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The Portrait of the Trickster in

Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

A B S T R U C T

This paper explores the significance of the trickster as a character in post-modern literature, with a specific focus on Ken Kesey's renowned novel, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." (1962). The trickster archetype holds a prominent position in literature. It represents rebellion, wit, and transformative actions. Through an analysis of Kesey's portrayal of the trickster as a character, the paper delves into the importance of the trickster's role in challenging authority and effecting change within the confines of mental institutions. In "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," the trickster manifests itself in the form of Randle McMurphy, a rebellious figure who defies the oppressive authority of Nurse Ratched and the institutional system. The paper highlights the paradoxical nature of McMurphy as a trickster with a noble dimension. Though employs various tactics, such as humor, rebellion, and manipulation, his ultimate goal is to empower the patients and restore their individuality. Kesey's portrayal of the trickster character demonstrates its importance in post-modern literature as a vehicle for critiquing oppressive systems and inspiring transformative change.

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صورة المخادع

في رواية كين كيسي "أحدهم طار فوق عش الوقواق

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الخلاصة:

يتناول البحث أهمية شخصية المخادع في أدب ما بعد الحداثة، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على رواية كين كيسي الشهيرة "أحدهم طار فوق عش الوقواق" (1962). تحتل شخصية المخادع مكانة بارزة في الأدب، حيث يمثل التمرد والدهاء والانشطة الثورية. ويعرض البحث أهمية دور المخادع في تحدي السلطة وتحقيق التغيير داخل إطار مشفى عقلي من خلال تحليل كيسي لشخصية المخادع. وتتجسد شخصية المخادع في

رواية "أحدهم طار فوق عش الوقواق"، في شخصية راندل مكميرفي، الشخصية المتمردة التي تتحدى السلطة القمعية للممرضة راتشد والنظام المؤسسي. يسلم البحث الضوء على الطبيعة المتناقضة لمكمورفي كشخصية مخادعة مع بُعد نبيل. بالرغم من استخدامه لتكتيكات متنوعة مثل الفكاهة والتمرد والتلاعب، فإن هدفه النهائي هو تمكين المرضى واستعادة هويتهم. ويوضح تصوير كيسي لشخصية المخادع أهميتها في الأدب المعاصر بوصفها وسيلة لانتقاد الأنظمة القمعية وإعطاء الإلهام للتغيير الثوري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المخادع، التمرد، السلطة، الجنون، كين كيسي، "أحدهم طار فوق عش الوقواق".

1. Introduction

By his very character, the trickster embodies chaos and contradiction. This enigmatic character takes on various roles, simultaneously acting as a foolish divine being, a rule-breaking hero, a rebellious figure, and a creative force. The trickster plays a significant part in establishing societal norms, yet intentionally violates them. Typically depicted as deceitful and amusing, the trickster possesses a moral nature rather than being explicitly immoral. Traditionally, the trickster is portrayed as male in mythical and traditional contexts. (Grădinaru, 2012, pp.85-86)

Historically speaking, numerous renowned authors have employed the trickster archetype in their works, exploring its transformative power and subversive nature. Among these authors, William Shakespeare, in his play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), displays the trickster character in Puck, a playful fairy who occupies a significant role in that play. Renowned for his trickery, Puck delights in causing mischief among the human characters. Symbolizing the enchanting force of magic, Puck emphasizes the significance of embracing one's untamed nature. (Vukadinovic,2008) Another example of a trickster is Mark Twain's mischievous and clever character Tom Sawyer, who challenges societal conventions in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, (1876) (Grant, 2015). Ken Kesey stands out for his masterful portrayal of the trickster in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Published in 1962, Kesey's novel delves into the oppressive world of a mental institution, where patients are subjected to dehumanizing treatments and strict control under the authority of Nurse Ratched.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey introduces Randle McMurphy, a captivating and rebellious figure who personifies the trickster archetype. McMurphy's arrival disrupts the established order of the mental institution, challenging the authority of Nurse Ratched and

inspiring fellow patients to reclaim their sense of self. With his cleverness, humor, and manipulation, McMurphy exposes the oppressive nature of the mental health system, becoming a symbol of resistance against conformity. Kesey's depiction of the trickster in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, unveils the profound metamorphic potency embedded within this archetype, capable of defying the fabric of societal conventions, kindling the flames of rebellion, and engendering a resolute transformation that transcends the confines of oppressive systems. (Miller, 2013)

Ken Kesey, an American writer and countercultural figure, was born on September 17, 1935, in La Junta, Colorado. He had a profound impact on the literary scene of the 1960s and beyond, challenging societal norms, questioning authority, and delving into the complexities of the human mind. Kesey's writing remains relevant and influential to both readers and scholars today. During his time at Stanford, Kesey volunteered for the government-funded "MKUltra" program, which involved experimenting with the psychedelic drug LSD. This experience profoundly shaped his perception of reality and became a significant influence on his writing and countercultural philosophy. (Haupt, 2001)

In 1962, Kesey achieved literary fame with the publication of his debut novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Set in a mental institution, the book explored themes of rebellion, individual freedom, and the oppressive nature of institutional control. It quickly became a timeless classic, addressing the social issues of its time and earning Kesey widespread acclaim. He passed away on November 10, 2001, leaving behind a legacy as a groundbreaking author and a symbol of countercultural rebellion. His works continue to be studied and celebrated, resonating with readers who seek a deeper understanding of societal structures and individual freedom, as well as those captivated by the exploration of the human spirit and defiance against oppressive systems. (Carnes, 1974, p.8)

By delving into the portrayal of the trickster archetype in literature, readers are provided with a deeper understanding of these characters' ability to unveil societal inequalities, challenge those in power, and disrupt established norms.

2. The Portrait of the Trickster

2.1 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published in 1962, is a thought-provoking story set in a mental institution in Oregon during the 1950s. The narrative is presented through the eyes of "Chief" Bromden, a Native American patient who fakes deafness and muteness to avoid interacting with the oppressive authority figures in the institution. At the heart of the novel is the arrival of Randle McMurphy, a charismatic and rebellious man who pretends to be mentally ill to escape a prison sentence. McMurphy's lively and unpredictable presence challenges the strict rules and control enforced by Nurse Ratched, the cold and domineering head nurse. (Carnes, 1974, pp.8-9)

McMurphy quickly becomes a symbol of defiance and liberation for the other patients, inspiring them to question their submissive roles in the institution. He encourages self-expression, challenges authority, and urges them to reclaim their individuality. However, his disruptive nature and clashes with Nurse Ratched create tension within the ward. (Carnes, 1974, pp.9-10)

The climax occurs during a late-night party organized by McMurphy, featuring alcohol and prostitutes. The revelry and defiance displayed by the patients enrage Nurse Ratched, culminating in a confrontation between her and McMurphy. In a tragic turn of events, McMurphy undergoes a lobotomy as punishment for his rebellious actions. The loss of his spirited presence deeply affects the patients, prompting Chief Bromden, who has been silently observing, to take action. Chief Bromden suffocates McMurphy with a pillow and then escapes from the institution, symbolizing his liberation from the oppressive system. (Carnes, 1974, pp. 10-11)

2.2 McMurphy as a Trickster

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, McMurphy, as a character, embodies the quintessential characteristics of the post-modern trickster archetype. The trickster, as portrayed in post-modern literature, assumes the role of a disruptive figure who dares to challenge established patterns, subvert authoritative powers, and effect profound transformations. The trickster is a cunning, manipulative character, with a particular potency to trick others to get his goals, a brilliant speaker who has the ability to persuade people with his ideas and thoughts. Though he has a leader quality, he is never serious, instead a sarcastic, ironic individual who mocks everyone

and turns every talk into a joke. McMurphy seamlessly embodies these qualities throughout the novel, effectively assuming his position as the embodiment of the post-modern trickster. (Knapp, 1978, pp. 400)

Firstly, McMurphy obtains an undeniable charisma, boastful and cunning. By pretending madness to escape the punishment of imprisonment, he disrupts the established order of the mental institution; he announces his plan proudly to the patients at the institution:

I'm in this place because that's the way I planned it, pure and simple, because it's a better place than a work farm. As near as I can tell I'm no loony, or never knew it if I was. Your nurse didn't know this; she's not going to be looking out for somebody coming at her with a trigger-quick mind like I obviously got. These things give me an edge I like. So I'm saying five bucks to each of you that wants it if I can't put a betsy bug up that nurse's butt within a week. (Kesey, 1962, p.74)

During a blackjack game, McMurphy describes himself to the men as a skilled grifter who possesses the ability to identify and exploit the weaknesses of others in order to achieve his own objectives. He claims, "The secret of being a top-notch con man is being able to know what the mark wants, and how to make him think he's getting it." (81) Although McMurphy does cheat the men out of their money, he primarily employs his talent to benefit them.

Being a trickster, McMurphy frequently fools others, yet, no one can fool him. Within a few days after arriving on the ward, McMurphy discerns something that no one else has noticed in the past decade. He discerns that Bromden's deafness and muteness are merely pretenses. The reader is told that "He stops laughing and whispers, "Why, you sure did give a jump when I told you that coon was coming, Chief. I thought somebody told me you was deaf." McMurphy's words to Bromden indicate his astute observation skills and deep comprehension of human behavior. Acting as a provocateur, McMurphy believes that Bromden will play a crucial role in his efforts to disrupt the ward.

Furthermore, McMurphy's behavior is marked by his mischievous, funny and sarcastic nature. He frequently teases nurse Ratched, and transmits his ironic mood to the other patients. The individuals in her ward who nickname her Big Nurse possess a knack for playful language, as evidenced by McMurphy's sarcastic greeting: "Good morning, Miss Rat-shed! How's things on the outside?" (96). McMurphy deliberately emphasizes the first syllable of her name, "rat."

While "Rat shed" may not be the most creative form of wordplay, it suggests that Miss Ratched has established a sanctuary for vermin rather than a nurturing environment for the mentally ill. Those who enter the shadowy confines of her ward, seeking respite from the blistering sun, are instead confronted with disturbing therapies and harsh nursing practices. (Francis, 2014, p.56)

He spreads his jokes even in critical moments, for instance, upon reaching the lobotomy room, McMurphy is positioned on the table, his arms outstretched in a way reminiscent of being on a cross. In a jesting manner, he quips, "Do I get a crown of thorns?" (283), moments before the procedure commences. It seems that the treatment does not have any discernible impact on him. (Francis, 2014, p 57) Another occasion is when McMurphy orchestrates the fishing expedition; it becomes a shared venture filled with excitement, enjoyment, and boisterousness. In one frantic and disordered moment aboard the boat, where Candy bears a bruised and bleeding breast and the Chief's thumb stings from the line, McMurphy observes the situation and laughs. He understands that it is necessary to find humor in the things that cause you pain in order to maintain your sanity and prevent the world from driving you completely insane. He acknowledges the presence of anguish, but refuses to let it overshadow the humor, just as he refuses to let humor diminish the significance of the pain. (Martin, 1973, pp.48-49)

McMurphy's liberal soul drives him to consistently encourage acts of defiance, and manifests a rebellious spirit that defies societal conventions and authoritative powers. When he joins the asylum, he declares war against the rigid restrictions of Nurse Ratched who assumes responsibility for the patients' access to medication, and it becomes evident that she employs the administration of medication as a means to exercise control over their lives. This becomes apparent when she uses a loudspeaker to call for "medications" and instructs the other nurses from behind a window that separates the nurse's station from the patients. She meticulously arranges the pills in a precise manner, ensuring that the patients line up at the window according to her determined order: first the Acutes, followed by the Chronics, the Wheelers, and finally the Vegetables. All the patients must adhere to this sequence and take their medication at the designated time. In the case of Mr. Taber, a patient who refuses to take his medication orally, Nurse Ratched remarks, "you can go, Mr. Taber, if you don't wish to take your medication orally" (35), implying that there are alternative methods to ensure compliance.

By employing these methods, Nurse Ratched manipulates the patients to such an extent that they never question her authority. Except for McMurphy and the Chief, all the patients dutifully

obey her instructions and genuinely believe that her procedures are in their best interest. In fact, they even assist her in her duties by documenting in her log book any information they gather from fellow patients. Nurse Ratched instructs them, "If you hear a friend say something during the course of your everyday conversation, then list it in the log book for the staff to see. It's not, as the movies call it, 'squealing,' it's helping your fellow" (50). In contrast to the other patients, McMurphy questions about the pills that are meant to them: "Miss, I don't like to create trouble. But I don't like to swallow something without knowing what it is, neither. How do I know this isn't one of those funny pills that makes me something I'm not?" (34)

From the moment he arrives on the ward, McMurphy actively challenges Nurse Ratched's authority. Bromden describes him as follows: "he's no ordinary Admission. I don't hear him slide scared along the wall, and when they tell him about the shower he doesn't just submit with a weak little yes, he tells them right back in a loud, brassy voice that he's already plenty damn clean, thank you" (11). It takes some time for the staff to enforce McMurphy's compliance with the mandatory green uniform worn by all patients and to acquaint him with the rules.

Beside his rebellious actions, he has a huge influence on the patients at the asylum, he urges his fellow patients to embrace their unique individualities and challenge the oppressive strictures that confine them. He manipulates their minds, telling them "Seen 'em all over the country and in the homes- people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to." (60)

McMurphy immediately demonstrates his ability to disrupt the established order and hierarchy within the ward. Despite the policy that mandates patients to remain segregated based on their categories (Acutes, Chronics, etc.), he initiates conversations with all the patients, moving freely from one side to another. His aim is not only to engage in dialogue but also to encourage their equal participation in ward activities; disregarding the "labels" they have been assigned. For instance, when he requires additional votes to gain permission to watch The World Series on TV, he attempts to persuade some of the chronic patients to raise their hands in support.

The narrator, Chief Bromden, recounts how, spurred by McMurphy, the men residing in the ward decide to alter the TV schedule in order to watch the World Series. This seemingly straightforward action becomes their first act of defiance against Nurse Ratched's arbitrary regulations and prompts them to question her absolute authority. Even though Nurse Ratched

dismisses the vote based on technicality, the mere act of asserting their right to be heard signifies rebellion. Moreover, the majority of the men unite in their vote, solidifying their unity and fostering future acts of resistance. Through their collective actions, the men convey a clear message to Nurse Ratched that she no longer possesses unchallenged control over them: “All twenty of them, raising not just for watching TV, but against the Big Nurse, against her trying to send McMurphy to Disturbed, against the way she’s talked and acted and beat them down for years.” (140) So, he emerges as a profound symbol of liberation, instilling within the patients a newfound sense of agency and prompting them to dismantle the regimented structure of the ward.

McMurphy's characterization as a trickster finds additional validation in his stubbornness and persistence. He never raises the white flag. Nurse Ratched has maintained McMurphy's confinement within the Disturbed ward and subjected him to electroconvulsive therapy in an attempt to diminish his spirit. However, contrary to her wishes, as described by Bromden, McMurphy's presence only elevates his status as a legendary figure among the other patients. Even in his absence, his influence grows, becoming a potent symbol of defiance that has the power to inspire his fellow inmates. With McMurphy seemingly gaining the upper hand, Nurse Ratched opts to confront this legend by revealing the harsh reality of McMurphy's eventual downfall, aiming to send a resolute message of deterrence:

She saw that McMurphy was growing bigger than ever while he was upstairs where the guys couldn't see the dent she was making on him, growing almost into a legend. A man out of sight can't be made to look weak, she decided, and started making plans to bring him back down to our ward. (291)

Moreover, McMurphy's ultimate fate serves as a manifestation of the trickster's sacrificial dimension. He willingly sacrifices his own well-being and personal freedom for the betterment of his fellow patients. Bromden, the narrator, states “It was us that had been making him go on for weeks, keeping him standing long after his feet and legs had given out”. (318) McMurphy pushes himself to the extremes in his battle against Nurse Ratched for the sake of the fellow patients on the ward. He is aware that he serves as a source of inspiration for the other men, helping them regain their self-assurance. Despite feeling depleted and no longer willing to participate, McMurphy refuses to allow Nurse Ratched to emerge victorious in their ongoing

clash of wills. In a final act of rebellion, McMurphy physically assaults her and forcefully tears her uniform. While this action ultimately leads to Nurse Ratched's downfall, it also exacts personal and irreversible sequences on McMurphy. (Knapp, 1978, pp. 404-405)

The harrowing act of lobotomy that is imposed upon him by the authorities signifies the sacrifice of his own individuality and ultimately culminates in his profound defeat. Nevertheless, his selfless act of sacrifice resonates deeply within the other patients, ultimately kindling their rebellion and eventual emancipation. They consciously adopt McMurphy's voice and behavior, as they are transferred to different individuals. Some among them choose to leave the ward and strive for a semblance of normalcy in their lives. McMurphy's teachings instill hope within them, providing a pathway towards a brighter future.

3. Conclusion

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey features a captivating portrayal of the trickster archetype through the character of Randle McMurphy, who embodies the rebellious and disruptive nature typically associated with trickster figures. He challenges the oppressive authority of Nurse Ratched and the rigid rules of the mental institution where he is confined.

McMurphy's strength lies in his ability to manipulate situations and people, using his charm and wit to defy the oppressive system. He instigates pranks, inspires the other patients to reclaim their autonomy, and challenges the power dynamics within the institution. His unyielding spirit and defiance affect the story by disrupting the oppressive status quo and offering hope to the other patients

In essence, the portrayal of McMurphy's character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* aptly captures and personifies the defining characteristics of the post-modern Trickster. He adeptly disrupts the prevailing order, defies authoritative powers, and catalyzes profound transformations by inspiring others to embrace their inherent individualities and courageously challenge the restrictive norms of society. Through his unwavering actions and ultimate sacrifice, McMurphy emerges as an emblematic figure who exposes the flaws embedded within oppressive systems, thereby embodying the true essence and transformative power of the Trickster.

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