

Sanity and Society

An important element of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the way that the majority of the story is told from a controlled and authoritarian environment in the ward. It is made clear that "The Big Nurse tends to get real put out if something keeps her outfit from running like a smooth, accurate, precision made machine."(25) We know that this controlling way of running things shows in her interactions with the patients, as well as with the staff, "They're all more relaxed now, certain they've come round to the plan she was wanting."(135) She makes sure that everything in the ward is running exactly as she planned and everybody in it submits to her authority. However, when McMurphy comes to the ward, he challenges the Nurse's authority, introducing the central conflict to the story. This conflict between authority and rebellion causes the reader to question their own relationships with authority and why we choose to succumb to them or not.

One element of the ward that McMurphy's rebellion makes us question is whether the Nurse's controlled environment is actually beneficial to the patients. An example of this in action is when Nurse Ratched denies McMurphy's request to change the schedule so they can watch the World Series. She claims that it is for the well-being of the patients, as they need a certain schedule to be happy. This is backed up by Billy Bibbit, who on page 104-105 says "Some of us have b-been here for fi-fi-five years, Randle. And some of us will b-be here maybe th-that muh-muh-much longer, long after you're g-g-gone, long after this Wo-world Series is over" reinforcing that some of the chronic patients need the exact schedule to function properly. But McMurphy makes us question whether this is really true, or if they have just adapted to the Nurse's wishes for them to live each day in a precise predetermined way. This comes to a head when many of the patients sit in front of the blank TV rather than do the work around the ward they are expected to do. At that moment we question whether they really want the predetermined path, and would rather be able to live more freely from day to day. This moment makes the

reader think about their own lives and whether or not they enjoy following the predetermined steps they follow. This is a large internal struggle for me, because I typically force myself to follow a precise and predetermined schedule every day, much like the Nurse does with her patients, as I think it is the only way I can be happy. But sometimes, another part of me wishes to live a more free flowing life on a day to day basis where I could experience life more fully. While the patients in the ward obviously have more of a need for structure, this scene makes the reader question whether the patients need that structure as much as Nurse Ratched claims, and whether we need our structure as much as we claim.

Another powerful moment in the story comes by way of a vision of Chief Bromden. As he sits in the car driving towards the beach with the guys from the ward he makes a representation of the combine, which is his word for the powers that be that want to control and shape us into doing their pleasing. He has a vision of “Five thousand houses punched out identical by a machine and strung across the hills outside of town” and “five thousand kids lived in those five thousand houses owned by those guys that got off the train.” He then talks about how interchangeable all the houses and kids were that none of them stood out, but “The only one they noticed was the little kid at the end of the whip. He’d always be so scuffed and bruised that he’d show up out of the place wherever he went.” My interpretation of this was that it was a clear metaphor for all of the people in the ward, Bromden included. They were the ones that could not conform to the combine, they could not conform to the designs of the “guys that got off the train.” Because of this, they were the ones that stood out and were ostracized, being sent out of sight into a ward, rather than the combine and the strange organization and control of everyday people. This vision is very powerful and makes me think about why I conform to the norms of society. I would be one of the five thousand kids going to houses strung across the hills, yet I think of the kids that are scuffed and bruised as the strange ones because they can’t conform to our strange social norms. It makes me reconsider how I treat people who are dealing with issues

and are unable to please the powers that be sufficiently, and it makes me want to change the way that we decide what is “normal” and what “stands out.” It makes me realize that I only conform to those norms because they are the only way to survive. we need to conform to the combine to be accepted by others and live a “successful” or “ordinary” life that we have been taught to desire.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a book that is filled with themes of rebelling against and questioning authority. The conflicts that the characters face as part of their lives in the ward and due to their mental illnesses make the reader question their own relationships with authority. It makes them think about whether the norms they have accepted and habituated to are really what is best for them, or if we are just conforming to the combine's unending need for order and structure. It made me question why we ostracize certain groups of people, and whether we should really be looking at ourselves and the society around us with that same scrutiny.