



## **“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” (1975)**

**Essay by DeShawn Hill**

Have you ever wondered why some of the greatest films ever made originate from novels? Why, in those adapted films, the characters seem to beam with life, emotion, and specific authenticity? I personally believe it is because in a truly great novel, the details are limitless. Due to the freeform writing style and the sheer amount of words available, the reader is able to envision and be consumed by the story... without a monitor, a cellphone or television remote!

Those intricate details found in great novels are what allow a reader, or in this case, the talented screenwriters and directors of the film, a bevy of rich and opulent options with which to build his or her story. “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975) directed by Milos Forman and starring Jack Nicholson is the perfect example of this.

Deriving from the 1962 novel of the same name, this film is set in an Oregon psychiatric ward where the lively and rebellious Randle Patrick McMurphy has connived his way into serving his six-month prison sentence. Early on, the theme of ‘man vs. law’ is plainly stated in our very first on-screen encounter with an authority figure, yielding us the award-winning film's first perfect line of dialogue. In defense of his slap-on-the-wrist sentencing, R.P. McMurphy laments to the head doctor in bratty defiance – “it ain't up to me, Doc! It ain't up to me!”

Soon after, we are introduced to several unique and bizarre characters in the ward. All ranging in varying levels of social and mental disabilities. None more solemn and sure of her own schedules and regulations than the quietly intense, Nurse Mildred Ratched. Between the two, R.P. McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, there is a constant struggle for power over the patients, often leaving McMurphy to seem just as crazy and wild as his new bunkmates.

In one of their earliest meetings, we get to see just how the two rivals stack up as R.P. McMurphy joins in on a routine group meeting involving several of the ward's patients. Discussing their respective situations, most publicly, Mr. Harding's relationship problems, R.P. shuffles his deck of cards obnoxiously, purposefully distracting from the matter at hand. A sharp glance from the head nurse is enough to make him stop, but not before her grip on the group of riled up patients begins to slip. Attacks against Mr. Harding's relationship being the spark of it all. An animated ruckus breaks out in all directions.

I believe this is when we, as an audience and R.P. McMurphy alike, get a true glimpse of what the would-be prisoner has gotten himself into. We learn here that R.P. McMurphy is actually living with several very damaged and possibly dangerous people, and that at this point, his prison-stint-turned-vacation may not be all that it's cracked it up to be.

The cinematography and production design of this film lean into this message as well, with the majority of the film being set in a drab concrete building, housing each patient in equally drab white gowns. This choice, though simple, informs the idea of mandated conformity for all the ward's patients and is contrasted only by the brief but beautiful shots of the majestic Oregon landscape, giving each lucky audience that sees this film, and maybe even a few of our unwitting characters, a longing for true freedom beyond the walls of the Oregon State Hospital these men so comfortably call home.

After seeing Nurse Ratched's process in action, emotionally and mentally manipulating her patients into behaving in the ways she deems fit, or as R.P. McMurphy puts it "...a rigged game," he decides to battle back. Attempting to empower his fellow inmates at every turn instead of letting them bow to the nurse's every wish.

"What do you think you are, for Chrissake, crazy or somethin'? Well, you're not! You're no crazier than the average asshole out walkin' around on the streets, and that's it." he exclaims, pleading with the inmates to understand the natural agency of their own manhood.

Towards the end of the film, in a similar attempt to empower the men, R.P. McMurphy sneaks alcohol and girls into the ward for a night of fun before he attempts his break out. Unfortunately for R.P. McMurphy, he gets too drunk, and amidst all the fun of the party, has forgotten to escape the ward like he planned. He wakes to a commotion and the child-like Billy Bibbit being accosted by the seething Nurse Ratched. She reprimands him sternly after he is caught sleeping with one of R.P. McMurphy's women. Seeing his joy at what he had done, Nurse Ratched threatens to tell his mother, sending Billy into a nervous frenzy. He rushes away to kill himself with broken glass. Seeing this, R.P. McMurphy attacks the nurse violently for what he believes caused Billy's death. He strangles the helpless nurse until he is forcibly removed by several security guards.

Randle Patrick McMurphy nearly made it out of the cuckoo's nest, but his desire to inspire his fellow inmates and show them a piece of the life that they could otherwise be living, ends up

costing him his own. Now lobotomized and unconscious, R.P. McMurphy, a once rebellious and lively man who made his bones by playing the system and trying his luck, has ultimately lost the game. Snuffing out his vibrant and radical existence in exchange for a drone-like vegetable state, the irony is palpable.

There is only one man in this story that will experience that wild, open world again. Free of pill-time and group schedules is the silent and strong Chief Bromden. Reinvigorated by the things R.P. McMurphy had shown him in their time together, he claimed to feel “as strong as a damn tree” before his exit. Maybe Randle Patrick McMurphy's best friend in the ward and soon to be his only living commemoration, the giant man yanks a cement control panel from the floor, (the same one that R.P. McMurphy could not in a fiery earlier scene, perhaps foreshadowing his failed battle against Nurse Ratched's systemic control) and slings it powerfully through a nearby window.

In Chief Bromden's exit, his last act of friendship is to free R.P. McMurphy in the same way he had attempted to free the Chief and the rest of the inmates. First, with the mind and then with the body. He pulls a pillow over R.P. McMurphy's frozen face and allows the dampened spirit to rest forever. The Chief takes off into the foggy morning of the open world, free to live and choose for himself. As all men should be.

“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” is a powerful film about rebellion-ism, authoritative control and the comradery of man. If you haven’t seen this five-time Academy Award winning film, I suggest that you do, or in the words of the troubled but oddly righteous R.P. McMurphy – “At least try, goddammit! At least do that!”

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress. “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” (1975) was added to the National Film Registry in 1993.

DeShawn Hill is an American-born writer and director with a passion for authentic and heartfelt films, and the lessons and reprieves that they supply. Born in Champaign, Illinois, with a near-fatal heart defect, DeShawn was mostly relegated to the TV room. There he would grow a fondness for the medium and begin to cultivate his own appreciation for the lively scenarios and passionate moments depicted on screen. This essay was posted in October 2024.