



2016

## Contrasting Biblical Themes in the Novel and Film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Madeline Gibson '19

Illinois Wesleyan University, [mgibson1@iwu.edu](mailto:mgibson1@iwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/gateway>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gibson, Madeline '19, "Contrasting Biblical Themes in the Novel and Film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" (2016). *Outstanding Gateway Papers*. 12.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/gateway/12>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by Writing Program Committee at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Madeline Gibson

GW 100

2 May 2016

Contrasting Biblical Themes in the Novel and Film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

In the beginning of the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Chief Bromden and his fellow patients in the psychiatric ward of the hospital are confined in a strict environment, subject to the cruel decisions of those in control, and convinced that there is no way to escape. Renewed hope for the patients comes in the form of the newly-admitted Randle McMurphy, who serves as an advocate for the overthrow of the authoritative forces controlling the ward, specifically Nurse Ratched. As savior of the ward, McMurphy frees the patients from oppression and helps them rediscover their strengths. Clear similarities exist between the plot of the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and the events leading up to Jesus's crucifixion in the Bible; however, the film adaptation of novel reduces these profound biblical depictions to simple interactions that lack deep meaning. Though the novel is incredibly notable and complex, with abundant subtleties, the film's omission of important biblical themes renders the movie average and superficial in comparison.

Throughout the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Nurse Ratched exhibits characteristics that mirror the Pharisees of the Bible. Both the Pharisees and Nurse Ratched feel threatened by a new leader in their territories, especially because these new leaders are trusted and popular among the people. In hopes of retaining power over the people, the Pharisees try to trick Jesus into saying something in contradiction with the laws of Moses, to assure his condemnation and the public's distrust. Likewise, Nurse Ratched exerts her authority as often as possible in an attempt to tame McMurphy's influence in the ward, or, rather, to keep him from "preaching his word." For example, Nurse Ratched denies

McMurphy's request to lower the volume of the music in the ward, claiming that the sound is set to a certain level for the deaf men and Chronics, rather than admitting she simply does not want to comply with McMurphy (Kesey 93). Nurse Ratched is equally reluctant to agree to McMurphy's request to watch the World Series, stating that "'the schedule has been set up for a delicately balanced reason that would be thrown into turmoil by the switch of routines'" (103), though, again, her true reason for declining is spite. Later, she tries to instill distrust in the other patients by convincing them that McMurphy is a con-man, rigging bets to steal the patients' money. "'...Mr. McMurphy isn't one to run a risk without reason. You would agree to that, wouldn't you?'" (228). Nurse Ratched succeeds in instilling some doubt about McMurphy's intentions in the patients' minds, but, much like in the Bible, the patients' faith in their savior overpowers any uncertainty.

Unlike the novel, the film adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* portrays Nurse Ratched as a woman simply trying to do her job rather than an authority figure seeking only to retain power. When Nurse Ratched denies requests made by McMurphy for a lower music volume and to watch baseball, her answers seem genuine and full of concern for the patients. Any underlying desire to disagree with McMurphy is masked or otherwise not present in the film adaptation. The film portrays McMurphy and Nurse Ratched's relationship as that of an obnoxious kid and a school teacher rather than that of a Christ-like revolutionary leader and a threatened figure of authority seeking to harm him.

The most direct biblical analogy made in the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that is omitted from the movie is the foreshadowing of McMurphy's "crucifixion." Due to his disruptive behavior, McMurphy is condemned to receive electroshock therapy in the Disturbed ward. Upon arriving, he is disrobed, his wrists and ankles are strapped onto the table, and McMurphy himself calls the salve and electrodes on his forehead his "'crown of thorns'" (Kesey 244). Much like Jesus is offered an opportunity to prove he is the son of God

and avoid being crucified, McMurphy is offered a way out of the electroshock therapy, “to admit he was wrong” by indicating and demonstrating “rational contact” (242). McMurphy does not comply; rather, he undergoes the treatment without medication, enduring the full effects of the pain just as Jesus suffers in his crucifixion. McMurphy survives the treatment, an indication that the electroshock is not his true crucifixion, but rather a foreshadowing of the crucifixion that is to come, his lobotomy. Though McMurphy also receives electroshock therapy and a lobotomy in the film adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the entire crucifixion analogy is not present, largely because McMurphy is portrayed as a superficial con-man rather than a loving savior. His joking tendencies, greediness, and masculinity are portrayed as inherent characteristics whereas in the novel they are overshadowed by his intended purpose of saving the patients. Very little time is dedicated to McMurphy’s electroshock therapy in the movie, but in that segment of the film, McMurphy appears nervous and takes medication before receiving treatment. He “takes the easy way out,” a direct contrast to Jesus’s behavior at his crucifixion.

Jesus’s crucifixion results from the betrayal of Judas, one of his followers, who agrees to lead the Romans to Jesus in exchange for money. A similar event occurs in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* when Billy claims McMurphy made him sleep with Candy. Nurse Ratched, still analogous to the Pharisees of the Bible, pressures Billy into the betrayal of his friend, but rather than tempting him with money as Judas is tempted in the Bible, she threatens to tell Billy’s mom what he has done. As soon as McMurphy’s name comes out of Billy’s mouth, power is symbolically transferred to Nurse Ratched. Nurse Ratched will ultimately use this power to crucify McMurphy. The betrayal scene in the film does not carry the same weight as do comparable scenes from the novel and Bible. In the movie, McMurphy truly does pressure Billy into sleeping with Candy and therefore is unworthy of sympathy.

The scene in the film depicts a moment of honesty rather than a defining moment resulting in the death of an innocent man.

After his lobotomy, McMurphy effectively dies; though he is alive, his once vibrant eyes and inappropriate comments are gone. Upon looking at him, one patient says, “‘there’s nothin’ in the face. Just like one of those store dummies...’” (Kesey 278). Though McMurphy’s body dies, his legacy of self-realization and freedom from oppression lives on in the patients. Like Jesus dies so that his followers can live, McMurphy dies so the patients can live. McMurphy’s uplifting ideology is responsible for the mass exodus of newly confident and competent patients from the ward. Jesus, too, leaves legacies of social liberalism and love that live today even though his body is dead. When McMurphy dies in the movie, Bromden reveals the sense of empowerment that McMurphy gives him, but that sentiment can hardly be attributed to the fact that McMurphy is a Jesus figure, seeing as no other biblical parallels are present in the film. In the film, McMurphy is more of a mentor and role model than a savior.

The varying presentations of thematic elements in the film and novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* make it difficult to synthesize information from both sources and extract morals common to both works. In cases such as this, one must rely on the original work to find the true story that is being told. As intended by Ken Kesey, McMurphy is a savior who has the express purpose of helping the patients at the cost of his own life, a journey that resembles that of Jesus in the Bible. This theme is critical in capturing the essence of the novel, and the theme’s subsequent omission from the film results in a work that lacks the richness and complexity of the novel.