Plot Overview

Nurse Ratched, in a black cape, walks into a locked ward of sleeping men. The first order of the day is medication, and the men line up at the nurse’s station to take their pills while the phonograph plays a soporific waltz. Like a burst of outside air, McMurphy arrives at the institution flanked by two guards. When they remove his handcuffs, he kisses one of the guards in sheer exuberance, cackling and bouncing with joy at being free.

On the ward, Nurse Ratched initially ignores McMurphy while she deals bureaucratically with his paperwork. McMurphy introduces himself to the Chief, a huge deaf-mute man sweeping the hall, then to Billy Bibbit—a stuttering mental patient with a fixation on his mother—and the other patients playing pinochle. McMurphy is loud and rambunctious, luring one patient away from the game with a deck of pornographic playing cards.

Dr. Spivey explores with McMurphy the reason he has been sent to the mental hospital from the prison work farm, where he was held previously. The doctor asks McMurphy whether he is faking mental illness to get out of work, and McMurphy admits slyly that he believes there is nothing wrong with his mind.

At McMurphy’s first group therapy session, he riffles his cards while Nurse Ratched speaks—his first gesture of defiance toward her authority. When the session deteriorates into shouting, Nurse Ratched remains straight-faced, impassively reacting at the group’s dysfunction. Later, she watches disapprovingly from a window as McMurphy tries to teach the Chief to play basketball. McMurphy also teaches the men to play blackjack. At one point, annoyed with the loud waltz music being played, he invades the nurse’s station to turn it down, thereby coming into direct conflict with Nurse Ratched, as patients are not allowed in the nurse’s station.

McMurphy’s conflict with Nurse Ratched erupts further during the World Series, when McMurphy proposes that Nurse Ratched revise the work schedule so the prisoners can watch the baseball games on television. She argues that the patients would find the
change too disruptive. However, she agrees to a vote, knowing that most of the patients lack the courage to oppose her. When only two patients vote on his side, McMurphy is shocked. Later, he boasts to the men that he plans to go downtown to watch the World Series in a bar, betting that he can escape by lifting a marble water fixture and throwing it through the window. When he fails, he says that at least he tried.

The next day in group, Nurse Ratched mercilessly presses Billy Bibbit about a girlfriend, his mother, and his first suicide attempt until Cheswick comes to the hapless Billy’s defense. Cheswick joins McMurphy in demanding the World Series, and they force another vote. When all the men in group raise their hands, Nurse Ratched informs them that the “chronics”—the most severe, withdrawn patients—also must vote. McMurphy tries in vain to get any of these catatonic lost souls to respond, and Nurse Ratched adjourns the meeting. Belatedly, the Chief raises his hand to break the tie, but Nurse Ratched refuses to count his vote. Although she appears to have won, McMurphy sits in front of the dark television screen and begins to call the baseball game play-by-play. The other men join him in wonder, cheering imaginary hits and runs under his contagious enthusiasm. Nurse Ratched demands that they stop shouting, but for once she cannot control them.

Dr. Spivey asks McMurphy about his experience on the ward thus far, and McMurphy complains about Nurse Ratched. In response, Dr. Spivey tells McMurphy he sees Nurse Ratched as one of the finest nurses on the ward. Another doctor asks McMurphy how McMurphy’s perceptions of Nurse Ratched’s unfairness make him feel and what the maxim “moss doesn’t grow on a rolling stone” means to him. McMurphy offers his explanation. The conversation ends with McMurphy flippantly showing Spivey a picture of a naked woman from his deck of pornographic cards. He asks Spivey if he knows where the woman lives.
In his frustration at being imprisoned on the ward, McMurphy climbs over the hospital fence with the Chief’s help. He hijacks the bus to take the nonrestricted patients on an outing, picking up his girlfriend, Candy, along the way and driving the men to the docks.

After boarding a fishing boat, McMurphy introduces the patients to a suspicious harbormaster, claiming that they are doctors from the mental hospital who have chartered the boat for a fishing trip. They motor out of the harbor, and McMurphy teaches Cheswick to drive the boat while the other men learn to fish. Taber catches a monster fish.

When the boat trip is done, the men return to face Dr. Spivey. The doctors decide that McMurphy is dangerous, and although Dr. Spivey wants to send him back to the prison farm, he defers to Nurse Ratched, who thinks McMurphy should stay in the institution. McMurphy later discovers that this means he is committed for as long as they think he should be—not the mere sixty-eight days left on his prison term.

Nurse Ratched suspends privileges and begins rationing cigarettes. The men question her authority, however, and she starts to lose control of the group. As Cheswick explodes in rage, McMurphy puts his hand through the glass of the nurse’s station to retrieve Cheswick’s cigarettes. When a fight breaks out between McMurphy and the lead attendant, Washington, the Chief comes to his defense.

In retaliation, Nurse Ratched sends Cheswick, McMurphy, and the Chief to electroshock therapy. As they wait, McMurphy offers the Chief a stick of Juicy Fruit gum, and the Chief thanks McMurphy, proving that he actually can speak and hear. When McMurphy reappears on the ward after his shock treatments, he rolls his eyes back and walks like a zombie to fool the men, then erupts in characteristic laughter to prove once again that he cannot be suppressed or dominated. Privately, however, he confesses to the Chief that he cannot take any more and plans to escape.
McMurphy bribes the night orderly so he can bring his girlfriend, Candy, her friend Rose, and some alcohol into the ward for a party. The men drink, play Christmas music, and dance with the girls. McMurphy removes the keys from the drunken orderly and says goodbye to the men. He invites Billy Bibbit to come with him, but Billy is not ready. Instead, McMurphy arranges for Billy to have sex with Candy, delaying his own escape. Everyone falls asleep, and in the morning Nurse Ratched finds the ward in disarray, with the window hanging open. When she discovers Billy Bibbit naked in bed with Candy, she invokes his mother’s name, making him disintegrate with shame. McMurphy tries to make it out the window, but a nurse's scream alerts him that Billy has just committed suicide. McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched, strangling her until Washington punches him senseless while she gasps for air. The guards take McMurphy away.

The Chief waits for McMurphy to come back to the ward. McMurphy returns in the night, wholly changed: he’s become a vegetable with lobotomy scars on both sides of his skull. Saying that he will take McMurphy with him, the Chief smothers his friend with a pillow. Then the Chief lifts the marble water fixture from the floor, throws it through the window, and escapes into the dawn.

Character List

Randle P. McMurphy -
Played by Jack Nicholson

McMurphy bursts into the staid institution from the outside world—he represents freedom, life, joy, and the power of the individual against a repressive establishment. Not totally likable, however, he is something of a rogue, in custody for statutory rape of an underage girl whom he claims was very willing, and he proves to be a literal pirate, commandeering a fishing boat with joyous disregard for the consequences. McMurphy takes risks to feel alive, and he tries to jar the other patients into
embracing life as well. His fishing trip is a celebration rather than a serious attempt to escape. When Candy warns him of its potential consequences, McMurphy laughs, unafraid and fully prepared to be recaptured.

McMurphy is wrong, however, that the worst the authorities can do to him is to return him to the institution—and it is a costly mistake. Compounding his error, he wagers that he can get under Nurse Ratched’s skin. But he learns that she controls the length of his sentence and that, in opposing her, he has sacrificed his release. Indeed, sacrifice is one of McMurphy’s functions as a Christ figure in the film. He performs miracles of a sort, as he makes the Chief speak and causes Billy to stop stuttering briefly at the end of the film. McMurphy also hosts a kind of Last Supper party for the men before he says goodbye. In the end, rather than save himself, McMurphy fights the forces of evil in Nurse Ratched and pays for it with his life. Yet his soul is never conquered and at the end is released through the Chief’s love—a triumph of the spirit over repression and death.

**Nurse Ratched**

Played by Louise Fletcher

If McMurphy serves as a Christ figure, Nurse Ratched is the Antichrist. She represents authority, conformity, bureaucracy, repression, evil, and death. She enters the ward in the morning wearing a black cape reminiscent of a vampire, as if to suck the lifeblood from the patients. She manages to suck out their spirits by medicating them, numbing them with routine, reminding them of their problems, and denying their individual dignity. McMurphy opposes Nurse Ratched’s dark power. When she tries to control him, her methods fail: he willfully spits out her medication and violates the sanctity of her nurse’s station. He ignores her version of reality in the dispute over the World Series and riles her enough to raise, uncharacteristically, her carefully modulated voice.

As the film progresses, McMurphy rallies the patients to rebel against Nurse Ratched’s authority and question the therapeutic value of her rules. In response, and true to her name, she ratchets up the battle between them with increasing viciousness. Hoping to turn the men against McMurphy, she blames him for taking away the patients’ privileges and cigarettes. When that tactic fails, she retaliates with electric shock treatments to deaden his mind and break his spirit. Nurse Ratched
fights more furiously after McMurphy’s party when she finds her starched white cap—the symbol of her authority—dirty and trampled on the floor. In desperation over the ward’s defiance and in an attempt to vanquish McMurphy, she shames Billy Bibbit into committing suicide. Having goaded McMurphy to violence, she justifies the surgical removal of the frontal lobes of his brain, which she assumes to be the source not only of his emotions and reasoning but also of his force and power. Yet even after McMurphy is physically subdued, his influence lives on in defiance of Nurse Ratched. The men now play his games, use his deceptions, speak his language, adopt his nicknames, and whisper legends about him. At the end of the film, Nurse Ratched’s insidious control is as damaged as her neck in its brace.

Chief Bromden -

Played by Will Sampson

At first, the Chief seems almost a caricature of an old wooden cigar-store Indian, but he grows and changes more than anyone during the course of the film. In the beginning, his defense against Nurse Ratched is complete withdrawal. By pretending to be deaf, he need neither speak nor interact with anyone. Even McMurphy’s antics do not initially pierce the Chief’s protective façade. The first sign of change comes after McMurphy climbs up the Chief’s back and arms in order to escape over the fence. McMurphy’s getaway brings a smile to the Chief’s face, because he sees for the first time that the outside world may be accessible and that rebellion may be an option. McMurphy’s energy continues to work on the Chief, who begins to reengage with life by responding to events on the ward. In an act Nurse Ratched rightly views as insubordinate, the Chief breaks the tie in favor of McMurphy in the World Series vote. He helps the inmates beat the orderlies in a game of basketball. A further breakthrough toward life and health occurs with the Chief’s first words, spoken to McMurphy to thank him not just for the comfort of a stick of gum but also for the example of his courage. Although McMurphy tells the Chief he is as big as a mountain, the Chief himself believes he is too small, too damaged, to escape. However, the Chief grows into his physical strength under McMurphy’s care, and when McMurphy returns to the ward lobotomized, the Chief decides he is now big enough to escape with McMurphy—this means he has
reached sanity. At the end of the film, the Chief goes out into the world much like the biblical Peter, the follower of Jesus who went on to build the Christian church after the death of Jesus.

Billy Bibbit -
Played by Brad Dourif

Although Billy Bibbit longs to be like the heroic McMurphy, he is not strong enough to stand up to Nurse Ratched on his own. Billy entwines his arms and legs when Nurse Ratched questions him, virtually tying himself into knots for her. A shine comes into Nurse Ratched’s eyes as she makes him suffer by reminding him of his weakness and his previous suicide attempts. Billy is so timid and fearful that he stutters his own name when he first meets McMurphy. However, McMurphy’s confidence and strength immediately charm and fascinate Billy, who becomes a devoted disciple. McMurphy tries to get Billy to realize that he should be out in the world, driving a convertible and having fun with girls. Even though Billy is a voluntary patient who can leave the misery of the ward at any time, he tells McMurphy that he is not ready, because he believes he is not strong enough to face the world. McMurphy encourages Billy’s natural longing for girls as a healthy appetite for life. By the time of McMurphy’s farewell party, Billy is sufficiently self-assured to embrace Candy in a romantic dance. When Billy confesses to McMurphy his attraction to Candy, he is confessing a desire to be the healthy, normal young man McMurphy has encouraged him to be.

The next morning, after Nurse Ratched finds him in bed with Candy, Billy speaks for the first time without stuttering. The men applaud not only for his confidence and manhood but also for his effrontery of Nurse Ratched’s control. Using her voice and the threat of his mother to shame Billy back to subservience, Nurse Ratched forces him to cower at her feet, begging for mercy. Rather than continue living under her repressive rule, Billy chooses suicide, relinquishing life, while simultaneously making an independent decision. Billy acts as the catalyst for the final battle between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, the forces of good and evil in the film.
Harding -
played by William Redfield
An intellectual patient who has problems with his wife and his sexuality. The thoughtful, articulate Harding is the leader of the ward until McMurphy appears. He follows the rules, answering Nurse Ratched’s questions in group therapy and taking his medication without complaint. He wears a mustache, along with a prissy expression, and loses his self-control only when Taber pokes at him physically or verbally. Nurse Ratched feels especially threatened when even the obedient Harding begins to side with McMurphy.

Cheswick -
played by Sydney Lassick
An anxious, fretful patient whose brow is always wrinkled in concern. With thick glasses framing his worried eyes, the diminutive Cheswick sometimes holds his breath and screws up his features until he looks like he will explode. His sense of fairness is easily frustrated, and he comes to Harding’s aid even when Harding rejects Cheswick’s assistance. McMurphy trusts Cheswick to drive the boat during their unauthorized fishing trip—before Cheswick can panic, McMurphy calms him by evoking the happiness of childhood as he sings “I’m Popeye the Sailor Man.”

Martini -
played by Danny DeVito
An inmate with a dim, foolish smile and infantile manner. Although Martini is unable to follow even the simplest rules in a game of cards or Monopoly, he loves to play and is always ready for fun. His mouth twitches and grimaces when Nurse Ratched makes him uncomfortable. Martini is fascinated by McMurphy from the moment McMurphy shows him the deck of dirty cards. Martini provides many of the comic moments of the film and is one of McMurphy’s most loyal followers.

Taber -
played by Christopher Lloyd
A hostile, belligerent, and profane patient. Taber delights in poking at Harding with ridicule and physical jabs. One of the funniest scenes in the film shows Harding finally getting even
with Taber by hiding a lit cigarette in his cuff. When Taber begins to shriek and jerk around, the orderlies think he is having a lunatic fit, but actually his ankle is burning. Taber’s long face moves rapidly from confusion to amazement to delight, and it is his series of expressions, as well as his laugh, that ends the film.

Dr. Spivey -
Played by Dean R. Brooks
The administrator of the mental institution. Dr. Spivey is a calm, mature, gray-haired doctor. McMurphy plays to Dr. Spivey’s vanity, as illustrated by a photo of a prize Chinook salmon on his desk. Dr. Spivey expresses doubt that anything is wrong with McMurphy’s mind, but he defers to the opinion of Nurse Ratched, for whom he expresses the highest regard.

Candy -
Played by Marya Small
McMurphy’s pretty, easygoing girlfriend. The good-natured Candy is willing to go along with all of McMurphy’s schemes. She asks the patients on the bus whether they are all crazy but does not judge them when they nod yes. She is gentle and understanding with Billy Bibbit and provides him with his first sexual experience.

Nurse Pilbow -
Played by Mimi Sarkisian
The nurse who carries out Nurse Ratched’s directives. Attractive and young, Nurse Pilbow shadows Nurse Ratched closely and administers the patients’ medications. She wears a pink coat in contrast to Nurse Ratched’s black one. She seems to believe that the medication she gives McMurphy is good for him. Unlike Nurse Ratched, Nurse Pilbow shrieks at the unexpected, whether it is McMurphy appearing inside the nurse’s station or Billy Bibbit lying with his throat cut.

Orderly Turkle -
Played by Scatman Crothers
The night orderly in the mental hospital. Turkle accepts McMurphy’s bribes of cash, alcohol, and the promise of a blonde, and he willingly lies to the night supervisor with
phony respectfulness. He turns a sly, blind eye to McMurphy and Candy in his eagerness to be with Rose. When he gets caught with a woman by the night supervisor, he gives up all hope of controlling the inmates and drinks himself to sleep.

**Attendant Washington** -  
Played by Nathan George  
The lead attendant. Washington enforces Nurse Ratched’s rules and exercises authority through discipline. He does not mind using force, gladly tightening a strap around his knuckles to threaten McMurphy. He enjoys manhandling the patients and pokes McMurphy with a pole simply to emphasize his authority.

**Warren** -  
Played by Mwako Cumbuka  
The second attendant. Warren’s physical presence helps keep the patients in line. He does Nurse Ratched’s bidding without comment.

**Scanlon** -  
Played by Delos V. Smith Jr.  
A bushy-haired, heavily bearded patient. Scanlon is a speechless presence during most of the film, so it is surprising when, in a group session, he challenges Nurse Ratched about being locked out of the dormitory.

**Sefelt** -  
Played by William Duell  
A short, quiet patient. Sefelt slips his own medications to his buddy and is the first to spread the rumor that McMurphy has escaped.

**Frederickson** -  
Played by Vincent Schiavelli  
Sefelt’s tall, quiet companion. Fredrickson has a lost, loony expression in his dark eyes but laughs eagerly at McMurphy’s antics.

**Bancini** -  
Played by Josip Elic
A tall, quiet patient who repeatedly claims he is tired. Bancini allows McMurphy to ride him like a horse in order to teach the Chief how to shoot a basketball.

**Colonel Matterson** -
Played by Peter Brocco

A wheelchair-bound patient, presumably the oldest in the ward. The Colonel is one of the “chronics,” who do not interact with others. During McMurphy’s Christmas party, Martini decorates the Colonel with ornaments, and he has as much fun as everyone else.

**Rose** -
Played by Louisa Moritz

A giggling, blowsy friend of Candy’s. Rose helps distract Turkle during the party and later dances with the infantile Martini’s head on her breasts.

**Night Nurse** -
Played by Kay Lee

The supervisor who investigates the ward on the night of McMurphy’s party. The night nurse is an older woman with severe gray hair. Her observant eyes and no-nonsense manner serve as one more reminder that authority watches day and night.

**Nurse Itsu** -
Played by Lan Fendors

The nurse who administers McMurphy’s electroshock therapy. Nurse Itsu has a beautifully soothing voice and gentle manner at odds with the torture she inflicts.

**The Harbormaster** -
Played by Mel Lambert

The authority figure on the dock during McMurphy’s fishing escape. The harbormaster turns away from McMurphy’s fanciful storytelling with suspicious disbelief and alerts the hospital.

**Ellsworth** -
Played by Dwight Markfield

A patient who loves to dance alone in the ward. Only at the party is Ellsworth allowed to dance to his heart’s content.
Miller -

Played by Alonzo Brown

The third and beefiest orderly. Miller is always seen with the other two orderlies, which contributes to the sense that they are not individuals so much as a single arm of authority.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

Conformity As a Threat to Freedom

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is a film with distinct political undercurrents, which are forcefully presented. When men conform to authoritarian rule, the film argues, they jeopardize not only their physical but also their mental freedom. McMurphy learns that the prison where he was held previously offered greater personal freedom than Nurse Ratched’s ward. In prison, he could have watched the World Series, served out his sixty-eight days, and then been free to go. Nurse Ratched’s authority, however, extends from the television to the term of McMurphy’s commitment, and her authority will not bear rebellion. Under her totalitarian control, McMurphy cannot even be sure what the rules are, for she rigs them to achieve the results she wants. When the men side unanimously with McMurphy the second time they vote on watching the World Series, Nurse Ratched announces calmly that the nine men with their hands up represent only half the ward and therefore are not a majority. The unresponsive patients, the “chronics,” do not threaten her control. When the Chief surprises everyone by raising his hand, she tells the jubilant McMurphy that his vote does not count, because the meeting is adjourned. Under authoritarian rule, even the appearance of democracy is subverted to maintain the status quo.
The Contradiction Between Tyranny and Sanity

As head nurse in a mental institution, Nurse Ratched should be promoting her patients’ sanity, but instead her tyranny directly subverts their mental health. She keeps the patients docile, medicated, dependent, and childlike. McMurphy tells the patients they are not loonies but men, and he encourages their manhood through fishing and basketball. The men then begin to ask reasonable questions about Nurse Ratched’s authority. Scanlon wants to know why the dormitory is locked during the day. She explains, insidiously, that time spent in the company of others is therapeutic. Cheswick demands the cigarettes she has confiscated and informs her that he is not a little child. Nurse Ratched’s oppression, however, causes Cheswick to lose control, and she keeps him in place with electroshock therapy. The men do not improve under her domination but rather disintegrate like Billy Bibbit. Nurse Ratched’s reason for keeping McMurphy on the ward, she tells the doctor, is to help him. Instead, she robs him of his vivacity and his sanity.

The Sacred Nature of the Individual

Unlike Nurse Ratched, McMurphy honors and loves the sanctity of individual human beings. He talks to the Chief, even though he thinks the Chief is deaf. He is patient with the babyish Martini, even though he cannot grasp the fundamentals of blackjack. He helps Taber catch a fish and teaches Cheswick to drive a boat. He encourages the Chief to grow through playing basketball. He intervenes on behalf of Cheswick by breaking the glass of the nurse’s station to get his cigarettes. He shows his affection for all the men, particularly Billy Bibbit, as he gives Billy the gift of his first sexual encounter, even as McMurphy realizes it will cost him his chance at freedom. In all these ways, McMurphy shows love for the unique, individual nature of each man. When McMurphy’s lobotomy robs him of the traits that made him an individual, the Chief returns his love through an act of death and resurrection. The Chief frees McMurphy, affirming that the spirit lives on after the body’s death in the minds and behaviors of the living.
Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Obstacles to Personal Freedom

The film underscores the loss of personal freedom with recurring patterns of barriers, gates, fences, bars, locks, and shackles. We hear the ward door slam ominously behind Nurse Ratched as the first sound of the movie. We see Bancini locked in overnight restraints. McMurphy first appears in manacles. Throughout the film, faces are filmed behind wire mesh and bars to emphasize the hopelessness of captivity. The glass of the nurse’s station represents the barrier between the individual and power—a barrier the patients are forbidden to cross, even though it appears more transparent than bars. McMurphy first crosses the barrier when he attempts it to turn down the music so he can think, but Nurse Ratched escorts him out, unwilling to tolerate independent thought. Later he shoves his hand through the glass, shattering the boundaries maintained by the authoritative state, with dire consequences.

Games

Games feature prominently in the film, not solely as a simple pastime but also as an affirmation of life, health, and enjoyment. McMurphy teaches blackjack and basketball, games he sees as manlier than the pinochle and Monopoly the patients play prior to his arrival. Under his coaching, the patients have the empowering experience of beating the orderlies in basketball. Enjoyment is important to McMurphy: for him, driving a boat is fun, fishing is fun, sex is fun, and games of all kinds help the patients feel alive. He tells Martini when he teaches him to fish that he is not a loony but a fisherman. In addition, the World Series take on pivotal importance in McMurphy’s battle for life against Nurse Ratched: the baseball games symbolize unity, as the ball players work as a team, and also, as a distinctly American pastime, echo the anti-authoritarian strain in American history.
The Rebel As Savior

Repeated references to Jesus draw attention to McMurphy’s role as a life-giving savior. The men follow him as disciples. When he is exasperated, McMurphy frequently invokes Jesus. He takes the patients fishing on the sea, in a literal representation of Jesus with his followers. He performs the “miracles” of getting the Chief to speak and Billy Bibbit to stop stuttering. He joins the men in the pool, dunking as if baptized. Because of his rebellion against authority, he suffers for them on the electroshock table. Finally, he sacrifices his own flight to freedom to help Billy Bibbit. Sefelt tells legends about McMurphy’s mythic escape just as the disciples spread word of Jesus’ resurrection in the Bible. When the Chief kills McMurphy out of mercy, the scene echoes the death, the tomb, and the resurrection that leads to eternal life.

Hearing As a Human Connection

Many of the film’s scenes reflect upon the sense of hearing as a means of understanding and connection among the characters. The Chief pretends to be deaf in order to withdraw from his surroundings, but McMurphy talks to him anyway as a means of establishing a human connection. His affectionate chatter begins to engage the Chief in life once again. On the other hand, the numbing music that Nurse Ratched plays is so loud that McMurphy complains he can’t hear himself think. He tells her the men wouldn’t have to shout if she would turn the volume down. Nurse Ratched, however, opposes thinking, understanding, and any other activity that would lead to healthy human relationships between the patients.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.
Keys

Over and over again, the camera focuses upon keys, and their metallic jingle echoes as the overriding symbol of authority. Nurse Ratched wears her keys on a loop over her arm like a decorative bracelet of power. She leads the men in stretches before group therapy, and her keys provide the only sound as she lifts and drops her arms. The orderlies wear their keys clipped to their belts like pistols at their sides. Orderlies control and discipline the men, and they use their keys to lock them down at night and release them in the morning. For McMurphy, keys are the means to escape. He is able to drive the men away for a fishing trip, because the keys to the bus are in the ignition. He gets Orderly Turkle drunk in order to liberate the keys from his pocket while he sleeps, then uses those keys to open the ward’s window, the portal to the world of freedom. As the orderlies drag Billy Bibbit away screaming the next morning, Washington flaunts his power by ordering McMurphy to drop the keys. McMurphy, realizing that Washington means to beat him senseless, slowly and carefully places the keys on the windowsill in admission of his failure to escape the institution’s control.

Cigarettes

In contrast to keys, cigarettes represent freedom. The men use cigarettes as chips in blackjack, each cigarette representing a dime—their only money to spend as they wish. Cigarettes provide the men with a makeshift currency, giving them power to place bets, take risks, and feel like men instead of children. In a climactic scene, Cheswick demands to know why Nurse Ratched has confiscated his cigarettes. She blames McMurphy for running a casino in the tub room and winning all the men’s money—a form of personal initiative that defies her authority. She does not want the patients to have the powerful feeling of being in control of their own lives. When Cheswick explodes, he makes clear the importance of his cigarettes, yelling that he is not a little child to have his cigarettes doled out like cookies. His desperation leads McMurphy to shatter the glass of the nurse’s
station in order to retrieve Cheswick's cigarettes, a symbol of his capacity for individual
dignity.

Pornographic Playing Cards

McMurphy's deck of dirty playing cards appears at critical moments of the film to signify his
rebellion against authority. He makes Martini his first disciple when he flashes the pictures
of naked women in his face, leading him away from the sedate game of pinochle. In his
first group therapy session, he shuffles the cards defiantly while Nurse Ratched is
speaking. McMurphy uses the cards most effectively during his evaluation by the doctors.
As they conclude, Dr. Spivey asks him if he has any questions, and he flashes a card at
the doctors, thus undermining their authority over him, openly demonstrating his contempt,
and privileging raw, sensual experience over the regular, ordered life in the hospital.

Film Analysis

The Triumphant Spark

Set in the stark depression of a mental hospital populated by lost souls, this film explores
bleak concepts of oppression, cruelty, suicide, and euthanasia, or mercy killing. Yet,
remarkably, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest celebrates life. From the moment
McMurphy enters the institution, he charges it with an unprecedented jolt of vivacity. Both
the patients and the staff are accustomed to a world deadened by sedatives and routine.
The phonograph in the nurse's station plays numbing waltz music while the patients line
up for their medications. During group therapy sessions, the patients and their nurse go
over the same ground again and again. The Chief pushes his broom around the floor to no
purpose, and the same men play the same card game at the same table day after day.
McMurphy bounds loudly into this setting, irreverent and bold, whooping at the Chief, teasing Martini away from the pinochle game, and generally upsetting the carefully established order with his energy and zest. McMurphy’s life force is so strong and compelling that it changes the men on the ward and threatens the authority that has kept them docile and compliant.

Nurse Ratched represents this authority, and she controls all the deadening influences: the drugs administered without question, the rules written on the blackboard, the unalterable work schedule, the music that cannot be turned down. Her therapy sessions have nothing to do with getting well but instead press the group into the same painful and humiliating grooves until she decides it is time to adjourn. Her entire demeanor is in opposition to McMurphy’s. Her face is stony and immobile, her voice controlled and modulated, her uniform starched and spotless.

In contrast, McMurphy’s expressions change constantly. He shouts, curses, jokes, and cackles with glee, and his hair is wild. After undergoing brutal electroshock therapy, he quips that the next woman to take him on will light up like a pinball machine. Everything about McMurphy threatens Nurse Ratched, and the two are in immediate opposition as the forces of life and death, sanity and insanity, independence and authority.

Even in the setting of a “cuckoo’s nest” and under the chilling gaze of Nurse Ratched, McMurphy manages to inspire a spark of life. Games like blackjack, basketball, and the World Series engage the other patients despite Nurse Ratched’s disapproval. Under McMurphy’s enthusiastic tutoring, the wheelchair-bound Colonel begins to sing as if he were at a baseball game, and the nearly catatonic Chief shoots baskets so the inmates can beat the orderlies in basketball.

Sex is a natural expression of delight for McMurphy, whereas it is a source of embarrassment and shame to Nurse Ratched. McMurphy believes young Billy Bibbit should be out in a convertible with a girl instead of inside the institution, but Nurse Ratched
wants Billy to feel ashamed after having sex with a girl in the ward. The most vivid celebration of life in the film occurs during McMurphy’s fishing escapade. He teaches Cheswick to drive a boat because it is fun, and he explains to Martini that he is not a loony now because he is a fisherman. McMurphy’s infectious joy teaches others to revel in simply being alive, to find identity and meaning in their experiences.

Many of the life-affirming images in Forman’s film are taken from the Christian symbolism embedded in Ken Kesey’s original novel. Raised in a religious household, Kesey knew Bible stories well. Forman weaved these threads throughout the film to provide additional depth: the patients flock to McMurphy as disciples. They become fishermen. They soak in the pool as in baptism. McMurphy performs the miracle of getting the Chief to speak. McMurphy suffers for the men, and one of them betrays him. Yet he sacrifices himself for them, dying so that his ebullient spirit might live on in each of them, rather than saving himself when he could.

Nurse Ratched believes that she—and the institution—have won when McMurphy undergoes a frontal lobotomy. His body is still alive, but everything that made up his unique spirit is gone. The film’s final affirmation of life echoes of resurrection, for the forces of death do not win. Instead, the Chief tells McMurphy, now essentially dead, that they will leave together. He smothers McMurphy’s body to free his spirit, then lifts the marble water fixture from the floor and throws it through the window. It is as if he were rolling away the stone from the tomb. As the Chief’s white-clad legs run away into the dawn, Taber begins to laugh, and music rises up in triumph.

Page-to-Screen Adaptation

The director, writers, and producers of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest faced a formidable challenge in adapting Ken Kesey’s novel into a story that would work on the screen. Kesey wrote the novel while working as an orderly in a psychiatric ward and while participating in psychology-department experiments with LSD, mescaline, and other
chemicals in order to earn extra money while attending graduate school at Stanford. He began to have hallucinations of a large Native American man sweeping the floors. The Chief became the narrator of his novel, and all the events of the story were told through his eyes. Like Kesey, the character of the Chief suffered from hallucinations: he held a firm belief that Nurse Ratched worked for an evil Combine that twisted and manufactured men. The novel became very popular with the counterculture movement after it was published in 1962, and its paranoia suited the antiwar activism of the era.

Because a film is a very different storytelling medium from a novel, Forman knew that Kesey’s story had to be changed to fit the new format, as well as updated to be relevant twelve years later. Equally problematic was the fact that psychedelic illusions of humans changing form or walls sprouting arms would not translate well to the screen, nor would the mythical Combine suit Forman’s interest in cinematic realism. The Broadway play of 1963 retained these features of the novel by having the Chief slip to the front of the stage to address the audience in asides, but this approach would look stilted on film.

To adapt the story so that it would work as a motion picture, the filmmakers changed the point of view to an omniscient, all-seeing perspective. The camera focuses upon the characters directly rather than interpreting them through the Chief’s eyes. This choice eliminated the need for both the hallucinations and the conspiracy of the Combine. Rather than being controlled by an evil machine, in the film adaptation Nurse Ratched is the ultimate authority-wielding bureaucrat. Forman understood that audiences would better relate to the struggle against a personified, rather than mechanical, enemy. His Nurse Ratched relies upon rules and her power to change them arbitrarily in order to enforce conformity over individualism.

Although Forman elected to retain many of the novel’s references to McMurphy as a Christ figure, he chose a more subtle approach for the film. For example, his electric shock table is not in the form of a cross, and McMurphy does not ask whether he gets a crown of thorns, as he does in the novel. The ending of the film, as of the novel, deals with death.
and resurrection. However, Forman modifies it for the screen: in the novel, by the time McMurphy returns from his lobotomy, most of the patients on the ward have already signed themselves out and managed to escape before McMurphy and the Chief do. In the film, all the characters are still on the ward. Forman's Chief escapes alone, leaving the window gaping open behind him for those who might choose to follow—a visually satisfying image that also underscores the importance of independent thought to a joyful life.

Important Quotations Explained

1. 

HARDING: “I'm not just talking about my wife, I'm talking about my life. I can't seem to get that through to you. I'm not just talking about one person, I'm talking about everybody, I'm talking about form, I'm talking about content, I'm talking about interrelationships. I'm talking about God, the devil, hell, heaven.”

Early in the film, during the first group therapy session, Nurse Ratched presses Harding about his relationship with his wife until he becomes frustrated and blurts out this clear summary of the film. Harding wants the men in his group to understand he is speaking of issues larger than himself, just as the film's story is meant to transcend the screen. With this speech, particularly since it comes so close to the beginning, the filmmaker signals that the film deals with these same issues. Harding says he is not speaking only of his own life but also of form, the outer appearance of things, and content, their inner meaning; he says that he is talking about everyone and their interrelationships. Both Harding and One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest address the battle between competing forces—God and the devil, good and evil, heaven and hell, sanity and insanity—within the human soul. In this way, the mental institution stands not just for larger society but for the universe, and the men in the film represent the potential for submission and celebration inherent in everyone.

The ideas in Harding’s lines recur throughout the film. The fates of the patients are interconnected, particularly those of Billy Bibbit, McMurphy, and the Chief, who frees
McMurphy’s spirit. Outward appearances within the film often are deceptive: the Chief, for example, appears to be deaf and mute, but in fact he hears and sees the underlying content and meaning of people’s actions on the ward more clearly than the others. In her nurse’s uniform and with her calm voice, Nurse Ratched appears to be an instrument of health and sanity, but in fact she prefers weakness and madness. She is a force of destruction who drives Billy Bibbit to commit suicide. The film aligns her with evil by repeatedly linking her with locks, keys, shackles, gates, and other forms of constraint.

McMurphy, the former prison inmate, initially appears to be a social misfit, but instead he forms connections with the patients, leading them toward health and sanity. The film aligns him with Jesus and the idea of salvation. The repression of the mental institution refers to hell, particularly as McMurphy is shocked on the electroshock table. McMurphy’s spirit escapes with the Chief to an afterlife, a heaven, beyond the hospital’s bars. This key speech sets up the film’s intention to treat universal issues of human significance.

2.

MCMURPHY: “You let me go on hassling Nurse Ratched here, knowing how much I had to lose, and you never told me nothing.”

In this session of group therapy, McMurphy accuses the men of betraying him by not telling him how much he was risking with his rebellious behavior. What started as a prank has taken a dire turn. This quote is the only time McMurphy comes close to expressing regret for his choices and actions. It is a moment of pause and reflection in the film as both we as viewers and McMurphy assess whether he can afford to continue his opposition to Nurse Ratched’s repression. These lines introduce the concept of betrayal and the fact that McMurphy clearly is saddened by the men’s failure to provide him with critical information about the hospital’s policies, particularly Nurse Ratched’s ability to decide the length of McMurphy’s stay. The film suggests that for McMurphy and for humanity, ignorance has devastating consequences. It further suggests that, as interconnected human beings, we have responsibilities to protect one another. With this line, McMurphy publicly acknowledges that he has pitted himself in opposition to Nurse Ratched and admits that he has gone too far to change the outcome. His friends have failed to warn him, and he has lost his physical freedom to Nurse Ratched. An unstated question seems
to hang in the air, heightening the tension of the scene. Might there yet be more for him to lose if he continues to fight her? As the scene unfolds, McMurphy must decide whether or not to escalate their conflict despite the magnitude of the risks.

3.

MCMURPHY: “Jesus, I mean you guys do nothing but complain about how you can’t stand it in this place here and then you haven’t got the guts just to walk out? What do you think you are for Christ sake, crazy or something? Well, you’re not! You’re not! You’re no crazier than the average asshole out walking around on the streets.”

After McMurphy accuses the men of betrayal, they explain that they are almost all “voluntary” rather than “committed” like him. McMurphy is filled with disbelief that any man would choose repression over freedom, particularly a young man in his prime like Billy Bibbit. By exhorting Billy to be out in a convertible, chasing girls, McMurphy extols the virtues of living life to its fullest potential. In these lines, McMurphy expresses three pivotal concepts: courage, free will, and the definition of sanity. When he tells the men they don’t have the guts to walk out when they can, he challenges their courage—a characteristic often associated with manhood.

McMurphy himself displays courage every time he opposes Nurse Ratched’s authority. Physical courage enables him to jump the fence and hijack a bus to take the men fishing. Mental courage empowers him to invent a World Series game in defiance of Nurse Ratched. His actions consistently demonstrate the importance of courage in the fight against tyranny. By choosing to oppose repression, McMurphy also demonstrates freedom of choice, or free will—a concept important in Christian belief. Free will allows humans to choose between good and evil. When McMurphy discovers that the patients have elected to subject themselves to the institution voluntarily, he reminds them that they have a choice. For emphasis, he invokes “Christ’s sake.” McMurphy implies that the choice to stay in subjugation is immoral—an act against the free will that God has granted humankind.

He goes on to assert that these men are no more insane than the average man, and indeed the question of sanity is central to the film. This line sets up the quirky individualism of the patients against the rigid conformity of Nurse Ratched. When McMurphy tells the men they are no crazier than the average man on the street, he denies Nurse Ratched’s
version of normality. Hers is confined to a narrow range of behavior carefully conscripted
by rules—her rules. A docile and sedated patient is her ideal. She employs drugs,
nighttime restraints, and lullaby-like music to keep her charges in that state. To ensure
their compliance, she uses the orderlies to discipline and subdue them. In contrast,
McMurphy’s definition of normality is as broad as the world and allows for great variation.
He makes fun of society’s labels for the insane, affectionately referring to the patients as
“lunatics” or “mental defectives” and to himself as the “bull goose loony.” When they act
like men, however, he gives them new labels, as when he tells Martini he’s no longer a
loony but a fisherman. By denying that the men are crazy, McMurphy refutes Nurse
Ratched’s definition of sanity. He challenges the men directly to exercise their free will to
live fully and with courage, and he dares them to reject the institution’s oppression of those
aims.
4.

CHIEF: “My papa was real big. He did like he pleased. That’s why everybody worked on
him. The last time I seen my father he was blind in the cities from drinking and every time
he put the bottle to his mouth, he don’t suck out of it, it sucks out of him. . . . I’m not saying
they killed him. The just worked on him, the way they’re working on you.”
The Chief’s warning occurs late at night following McMurphy’s electroshock treatments, as
McMurphy kneels beside the Chief’s bed and confesses that he can’t take the institution
anymore. The Chief, a physical giant, whispers, making himself small to emphasize his
inability to escape with McMurphy. The Chief introduces size as a measure of inner rather
than outer reality. By asserting that McMurphy is much bigger than he is, he measures with
a different yardstick—that of the heart. The Chief, who speaks very little in the film, says a
great deal in these few words. By comparing McMurphy to his father, he makes clear his
love and respect. To the Chief, the size of both men he admires is in their ability to do as
they please. They behave as men, as individuals, as rebels against institutions of authority.
The Chief implies that society represses such big men when he says that everybody
“worked on” his father. His father coped with society’s repression by escaping into alcohol.
He drank until he was blind, until he no longer had to see the injustice of his situation. Both
the cities and the mental institution stand for crowding and oppression, and neither leaves
room for such a big man. Alcohol steals more from his father than it gives him: it robs him of his dignity and vision and sucks the soul from his body. Like Nurse Ratched’s sedatives, alcohol provides only the illusion of killing the pain. McMurphy assumes that drinking killed the Chief’s father, but the Chief suggests that something far worse can happen to a man than the death of his body. Repression works on a man and makes him smaller, blinding him and draining the manhood from him. This is what happened to the Chief’s father, and it is what the Chief sees happening to McMurphy. The Chief speaks near the end of the film with the voice of prophecy and doom so that McMurphy—and viewers—will heed his lesson.

5.

**NURSE RATCHED:** “Now calm down. The best thing we can do is go on with our daily routine.”

Nurse Ratched ushers the men into the corridor after Billy Bibbit’s suicide to deliver this brief line, which encapsulates her entire character and belief system. While the others, including the shrieking Nurse Pilbow and the gasping patients, react with horror to Billy’s bloody corpse, Nurse Ratched projects an unnatural discipline. Her cold control betrays her heartlessness. No matter how genuinely appalling the event, Nurse Ratched insists upon quiet, order, and routine. Her need to control every aspect of behavior on the ward extends to a need to direct even how the men should feel. In her tyranny, she tries to strip them of their natural emotions and deaden their sensitivity with routine. In light of the men’s affection for Billy, her demand for calm and order is not only grossly inappropriate but also a mad distortion of human nature. With these words, the film portrays her as more insane than the mental patients.

In contrast, McMurphy’s selfless rage, which wells up as she delivers this directive, comes from his emotional sanity. He grips her throat with his bare hands as if to choke off the evil of her words. Without regard for himself, McMurphy grapples her to the floor as if wrestling the devil. While he shakes her neck, her carefully arranged hair comes undone, marking her loss of authority and control. The film suggests that McMurphy’s attack on Nurse Ratched is far more than revenge for Billy Bibbit’s death: he is fighting for humanity, for the individual’s right to be loved, respected, and mourned.
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest