactics ("McCarthyism")

exposing various negative aspects of Kesey's text, from objectification to violence. However, the focus of these texts has tended to be mainly on women, their roles in the book, and on how the message of the novel might affect women in real life. However, it is worthwhile to remember that men are also affected by stereotypical gender expectations. Despite the advent of men's studies, with its feminist-informed study of men and masculinities, surprisingly little material has been produced dealing with issues of expectations of men and masculinity as portrayed in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This is remarkable, mainly because the novel is rich in opportunities to cast light on the impact certain aspects of social constructions of gender has on individuals and on society in general, as well as the prescriptiveness of stereotyped gender conformity.

The few texts dealing specifically with the representation of masculinity in the novel have tended towards two differing points of view. One side sees McMurphy as a strong and generally positive role model who offers reason in a world gone mad. The critic Richard D. Maxwell supports this view, and sees the protagonist as offering a model for masculinity which the other male characters should try to mimic. Though Maxwell deals with representations of masculinity in the novel, it is not from a men's studies perspective: he ignores aspects of McMurphy's masculinity which that critical approach would consider problematic, such as his aggressive sexuality. Instead, Maxwell lauds McMurphy's use of his "male virility" (Maxwell 139) as a "weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy" (Kesey 89). Characters such as Harding and Billy Bibbit are, by contrast, described as having abdicated their masculinity by allowing themselves to be dominated by women (Maxwell 135).

Bruce E. Wallis agrees that the protagonist is meant to be a hero trying to do the right thing. Wallis affirms McMurphy's status as a mythicized representation of

an ideal by outlining the similarities between McMurphy and Jesus, both of which are described as trying to lead their people to salvation at the cost of their own lives (Wallis 105). However, Wallis ultimately judges McMurphy's cult to be a victim of a false conviction that "man is naturally benevolent, and that his natural actions [...] will invariably conduce the greatest good" (109). According to Wallis, this is not the case, and the "cuckoo philosophy" would produce a world of self-centered, nonempathic children (110).

Terence Martin also notes the parallels between McMurphy and Christ, and interprets McMurphy as having mainly good intentions. However, he acknowledges that McMurphy's methods for achieving his goal are sometimes questionable. Martin further emphasizes the role of community and joint effort as key to McMurphy's successful resistance, as opposed to the individualism American literature otherwise tends towards: "The later McMurphy [...] is thoroughly encumbered with the shrunken men on the ward, committed to a desperate struggle for *their* manhood" [emphasis in the original] (Martin 25-6), which stands in stark contrast to his message of egocentric "self-loving self-assertion" (Wallis 110). McMurphy is at first supported and then compelled by the patients' belief in him to attack Nurse Ratched and the oppressive civilization she represents, leading to his lobotomization and ultimate death. As such, McMurphy is an example of the hegemonic masculinity described by R.W. Connell (77) hurting those who may at first appear to be profiting from it. The expectations put on McMurphy to live up to a patriarchal ideal compel him to violence, something which does not go unpunished.

Maxwell and Wallis both represent traditional readings of the novel in which McMurphy's heroic status goes unchallenged and his version of masculinity is presented as a magical cure-all. From a men's studies perspective, however, the main

character of the novel is easily toppled from this pedestal. The history of American literature abounds in male protagonists who stand up for what is right at all costs, and at first glance McMurphy appears to fit that description. This recurring theme has been commented on by Ann-Janine Morey-Gaines in her article: “Of Menace and Men: The Sexual Tensions of the American Frontier Metaphor”. Morey-Gaines explores how the landscape of the American Western genre has changed and evolved, while its protagonists have remained remarkably constant (147). The main change in the genre, according to Morey-Gaines, has been in the antagonist offered to the protagonist: “the male hero began as a frontiersman hunting game and Indians” (147). When these forces against which the frontiersman could test his manhood became scarce, “Woman [...] becomes the villain responsible for the disappearance of the anarchic, adolescent freedom of the wild western frontier” (147). In step with the shrinking of America’s physical frontier, the frontier hero is being pitted against symbols of the civilization he originally, though ambivalently, was set to protect (138).

Despite being the only one of the above texts with an explicit men’s studies approach to the novel, the primary focus in Morey-Gaines’ article is on only one of the male characters in the novel and on only one version of masculinity. Additionally, Morey-Gaines, along with Martin, Wallis, and Maxwell, as well as the feminist critics previously listed have all, in different ways, touched on the effects McMurphy’s brand of masculinity has on women and, in part, the effects on the protagonist himself. Some critical attention has been paid to how McMurphy’s masculinity can be interpreted to have a positive impact on the novel’s characters, particularly Harding and Chief Bromden. However, little has been written about the negative effects this brand of masculinity has on the other patients of the ward. This is a blind

spot in the corpus of writing on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* which the following essay will attempt to remedy. Men's studies will be used as a critical framework, as it is an approach concerned with the construction of masculinities and the problems surrounding those constructs. This thesis will explore those aspects of McMurphy's character that are idolized and even mythicized by his fellow patients, and regarded by them as masculine ideals. Additionally, the thesis will examine whether, and in what ways, the idolization of these traits has negative consequences for the men in the novel. To achieve this, R.W. Connell's framework for categorizing and explaining the relationship between different masculinities, as outlined in *Masculinities*, will be applied to the novel. Additional men's studies resources such as Harry Brod's *The Making of Masculinities* and Michael S. Kimmel's *The History of Men*, among others, will also be consulted for theoretical background. Since femininity and masculinity have often been explored and explained in relation to one another, writing about masculinities from the field of feminist theory will also occasionally be used to help explain aspects of the novel.

### **The Man, The Myth: McMurphy**

Myths, according to E.O. James, are more than entertaining folk tales (475). Myths serve to ground "the established order in a mythological supernatural reality", which lends the ideals of that established order "a sacred authority" (477), thus making myths more prescriptive than entertaining. The character in the novel called Randle P. McMurphy can be said to embody a certain set of ideals specific to American culture, namely those of the frontier hero described by Morey-Gaines. Variations of characters resembling McMurphy, from Jack Schaefer's *Shane* to John Wayne, have been prevalent in American literature and culture since the period of the country's

inception, and remain common to this day (Morey-Gaines, 132-4, 147). McMurphy is a modern incarnation of the oft employed wild West hero and by evoking such frontier imagery, the novel suggests right from the start that McMurphy is meant to be the uncontested protagonist. As Morey-Gaines puts it: “The novel extolls a brawling, sexually abusive man whom we must admire and support or find ourselves on the side of repression and social tyranny” (146). His position as protagonist is in line with the tendency in patriarchal societies to mythicize men seen as embodying a “secure and stable male identity” (Brod 48). This identity tends to be based on “sexism, racism and homophobia” (Kimmel 7). Barring racism, McMurphy exhibits these traits, which will be discussed below.

According to Harry Brod, men tend to be nostalgic for what they perceive as a simpler time, where their masculinity was easily defined (48). Variations of the cowboy character, such as McMurphy, are a classic romanticized emblem of this time and remain popularly employed as literary protagonists (48). Indeed, Marshall W. Fishwick calls the cowboy character “America’s Contribution to the World’s Mythology” (77), claiming the cowboy to be “the envy of all who believe that a good, clean life in God’s outdoors, close to the ‘real’ things, is desirable” (82). In other words, the cowboy is an all-American symbol of masculinity (Kimmel 94). Embodying that iconic figure, the protagonist becomes a prototype.

However, the cowboy character is not the only prototypic aspect of McMurphy’s persona. As Wallis suggests, McMurphy is portrayed as a Christ-figure, and as such he is elevated to the status of myth. This process of mythicization begins as soon as the character is introduced to the setting of the psychiatric ward. Chief Bromden, the narrator, hears McMurphy’s voice before he sees the man: “He sounds like he’s way above them, talking down, like he’s sailing fifty yards overhead,

hollering at those below on the ground” (Kesey 16). A disembodied voice, “loud and full of hell” (17), from “above” evokes a sense of divinity by mirroring biblical descriptions of God. The Chief sees McMurphy as a kind of giant, telling him: “You’re twice the size of me” (261), and Bromden eventually lets McMurphy lend him his strength and size, in a pastiche of how Jesus let his apostles partake of his metaphorical body. McMurphy is portrayed as superhuman, larger than life.

The parallels between McMurphy and the Christian martyr are strengthened throughout the book, with him being a friend to the other patients while at the same time remaining apart from them. McMurphy establishes himself as an authority and as someone the men of the ward look up to. “McMurphy was [Billy’s] special friend and hero” (316-7) and Billy tries to emulate him, as does Cheswick, “rubbing his hands together like McMurphy does” (93). However, having one’s heroes exposed as mere mortals can have a disastrous effect. When Cheswick realizes that his idol is as human as himself, though he does not blame McMurphy for his humanity, he is unable to deal with the disappointment and therefore kills himself (210). Though certainly a setback to the building of the myth surrounding McMurphy, much of that damage is repaired when he manages to organize a fishing trip, where he leads his twelve acolytes towards the ocean (286). The trip ties the participants closely together and further underlines McMurphy’s role as Christ-like savior. McMurphy’s reputation is strengthened even more when he defends the germophobic patient George against the aides – an action which lands him in the Disturbed ward for Electro-Shock Therapy (338). McMurphy is strapped to a table “shaped, ironically, like a cross” (87) and receives an electric “crown of silver thorns” (341). In the end of the novel, the men urge McMurphy to defeat the evil Nurse Ratched (384) and he sacrifices himself by doing so (388), thus coming full circle with the novel’s biblical

analogy of the man sent to give hope to and save his people at the cost of his own life. All of this serves to cement the mythology surrounding him. When the lobotomized McMurphy is brought back to the ward, the patients, his apostles, decide that the “store dummy” (388) on the gurney is a fake: “The arms? They couldn’t do those. His arms were *big!*” (389), and they hold on to their idea of the superhuman McMurphy rather than the reality of the mortal man.

As previously mentioned, McMurphy has been celebrated by many critics as a true man’s man. He has also been described by the novel’s character Harding as a “cowboy” (Kesey 84). Ann-Janine Morey-Gaines calls the cowboy “one of the most essential archetypes of American culture” (132), with “cowboy” and “man’s man” tending to be inextricably linked, and the former therefore coming to represent an ideal American man. It seems well worth examining what it is about McMurphy that evokes admiration and even worship in both the novel’s patients and in critics like Richard D. Maxwell. Chief Bromden is probably McMurphy’s strongest supporter. Feeling let down by his own father’s submission to his mother, Bromden sees McMurphy as a surrogate father, and compares the two from the start (Kesey 17). As mentioned, Bromden admires McMurphy’s size and strength, along with the laughter that surrounds him (18). To Bromden, McMurphy exudes a power which he and the other patients lack. This power is rooted in McMurphy’s appearance to embody a “hegemonic masculinity”, which is “the configuration of gender practices” that legitimizes patriarchy and patriarchy’s inherent subordination of women to men (Connell 77), by outlining a prescriptive stereotypical form of masculinity as the powerful ideal men are expected to conform to. By taking a stance for hegemonic masculinity and against the novel’s “matriarchy” (Kesey 79), McMurphy assumes this position of power. Since the main conflict in the novel is stated as being between

“matriarchy”, as represented by Nurse Ratched, and the male patients, McMurphy’s role as the patients’ de facto leader elevates him to the position of defender of the entire male gender and an ideal to be emulated.

Though he admits to having “fightin’ tendencies” (84), and his physical strength is part of his appeal, most of McMurphy’s power is sexual in nature, as Harding specifies (84). Harding claims that McMurphy’s “fuckin’ tendencies” show that he is “a healthy, functioning and adequate rabbit, whereas most of us in here even lack the sexual ability to make the grade as adequate rabbits” (84). It is indeed through sexual aggression that McMurphy defeats Nurse Ratched, as his final attack on her heavily implies rape: “he grabbed for her and ripped her uniform all the way down the front” (385). Afterwards, even Nurse Ratched’s new uniform can “no longer conceal the fact that she was a woman” (386), which to the men of the ward means she no longer has any power over them. Throughout the novel, McMurphy makes a point of his own sexual appetite, which he and the other patients seem to regard as a healthy example they should aspire towards, even though McMurphy’s aggressive sexuality saw him arrested for raping a fifteen-year-old girl (56). The patients seem convinced by McMurphy’s assurance that the girl “was *plenty* willin’” (57) and never show anything but admiration for his sexual boasting.

In addition to his “fightin’” and “fuckin’ tendencies”, McMurphy happily professes himself to be a “gambling fool” (18). Hosting card games is one of the ways he fosters a competitive camaraderie among the patients, transforming the men who would previously tear each other apart in the group therapy “peekin’ part[ies]” (72) into a closely-knit unit. However, part of the card games’ charm is the pin-ups pictured on the backs of McMurphy’s playing cards, which he encourages the men to objectify: “check the pictures, huh? Every one different. Fifty-two positions” (18).

Robin Morgan claims that, “Pornography is the theory and rape is the practice” (qtd. in Heath 196), which means McMurphy could be said to offer lectures on the theory. The card games, and the communal objectification of women it allows for, makes the men feel part of a collective gathered around the central figure of McMurphy.

In this leadership role, McMurphy tries to inspire the men of the ward to defy the oppression of society and make them question whether they are truly mentally ill at all. As he says to the patients: “You ain’t crazy that way. I mean – hell, I been surprised how sane you guys all are” (Kesey 82). To McMurphy’s mind, the “Acutes” (20) only need to show some courage to be cured: “you could get along outside if you had the guts” (232). Considering the stigma surrounding mental illness, having one person believing that they are not really crazy or ill, and believing in their capacity to take care of themselves, possibly serves to heighten the Acutes’ opinion of McMurphy; especially in comparison to the establishment that has deemed them deficient. This despite the fact that McMurphy shows little understanding or sympathy for why any man would willingly subject himself to therapy. McMurphy’s own diagnosis as a “psychopath” is shrugged off and the charge of sexual “overzealousness” as a negative feature of a mental illness is treated as a particularly funny joke (59). In the end of the novel, he has the initially “Chronic” (21) Chief Bromden and a large portion of the Acutes believing they can overcome their psychological problems simply by deciding to do so: an empowering feeling for people who have previously seen themselves as powerless.

The masculine traits described in McMurphy and mythicized along with the man himself are then as follows: a cowboy gambler with a tendency towards physical and sexual violence, and an accompanying propensity for objectification of women. These traits award him the place at the top of the patients’ hierarchy. He also believes

most mental illnesses can be cured through sheer will, if they exist to begin with. McMurphy's brand of masculinity is portrayed as ideal and the men who deviate from it are deemed effeminate, weak, or described as otherwise found lacking in manhood. However, for all his bravado, McMurphy keeps up this exhibition of manliness only at considerable personal cost. By establishing himself as king of the hill and promising to vanquish the evil Nurse Ratched, McMurphy inadvertently creates a cult following. According to Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, there is an overriding cultural assumption that "idealizes men's capacity for loyalty, devotion, and self-sacrifice" (241), and it can be argued that it is trying to live up to this cultural ideal which ultimately forces McMurphy's hand.

Though McMurphy initially manipulates the other patients of the ward, the direction of power eventually switches and he ends up becoming a marionette driven by the expectations put on him by his followers. As Chief Bromden says when McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched: "We couldn't stop him because we were the ones making him do it" (384). McMurphy conforms to the expectation of his fellow patients for him to maintain the aggressive man's man persona he initially presented himself with, and which the patients have since held him to. In other words, the myth created around McMurphy ends up forcing him to an action which ultimately leads to his death. While generally not taken at face value, myths can still influence people's beliefs and behavior by serving as models of conduct to be either emulated or avoided. As such, the mythology that the patients build around McMurphy affects the characters in the novel, and the following sections will examine what effects the mythicization of McMurphy and his version of masculinity has on the patients of the ward.

### **Straight is the Way**

One consequence of this myth, and of the patriarchal power structure on which it is founded, is the expectation that people abide by certain, usually unspoken, rules. One major criterion for acceptance in this hierarchy is heterosexuality, which Connell points out as being just as compulsory for men as feminist theory has determined it to be for women (104). Tim Carrigan et al have also identified heterosexuality as “the most important feature of” especially middle-class men’s masculinity (93). However, for women compulsory heterosexuality tends to mean “cultural and social pressures [...] to make themselves sexually available to men, on whatever terms they can get” (Connell 104), while the same norm applied to men instead tends to reward a more aggressive version of heterosexuality. According to Connell’s interviews,<sup>2</sup> the men who dare deviate from presenting themselves as voracious in their heterosexual appetites tend to represent a minority, and heterosexual exploits are instead generally bragged about (103-4). Accordingly, there is a tendency for men to feel that sex is something women owe to them, since these hierarchical structures connect “the making of masculinity with the subordination of women” (11). Placing women in a hierarchically lower position vis-à-vis men also means that men who “attack or harass women [...] are unlikely to think themselves deviant” (83). Connell’s research reveals quite the opposite, that such men “usually feel they are entirely justified, that they are exercising a right” (83).

In compliance with this pattern, McMurphy seems to feel justified in his attack on Nurse Ratched, acting like a “sane, willful, dogged man performing a hard duty that finally just had to be done, like it or not” (Kesey 385). Feminist critics like

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<sup>2</sup> R.W. Connell, whose book *Masculinities* was first published in 1995, bases part of her work on interviews with four groups of Australian men. The group with members who are “on the dole and have at best a spasmodic experience of employment” and who have “been in conflict with the state” (Connell 94) has been the focus of this study, because of the socio-economic and behavioral parallels with the character McMurphy.

Napierski-Prancl and Hague have written extensively on how the expectations of violence and aggressive heterosexuality in men affects women in the novel. Examples of this range from the heavily implied rape of Nurse Ratched to the sexualization of the “little nurse with the birthmark” (Kesey 364), all of which seem to aim to reduce women to “disposable receptacles for semen” (Connell 108). However, the effects of this expectation of aggressive heterosexuality on the male characters have not been as thoroughly examined.

Beginning with the example of McMurphy’s pornographic playing cards, Stephen Heath asks: “what complicity of masculinity does pornography involve me in?” (196). According to Heath, “the capitalized circulation of sexual-commodity women” is a crystallization of a social structure of sexual oppression (196). The pornographic playing cards then reinforce a masculine sexual economy which confirms women as passive, feminine “Others” to which men can contrast themselves, and in doing so allay the fear that “men might really be feminine and passive too” (196). Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément ascribe this fear to the patriarchal insistence on “the primacy of the phallus” (85). The “phallocratic ideology” Cixous and Clément describe has reduced man to a narrow, and therefore fragile, characterization of masculinity, which is always defined in contrast to a femininity (85). Since the subordinate status of women is such a prevalent and accepted notion (65), it is not surprising that Harding seems very upset at the accusation that he has “nothing between [his] legs but a patch of hair”, implying that he is essentially a woman (Kesey 80). Since the establishment of masculinity involves “the disparagement of girls and women” (Peretz 37) – a group historically described in terms of inferiority and subordination to men (Cixous and Clément 63-5) - a male demonstrating any trait considered stereotypically feminine places him in a

subordinate position to other men. A study by James W. Messerschmidt shows that defining masculinities in this contrastive way is a source of anxiety in men, which can lead to sexual assault as a method for reaffirming one's masculinity (qtd. in Peretz 36). This suggests that rape as a tool for men's dominance is a symptom of insecurity about their masculinity and a way for men to prove that they do, in fact, measure up to society's expectations of what it means to be a man. This is supported by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence,<sup>3</sup> finding that exploitation of women is a common way to prove your masculinity (Kimmel 93). McMurphy's flippant dismissal of rape, and of sexual overzealousness as a possible negative, reinforces the idea of male heterosexuality as always natural and its expression as always justifiable to some degree. McMurphy also devalues any deviations from a voracious heterosexual appetite, saying "whoever heard tell of a man gettin' too much poozle" (Kesey 19), effectively rejecting homosexuality through omission at the same time.

### **Gay is Girly**

As stated, Carrigan et al identify heterosexuality as one of the most strongly defining characteristics of masculinity. However, they also highlight the fact that "the pattern of exclusive adult heterosexuality is a historically constructed one" (93). The dominance of heterosexuality as the societal norm is "by no means universal" (93). On the contrary, "there are cultures and historical situations [...] where homosexual

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<sup>3</sup> The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence was established in 1968 and mandated to:

investigate and make recommendations with respect to: (a) the causes and prevention of lawless acts of violence in our society, including assassination, murder, and assault; and (b) the causes and prevention of disrespect for law and order, of disrespect for public officials, and of violent disruptions of public order by individuals and groups. (NixonLibrary.gov)

behaviour is majority practice (at a given point in the life-cycle)” (Connell 47).<sup>4</sup> Despite widespread historical acceptance, homosexuality became medically and legally defined as a deviant “social type” during the late nineteenth century (Connell 196). Pairing homosexual men symbolically with women, patriarchal culture opted for a “simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity” (143), while at the same time effectively declaring homosexuality a pathology (11). This has led to an almost global culture where, to prove their masculinity, men may try to violently distance themselves from the feminization that homosexuality is perceived to represent, for example through “bashing gays” (111) and where, until very recently, being gay was generally considered a choice worthy of punishment or a mental illness to be ridiculed or cured. Homophobia of this kind is both present and normalized in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

The dissociation from homosexuality implied in McMurphy’s assumptions about the normalcy of a voracious straight sexuality is more clearly expressed elsewhere in the novel. Chief Bromden, who idolizes McMurphy and his displays of masculine power, firmly rejects any notion that his devotion to McMurphy might be sexual in nature: “I want to touch him because I’m one of these queers! But that’s a lie too. That’s one fear hiding behind another” (Kesey 265). The fear of homosexuality evident in the novel is likely symptomatic of its time. 1950s and 1960s America was not a kind place for homosexuals, who were persecuted in public office and the military, and harassed by police in everyday life (Evans 245). Cold War propaganda linked being gay with the dreaded communism (245), making suspected homosexuals fair game. With such implications, it is unsurprising that Harding is upset at being accused of homosexuality (Kesey 80). Though Harding’s implied

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<sup>4</sup> Homosexuality was accepted in many native cultures of Latin America prior to Spanish colonialism (Connell 198), as well as in ancient Greece, where the practice of “*eros*” tended to be more concerned with the social status than the gender of the people involved (Pickett).

sexual orientation does not seem to distance him from the other men, the way it is suggested makes clear that it is not acceptable, either to Harding himself or to the wider world. For example, when Harding is caught weaving his hands around as he speaks, he quickly stops and hides his hands (218), as if to physically distance himself from the “hoity-toity boys [...] with the limp little wrists that flip so nice”, and who his wife says have come looking for him (219-20). “Limp wrist” is a homophobic slur not confined to the novel’s time, and used publicly as recently as the 2004 US presidential election (Harris 279-80): a sign that even in higher office, homophobia is still alive and well to this day.

Underlining the novel’s, and by extension society’s, rejection of anything but aggressive heterosexuality as acceptable in men, Harding leaves the ward in the company of his wife (Kesey 387). This suggests that he has been cured of what was, until 1973, regarded as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association (Levin). Either that, or he has chosen to resume denying his sexuality to maintain his claim to expected masculine heterosexuality, as well as his position in the society outside the ward. However, there are good reasons for why homosexuality is no longer classified as a mental illness (Levin). As Harding himself says, it was not the practices he indulged in that made him need treatment, but instead: “the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me – and the great voice of millions chanting, ‘Shame. Shame. Shame’” (Kesey 371). This societal view of homosexuality as something to be ashamed of, and something to be cured, can partly be traced to a trend between 1930-1960 to use psychoanalysis both as a tool for diagnosing homosexuality, as well as “a technique of normalization, attempting to adjust its patients to the gender order” regarded as socially acceptable (Connell 11). The psychiatric ward depicted in Kesey’s novel is explicitly concerned with

“adjusting” its patients to the outside world in this manner, which includes trying to cure Harding of his deviant and shameful sexuality. This kind of internal and external denial and disparagement of aspects of a person’s nature are major contributions to the overrepresentation of gays and lesbians with mental health problems (DeAngelis). Harding is a good example of the effects of such external disparagement, as his sexuality makes him a target for comments about aspects of his personality considered effeminate. These he takes as insults, because of the patriarchal cultures’ insistence on the subordinate nature of women. Harding also exemplifies the consequences institutionalised homophobia might have for one who internalizes it, as the end of the novel sees him returning to the closet of his marriage, portraying him as successful because of this choice to deny his sexuality. In doing so, Harding fulfils the expectation of heterosexuality with which society has imbued his gender role.

### **King of the Hill**

Gender and gender roles are socially constructed, and different types of masculine gender roles are no exception (Kimmel 6). Kimmel identifies “sexism, racism, and homophobia” as the “constituent elements” by which masculinities are created (7), based on findings from the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (93). According to him, men’s “power over other men concerns the distribution of [society’s] rewards among men by differential access to class, race, ethnic privileges, or privileges based on sexual orientation” (7). As shown, this creates a power imbalance both caused by and resulting in the subordination of femininity, and of masculinities deviating from societal ideals, to hegemonic masculinity. In addition to the belief in the inferiority of women, homosexuals, and other marginalized forms of masculinity (Connell 78) the dominance of hegemonic

masculinity also rests on a belief that real men “are ‘strong’ because [they] do not have needs” (Seidler 50). Instead, men are taught to think they are there to support those “weaker” than themselves, which extends to knowing “what is best for others” (50). This assumption of authority is connected to the contradictory biologically deterministic notion that, although men cannot be expected to control their sexual appetite or capacity for violence (Connell 45), they are also endowed with the “essentially [...] masculine quality” of reason (Seidler 50). However, it is important to note that biological determinism has often been employed to justify injustice and naturalize that which is socially constructed. Rather than authorizing this assumed dominance, Connell (111) and Kimmel (93) both see it as overcompensation in an attempt to hide insecurities. These insecurities are often based on the same fear of feminization which fuels homophobia, and Joseph H. Pleck terms the exaggerated masculine behaviour this might result in “*hypermasculinity* [emphasis in the original]”, seeing it “as a defense against the male’s unconscious feminine identification” (31).

According to Kimmel, violence and aggression such as displayed by McMurphy, along with extreme competitiveness and gnawing insecurity are “defining features of [...] a masculinity that must always prove itself and that is always in doubt” (93). Gambling, which is one of McMurphy’s fortes, is among other things an outlet for competitiveness. Connell echoes Kimmel’s analysis, stating that “there is a response to powerlessness, a claim to a gendered position of power, a pressured exaggeration (bashing gays, wild riding) of masculine conventions” (111). After having acquainted himself with the ward, McMurphy quickly attempts to situate himself at the top of its hierarchy, in accordance with this pattern of trying to prove oneself. When Billy Bibbit points out Harding as the man in charge at the ward,

McMurphy immediately challenges him, saying: "I'm accustomed to being top man. [...]. Tell this Harding that he either meets me man to man or he's a yaller skunk and better be outta town by sunset" (Kesey 27-8). Connell and Kimmel both suggest that this kind of assertiveness is really a façade meant to hide insecurities, which McMurphy's exaggerated performance seems to confirm.

Additionally, though presented jokingly, McMurphy's cowboy image is supported by this reference to a wild west duel. It also exemplifies an instance of hegemonic masculinity asserting dominance. McMurphy tries to position himself hierarchically above Harding who, though he embodies a "subordinated masculinity" often accompanying homosexuality (78), is presented as the leader of the patients. His sexuality puts Harding "at the bottom of the hierarchy among men" (78). However, gay masculinity is not alone in this subordinated hierarchical group. It can also include heterosexuals, who are often forced into this group through derogatory slurs that often aim to feminize the targets (79). As Harding tells McMurphy, "This world ... belongs to the strong, my friend!" (Kesey 81), and being feminine is considered the same as being weak. Since being weak is taboo for men, this severely limits the range of socially acceptable expressions of masculinity. These restrictions are socially enforced, through for example name calling, which Pleck suggests "prevents individuals who violate the traditional role for their sex from challenging it; instead, they feel personally inadequate and insecure" (Connell 25). Harding, as discussed, exemplifies feeling inadequate due to an inability to live up to societal standards.

Being a strong male character - "a wolf", in Harding's terms (Kesey 85) - McMurphy is quickly accepted as a leader by the men of the ward. As the leader of the Acutes, he becomes a role model and someone his followers try to emulate in

order to gain “more masculinity: plus-value of virility, authority, power” themselves (Cixous and Clément 87). McMurphy is the model of masculinity to which the rest of the Acutes try to adhere and Cheswick is the character who most obviously tries to mimic McMurphy. But when his hero fails to live up to expectations, and Cheswick himself is punished for his attempts to imitate McMurphy’s rebellious nature (Kesey 208), Cheswick chooses to end his life (210). Similarly, when trying to live up to the standard of heterosexuality described earlier, McMurphy’s insecure and neurotic protégé, Billy Bibbit, is pressured to emulate his hero’s boasted sexuality in an effort to prove his masculinity (357-8). Though many of Billy’s mental health problems can perhaps rightfully be blamed on his mother’s babying of him (355), this does not take away from the fact that Billy does suffer from a range of psychological issues, including being “[schizo]Phrenic” (363) and having suicidal thoughts (86). Although Billy says he would like to have a girlfriend, he considers himself not “big and tough” enough to get what he wants (232), to which McMurphy’s cure is sex.

Despite its nonconformist aspirations, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* has a very prescriptive notion of what it means to be a man, and one that seems mostly in line with its contemporary society. There is a great deal of pressure put on the men of the novel to conform to societal standards of masculinity, both by the psychiatric establishment and by McMurphy. McMurphy represents an extreme version of these standards, and is what Pleck might term an “*overconformist*”, since he has “responded all too fully to a particular aspect of male socialization” (51). This suggests that adherence to hegemonic masculinity norms can be overdone, since McMurphy is himself committed to a psychiatric ward. It seems a difficult balancing act to live up to the ideal.

### **Insanity is Weak**

The notion that men must always strive to be on top and never show weakness is perhaps partly to blame for the persistent refusal in patriarchal societies to acknowledge mental health problems in men. From the 1930s onwards, psychoanalysis' study of sex roles was preoccupied with "What makes men less masculine than they should be, and what can we do about it?" (Pleck 22). Since this state of being "less masculine" was judged in comparison to a prototypical hegemonic masculinity by many psychological models, this meant that any deviation from the hegemonic ideal was deemed problematic (Kimmel 14). The response of psychoanalysis to these problems was in essence very similar to McMurphy's oversimplified idea that the men of the ward only need to have some "guts" in order to "get along outside" (Kesey 232). According to Connell, mental health was to a large degree described in terms of conforming to the "gender orthodoxy" of maintaining a heterosexual relationship (11). If you did not, that showed that you were mentally ill, and the cure for that illness was to try and conform to gender orthodoxy. This was presented as an unproblematic and natural choice (11). People who were unable to follow this path were simply too weak. This simplistic approach to mental health, and the societal expectations on them not to show weakness, deters men from seeking help when they need it (Winerman). Instead, men are expected to "tough it out" on their own (Winerman).

Toughing it out is a cowboy specialty, as he is often portrayed as a tough man's man and a lone, often reckless, hero who stands up for what he believes is right (Kimmel 94). The cowboy persona, which is part of McMurphy's mythicized masculinity, is also based on the concept of self-reliance and self-sufficiency (94). A romanticized notion, this image of the ideal man as someone who deals with his own

problems and can always trust to his own inner strength, has contributed to making mental illness taboo. Harding is an excellent example of internalization of the myth of the self-sufficient man, as he says: “I want to do it on my own, by myself”, refusing the help McMurphy offers him (Kesey 370). According to Lea Winerman, “masculine role socialization” and the pervasive societal idea that men should be able to just grin and bear it, are some of the major contributing factors to why men who need psychological help do not seek it. This is the case even though men suffer from psychological problems to the same extent as, and sometimes more than, women (Winerman). Though many of the Acutes are on the ward voluntarily, it seems to be a last resort: one with limited success in helping them.

However, it is questionable whether McMurphy’s proposed cures are of any more help than the therapy offered by the ward. As mentioned, McMurphy subscribes to the idea that a “liberating eros could heal the neurotic citizens of a deathly civilization” (Gilbert and Gubar 323), and that sex is the solution to any problem a man might have. Completely disregarding Billy Bibbit’s psychological issues, McMurphy tells him that he is “just a young guy” and as such he “oughta be out running around in a convertible, bird-dogging girls” (Kesey 232). When Billy reacts to this with a sobbing breakdown, McMurphy is mystified. To his mind, since most of the Acutes are not what he deems “*nuts*”, they should just pull themselves together and leave the ward (232). He is essentially telling the men that they are wrong for seeking medical help, for not being able to “tough it out”. McMurphy thereby accuses the men of not living up to his expectations on their masculinity. In the same way, the therapy sessions on the ward attacks the men for deviating from societal expectations of what being a man means; ergo, being assertive, strong and straight. This further stigmatizes mental illness as unmanly. Barbara Ehrenreich claims that ““The practice

of manliness has become ... a lethal curse” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 328). The fact that the novel sees many of its characters committing suicide or otherwise dying because they try to live up to expectations perpetuated by a myth of masculinity, seems to confirm that claim.

## **Conclusion**

McMurphy’s empowering qualities, and his continuation of the cowboy protagonist myth so closely linked to American national identity, were discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Kesey’s reworking of this familiar masculine archetype is part of why *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* remains so popular. However, it is important to look at all aspects of this version of masculinity – including the negatives – that the novel, intentionally or not, idolizes and mythicizes. While the ideal inspires and empowers some of the ward’s patients, this thesis has found such idolization to have destructive consequences; prompting objectification and sexual exploitation of women, marginalization and denial of homosexuality, suicide, and violence. The consequences this form of masculinity has for the characters in the novel readily translate to problems arising from celebrating similar masculine archetypes in the real world.

The representation of McMurphy as a cowboyesque messiah-figure helps mythicize his brand of masculinity and due to the prescriptive nature of myths, he becomes a “sacred authority” (James 477). However, the myth describes an ideal which is unattainable, even by the man who is thought to embody it. The destructive nature of this ideal encompasses the embodiment of the myth himself. He who preaches egoism and self-sufficiency is himself reliant on and ultimately driven by the other men of the ward. McMurphy ends up an icon of a certain brand of

masculinity, and is forced to try and live up to the accompanying expectations of his devotees at considerable personal cost.

The competitiveness which the myth of masculinity reinforces also causes a constant pressure to prove how well one conforms to the ideal, and anxiety over the ways in which one does not. Billy Bibbit, who is neither self-reliant, assertive, nor sexually active, is driven to tears, self-harm and ultimately suicide when these points are driven home. Harding, who also deviates from the prescript heterosexuality the myth demands, is only given his freedom by stepping back into the closet of his marriage at the same time. An ideal of masculinity which rejects and denounces homosexuality contributes to the destructive feeling of shame and guilt which Harding expresses, and which can cause mental health issues.

Such psychological problems are also rejected or their severity diminished throughout the novel. Being mentally ill is portrayed as a sign of weakness and lack of “guts” rather than as a medical reality. When a masculinity which dismisses mental illness remains the ideal, men are less likely to seek necessary professional medical attention. By extension, including a book promoting such a destructive myth in classrooms everywhere, without challenging or problematizing it, risks perpetuating and naturalizing these issues further. To counteract this, the negative consequences of mythicizing McMurphy’s brand of masculinity should be acknowledged and thoroughly addressed, as they have been in this thesis.

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