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Captain Ahab and Her Crew

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the novel's anti-hero R.P. McMurphy unexpectedly parallels Moby-Dick. In the infamous Melville classic, Moby-Dick bites off the leg of Captain Ahab. Ahab thusly convinces his crew to join him in a revenge-filled quest to kill the white whale. The life of R. P. McMurphy presents a similar journey. While McMurphy attempts to restore the masculinity of the men on the ward so the men can live freely as they once had before the women's liberation movement, women such as Nurse Ratched endeavor to hunt down these men and emasculate them. Consequently, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, an anti-feminist novel written in opposition to the rising women's rights movement, presents a case for the hunted man. The women in the novel strive to control the men in the ward and remove any form of masculinity from their lives. The film adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* furthers this hunter-versus-hunted dynamic between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy. Ratched and McMurphy exemplify to readers and viewers that an oppressed group in power will only lead to the subsequent abuse of said power, according to Kesey's narrative.

Readers are aware of Ahab's revenge-related reasoning throughout Captain Ahab's search for Moby-Dick; Nurse Ratched's reasoning, however more subtle, is also evident to readers. Moby-Dick bit off Ahab's leg and Captain Ahab will remain at sea until he exacts his vengeance on Moby-Dick. So too, does Nurse Ratched remain at sea. As the novel presents a ward in which women are in power, Nurse Ratched represents women in general. Women, for countless generations, were ignorantly treated as lesser beings to their male counterparts. Even

with the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, socially ingrained sexism still remained. Simply put: a man's life was much easier when he could freely pursue his passions under the assumption that a woman would always be around to prepare his meals, raise his children, and clean his home, all the while assuming the home was a woman's place. The emergence of women's rights threatened men's rights.

Through countless generations, however, the collective manhood symbolized through Moby-Dick had been gnawing at the leg of women through forms of systematic oppression until, finally, the whale bit off the entire limb. Women, symbolized through Captain Ahab, were thusly forced to fall even further behind men. When women like Nurse Ratched realized, or eventually admitted aloud that women were equal to men and subsequently just as powerful as Moby-Dick, early feminists began to wonder why the systematic oppression of women had been permitted for so long. Nurse Ratched, embodying these first, angry women, subsequently works where she can prove her power over men as a woman: a mental ward. Liberated, empowered, and in search of revenge, Nurse Ratched begins her quest to capture the male embodiment of Moby-Dick.

As the head nurse of the mental ward, Nurse Ratched exerts her power over men daily. In her ward, Nurse Ratched stifles masculinity. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* suggests women in power will only abuse their power due to a long history of oppression, and Ratched exemplifies this notion as an oppressed woman finally in a position of power over the men who have suppressed her rights for so long. Ratched's method of revenge is simple: "If she can't cut below the belt she'll do it above the eyes," (Kesey 191). The men in Ratched's ward have been emasculated, and now succumb to Ratched's power. These men may not be the embodiment of male dominance for whom Ratched has been searching, but these men certainly represent smaller

whales Captain Ahab spears along the way. Two exceptions to Ratched's rule are Dale Harding and Chief Bromden.

Dale Harding and Chief Bromden are seemingly the only patients in the ward who realize Ratched's elaborate plan for emasculation. Harding and Bromden, of course, are attuned to Ratched's plan since they have previously been targeted by women (Vera Harding and Mary Louise Bromden) who, in the novel, serve as members of Captain Ahab's crew. By the time Bromden and Harding reach the ward, they have already been emasculated, which is to say they have lost their power in male-dominated society and now succumb to women in charge. However, one patient who has not lost any control upon commitment to Nurse Ratched's ward is R.P. McMurphy, whose dominance is evidenced clearly in the screen adaptation of the novel.

In order to clearly set up the hunter-versus-hunted dynamic, many extraneous characters are removed from the film adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Namely, although Nurse Ratched's crew of women seek to emasculate men on the outside world, Nurse Ratched remains to man the boat practically by herself in the mental ward in her search for Moby-Dick in the film. For example, Mary Louise Bromden receives little mention in the film, and much of Bromden's background is removed to typify Bromden as another victim of emasculation at the hands of Nurse Ratched. Likewise, Vera Harding is only brought up in therapy sessions, as an example of female dominance over the men in her ward. The ward of homogenous, emasculated men is therefore challenged dramatically when McMurphy arrives.

McMurphy's initial night on the ward results in the first, explicitly stated allusion to *Moby-Dick*. Narrator Bromden observes McMurphy: "He goes to getting ready for bed, pulling off his clothes. The shorts under his work pants are...covered with big white whales." When McMurphy notices Bromden looking at his boxers, he explains they are from a classmate at

Oregon State, who gifted them to McMurphy because ““she said I was a symbol”” (Kesey 84). Already, McMurphy admits to his symbolic role in the novel. McMurphy embodies Moby-Dick in human form, which in regards to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* means McMurphy is also the human embodiment of the male dominance Nurse Ratched strives to defeat. The next morning, when Nurse Ratched encounters McMurphy in his boxers, she “glares at those big white whales leaping round on his shorts in pure wordless outrage” (99). Ratched and her crew have been targeting men in general, but now Ratched has found Moby-Dick himself. If Ratched can capture McMurphy, a larger-than-life man, she can prove to the ward and men everywhere the true lengths of her power. McMurphy, however, also has a plan to reaffirm male-dominance on the ward.

McMurphy, while attempting to reclaim masculinity for the ward, acts abrasively. In the film adaptation, McMurphy breaks the glass divide between Nurse Ratched and the patients. In the novel, he does this more than once. The film, however, allows for viewers to truly see McMurphy's power over Ratched. At times, Ratched is truly furious with McMurphy. When McMurphy narrates the World Series game, for example, he incites the dissension of the entire ward, including Harding and Bromden. The men are far too engrossed with McMurphy to listen to Nurse Ratched's yelling. With McMurphy firmly in charge of the ward now, his fellow patients finally regain the masculinity that has been so denied under Nurse Ratched's regime. McMurphy converts not only patients who have been emasculated at the hands of Nurse Ratched, but also patients such as Dale Harding and Chief Bromden, who were previously emasculated by members of Ratched's metaphorical crew. McMurphy's reign over the ward threatens to conclude, however, when Nurse Ratched's desperation to remove masculinity from her society results in a final confrontation between the two.

Moby-Dick takes Captain Ahab to the bottom of the sea during their final battle at the end of *Moby-Dick*. So too, does McMurphy drag Nurse Ratched with him to the depths of their struggle for power. This scene is stated explicitly in both the novel and film. After Billy Bibbit's suicide, for which both blame the other, McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched. McMurphy strangles Nurse Ratched in both versions, as the men of the ward (including Harding and Bromden) watch. Ratched's patients see this confrontation as the final stage to completely restoring their masculinity. If McMurphy can defeat Nurse Ratched, masculinity can regain control. If Nurse Ratched can get the upper hand, however, she and her crew of powerful women could dominate indefinitely over their former oppressors. Chief Bromden, narrator of the novel, captures the moment in which the man fighting for masculinity gives in to his desperation: "[McMurphy] let himself cry out: A sound of cornered-animal fear and hate and surrender and defiance...when he finally doesn't care anymore about anything, but himself and his dying" (Kesey 319). Both McMurphy and Ratched have fought mercilessly for their causes. Both the film and movie capture the anxiety in their faces and attitudes as they battle.

Ratched loses her hold on the ward after this final battle. Despite McMurphy's eventual death, his gallant last effort to reclaim the masculinity of the ward results in success. Like Captain Ahab, Ratched is left at the bottom of the sea, drowning in reclaimed femininity and oppression. At the bottom of the sea, although once again out of her sight, looms Moby-Dick. His power has been firmly reestablished over women, and specifically Nurse Ratched. The oppressed are no longer able to abuse their power, and men are, as McMurphy intended, once again more dominant over women.