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FLM151: Section B — Fall 2016

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Film Analysis #3

Character

1. Describe the *Protagonist* and the *Antagonist* and cite at least three specific *Beats* where we see them in conflict.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest is a battle of wills between Randle McMurphy, a troubled free spirit, who is committed to the oppressive ward of the contemptible Nurse Ratched. McMurphy is the embodiment of “freedom, anarchy, self-gratification and bucking the system” (Ebert). These traits help cement McMurphy as a character that the viewers will like, despite his flaws which have landed him in jail. McMurphy is the rebel that the viewers want to root for throughout the film. Ratched, on the other hand, is an authority figure whose “duty and righteousness” are qualities we “have been taught to fear in a certain kind of female authority figure” (Ebert). McMurphy, the protagonist, and Ratched, the antagonist, are complete opposites who conflict with one another throughout *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, like a reckless rebel versus a staunch authoritarian.

The first beat of the movie helps establish the relationship of conflict between McMurphy and Ratched. The first therapy session between the patients and Ratched has McMurphy witnessing just how cruel McMurphy's treatment of the patients really is. Dale Harding seems like a strong and opinionated man at first, but then Ratched manipulates the group into discussing Harding's shame and he is emasculated in front of everyone (00:17:03 – 00:20:52). It is at this point in the film that McMurphy first sees how Ratched's therapy turns the patients against each other and uses their shame to figuratively castrate them (Shmoop). This moment defines the character of Ratched and gives McMurphy's character a purpose. McMurphy spends the rest of the film challenging her treatment of the patients at the ward.

The next beat of conflict between McMurphy and Ratched comes when McMurphy realizes how much control Ratched has over his future at her ward. Upon returning from their fishing trip, the board of doctors want to return McMurphy back to the prison farm, but Ratched insists that they “must not pass our responsibilities on to someone else” (01:05:58 – 01:06:55). Ratched firmly contradicts her male administrators in a character defining moment of the film (Ebert). This moment shows the viewer that even though Ratched could have gotten rid of the man who has been challenging her authority she is determined instead to break McMurphy herself.

The most intense beat of conflict between McMurphy and Ratched occurs immediately after the death of Billy Bibbit. After a raging party, the patients are confronted by Ratched and she threatens Billy by using his fear of women to find out exactly what happened (01:58:10 – 01:58:51). This fear is so intense for Billy that he commits suicide for fear of Ratched's threat and this causes McMurphy to nearly choke Ratched to death in a fit of rage (Wikipedia). The

conflict between McMurphy and Ratched comes to a head at this point, showing the viewer that Ratched's cruelty knows no bounds and that McMurphy can only be pushed so far. McMurphy loses the battle when this incident allows Ratched to order McMurphy to be lobotomized, thus ending their conflict for good.

2. Identify at least 4 supporting characters and how they contribute to the conflict.

Chief is a patient at the ward who pretends to be deaf and unable to speak. Chief eventually lowers his guard around Randle McMurphy and admits to him that he can hear everything that everyone says and tells outside of the doctor's office when they get in trouble (01:22:30 – 01:23:40). Chief contributes to the conflict by attempting to "protect McMurphy when he gets into a fight with the orderlies" (Shmoop). By coming to McMurphy's aid Chief helps validate McMurphy's position in the conflict. Chief also acts as a goal for McMurphy, as McMurphy is encouraged to help make Chief feel strong and courageous. Unfortunately, Chief "fails to protect the man he has come to see as a savior" when McMurphy returns to the ward lobotomized (Shmoop). Chief's failure galvanizes his resolve and finally gives him the courage to leave the ward in the same way McMurphy attempted to earlier in the film (02:09:32 – 02:11:12).

Billy Bibbit is a nervous patient at the ward who has an extreme stutter and a fear of women. Billy's contribution to the conflict comes as the result of his suicide. Upon catching Billy with a prostitute, Nurse Ratched threatens to tell his mother (01:58:10 – 01:58:51). This threat causes Billy to fear for the "loss of his mother's love", thus plunging Billy into an emotional breakdown that ends in his suicide (Wikipedia). Billy's suicide causes Randle McMurphy to lose control and start choking Nurse Ratched, bringing about the decision to have McMurphy lobotomized.

Dale Harding is an opinionated patient who at first appears strong enough to withstand the emasculating treatment that Nurse Ratched employs in the ward. Harding's contribution to the conflict comes from the first meeting that Randle McMurphy attends when they discuss Harding's shame (00:17:03 – 00:20:52). McMurphy sees how Nurse Ratched treats the men at the ward, "taking away the men's power by exploiting their weaknesses and turning them against each other" (Shmoop). This first meeting acts as the catalyst McMurphy's crusade against the ward, thus starting the conflict between him and Nurse Ratched.

The orderlies under Nurse Ratched are a natural extension of Nurse Ratched and her unfair rule over the ward. The orderlies contribute to the conflict by exacting Nurse Ratched's punishment upon the ward. They apply excess force in restraining the patients,

even when they are already in pain, and taunting them by saying things like “I’ll break your f***ing face” (01:17:27 – 01:18:55). This kind of behavior makes it seem like the orderlies actually “enjoy humiliating the patients and exerting their power over the men” (Shmoop). This excessive use of force drives McMurphy, and even a few of the other patients, to fight back and escalate the conflict even more.

Works Cited

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