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REBEL, SUPERMAN, BULL GOOSE LOONY: THE HERO AS ADOLESCENT

Although not written specifically for adolescent readers, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has now joined Great American Novels like *Huckleberry Finn, The Awakening, The Great Gatsby,* and *Catcher in the Rye* on high-school reading lists. In theory, anyway, these portrayals of romantic rebellion, escape, and sacrifice should appeal to the young. All have protagonists challenging social norms to one degree or another, albeit in pursuit of cultural ideals like freedom, individualism, and personal fulfillment. In addition, as literary heroes, all of them—and most explicitly Randle Patrick McMurphy—embody not only the archetype of myth but the theoretically ideal adolescent. They emerge from the heyday of American realism, when the literary canon evolved in synchronicity with fundamental theories of both human development and heroic archetypes; indeed, by the early twentieth century, classic depth psychologists such as Freud, Jung, and Otto Rank almost inevitably handled one category in terms of the other. By the 1962 publication of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* the psychological paradigms of the mythic hero and the adolescent had become virtually inextricable.

Kesey's own employment of heroic myth was recognized early in the critical appreciation of the novel. At the time of its publication, depth psychology—especially Freudian—hovered at the pinnacle of its influence, not only in the theoretical and clinical practice of psychology but in other intellectual disciplines, notably literary critique and technique. In 1968 Leslie A. Fiedler recognized the affinity of Kesey's novel with his own somewhat Freudian analysis of American literary tradition, *Love and Death in the American Novel:* McMurphy and Chief Broom are his interracial, homoerotic couple, the heirs of Leatherstocking and Chingachgook, Ishmael and

Queequeg, Huck and Jim, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, fighting the feminizing effects of civilization to preserve an eternal male adolescence ("The Higher Sentimentality").

Other analyses cite traditional sources for the heroic template. For example, Kesey clearly and intentionally loads the book with images of the Great American Hero of literature and popular culture: McMurphy enters the ward as a frontier roustabout, boasting and gambling like a Mississippi riverboatman; his verbal competition with Harding for the position of "bull goose loony" comes right out of the tradition of Davy Crockett and Mike Fink, perhaps by way of *Huckleberry Finn.* McMurphy even openly asserts during the exchange about his Moby Dick undershorts that he is a literary symbol. John A. Barsness, in his 1969 article "Ken Kesey: The Hero in Modern Dress," also views McMurphy as an inheritor of the Western hero tradition, at the end of a line of solitary men standing up to the banalities of civilization that includes Huck Finn and Owen Wister's Virginian.

Running underneath this specifically American version of the hero is the more ancient archetype of the warrior-king. According to Harold Lubin in his 1968 study *Heroes and Anti-Heroes,* the "fully realized warrior hero becomes more than a warrior, and his concern becomes more than personal glory. He undertakes his trials, the tests of his strength, courage, and endurance, in part out of his concern for his fellow man (12). Lubin offers the best all-inclusive definition of the hero: one "who takes the risks that we are not prepared to take for the things we believe in" (5).

In addition, many critics have noted the specifically Christian references in the latter half of the novel: the twelve who go fishing with McMurphy, the symbolic anointment and crucifixion of the electroshock treatments, the redemptive quality of McMurphy's ultimate heroic martyrdom (see, for example, "Christ in the Cuckoo's Nest" by Bruce E. Wallis in George Searle's *Casebook* and Barry H. Leeds's discussion on pages 33-34 of his study *Ken Kesey*). Following the arc of the hero, in other words, over the course of the novel McMurphy grows from egocentric trickster into a fisher of men and Fisher King, a heroic martyr bringing a new dispensation to those who follow him. As Barry Leeds observes, "In the process, he himself develops greater maturity and responsibility, progressing from good-natured selfishness to a selfless commitment to his fellows" (25-26).

According to classical psychological theory, such heroic tales of moral growth have a meaningful parallel in the real-life process of individual human development. Freud, Jung, and their colleagues all shared to one degree or another the axiom that, just as dreams represent the unconscious of the individual, myth and popular culture comprise the collective dreams of society, and that the part reflects the whole. It was this belief that drove Freud to examine the Grimms' fairy tales and Jung to seek the collective unconscious in the world's mythologies. In *Cuckoo's Nest* Kesey makes explicit allusion to Freud and Jung through Harding ("Fred Yoong" in McMurphy's malaprop rejoinder). The Freudian motifs are still as recognizable as they were when the novel first appeared: the symbolic battle between son and parent in the respective roles of rebel and tyrant, the expression and repression of sexual urges, the guilt and psychoses that stem therefrom, castration anxiety, the dysfunctional effects of a masculinized mother figure, and the sexual ambivalence toward same. As late as 1975, Ruth Sullivan could provide an Oedipal analysis of the book's heroic paradigm in her article "Big Mama, Big Papa, and Little Sons in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," albeit with McMurphy in the peculiar role of father figure instead of rebellious son.

When we turn to Jung, we see even more clearly the relationship between the archetype of the hero and the developmental paradigm of the adolescent. A Jungian interpretation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* would view McMurphy as a projection of the hero as a super-adolescent—physically powerful, avidly sexual, cunning, and confident. The men on the ward, and centrally the Chief, have lapsed into a regressive state of infantile dependency under the repressive mothering of Nurse Ratched and will remain psychologically crippled until they can conquer their Shadow—the archetypal projection of the dark side of their personalities—specifically, in this case, their impotence as human beings and their guilt about that impotence. As Harding expresses the problem, they are "feeble, stunted, weak little creatures in a weak little race. Rabbits, *sans* whambam [. . .] " (Kesey 64).

In her power as mother-monster, the Big Nurse embodies the Shadow; she must be conquered before the men can evolve into psychologically healthy individuals. McMurphy, as the embodiment of the Hero, accomplishes that task for them, leading to

the liberation of Chief Broom, Harding, and the other men who gain strength from his sacrifice and flee on the trail that McMurphy blazes for them. In his conquest of the Shadow, he has provided the men a rite of passage into personal power and individuation that they obviously skipped in the normal course of development. As the eternal adolescent, however, McMurphy must also eventually get out of the way, so that the Chief and his fellows may mature independently into functioning adults.

It is particularly instructive to turn from Jung, who is always associated with the archetype, to Otto Rank, his fellow Freudian apostate who in fact developed the concept. Rank is far less remembered today than Freud and Jung, but his extensive treatment of the heroic in myth reveals even more about the literary tradition that leads up to McMurphy. Like his colleagues, Rank relates the hero to the psychological crises of human development, especially during the crucial period of adolescence. Rank accepts Freud's libido and Jung's quest for Self, but subordinates both to a somewhat Nietzschean "will." It is the adolescent's will to control his own life that leads to rebellion against parents and other authority figures and that makes the young unable to form stable sexual relations with peers.

Rank sees adolescent development going through three distinct stages in the assertion of the will; the stage at which the adolescent settles determines that individual's relationship to society. The first stage finds the adolescent overcoming the battle between personal will and the external and internal forces that besiege it by simply bowing to the needs of society. Such an individual can "live harmoniously because he accepts reality and adjusts his own mode of living to it; this type of person is duty-conscious" (Muuss 33). The first stage individual, in other words, becomes the *Massenmensch.* In Kesey's novel we see such individuals—if individuals they can be called—"outside," as the Chief names the world beyond the institutional walls, where men who replicate "like a hatch of identical insects" (227) go to work in identical suits and live in identical houses.

For Rank, those adolescents who are unable to yield to social norms move on to a second stage in which they continue the struggle to resolve the conflict between personal will and opposing forces. Some end up "inside" like Harding, Billy Bibbitt, and Chief Bromden, tormented by inadequacy, guilt, and psychological problems and incapable of making the transition

from adolescence to adulthood with personal will intact. Others survive this second stage, however, asserting their will over countervailing forces, internalizing their ideals, and moving on to the third stage. Such a third stage individual has neither submitted to the norms of his society nor ended up destroyed by them. Instead, s/he becomes the exception—a genius, an artist, a leader, a sage. He may function as a boddhisatva or dharma bum, at peace with himself and content to stand as an example for others. Alternatively, she may adopt an active role and assert her will toward changing the social codes she has been unable to accept, for her own sake and others'.

Rank answers Freud's Oedipus complex—the desire of the child to possess the parent—with what he calls "the Prometheus complex." A Nietzschean "creative type" distinguished from the majority "average type," the Promethean is a natural leader, "represented in mythology in idealized form as hero" (*Psychology of Difference* 197). Rank goes on to describe this persona in detail:

> The leader is a creative projecting type, what I would call a man of will or man of action, one who wants not only to preserve his ego and his personality but also wants to impose it on others. For the average human being, the significance of the leader in this sense is, so to say, a compromise in that the leader *spares* the average person the formation of personality, that is, makes it possible through identification (197).

As a third stage rebel, McMurphy quickly assumes the role of bull goose loony after entering the ward and evolves from there to Promethean superman, a heroic catalyst that alters the community itself by giving them an archetypal figure to identify with. If we view Nurse Ratched as the Great Mother who enforces received social norms and uses her own parental complex to keep the men in a condition of infantile dependency, McMurphy's heroic rebellion and sacrifice represents the archetypal generational battle. As Rank asserts in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero,* it is the successful adolescent rebel *cum* hero who points the way to the future: "[s]ocial progress is essentially based upon this opposition between the two generations" (64). In short, the adolescent rebel who becomes an effective adult is crucial to the evolution of society and its members. This category, I submit, contains not only Randle Patrick McMurphy but his real-world creator.

Today's developmental theorists have pretty much relegated

Freud, Jung, and Rank to the dustbin of history and literary studies. Their mid-century successor Erik Erikson, however, continues to be taken seriously. Like his Central European predecessors, Scandinavian-American Erikson sees the challenge of growing up as the negotiation between personal desires and social requirements toward a coherent and healthy Self, a process he calls "individuation."

Of particular relevance to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is Erikson's chapter in his landmark work *Childhood and Society* (1950) regarding the American character, where he views the challenge post-World War II adolescents face to achieve an identity that embraces democracy without yielding to conformity, that resists the twin modern dangers of what he calls "Momism" and "bossism." Erikson distinguishes middle-class American families from the patriarchal European ones that spawned Freud's Oedipal theory; on this side of the Atlantic the dominant force in the household is not Pop, whose role is merely that of provider, but an archetypal "Mom." Mom's job is to facilitate, to make sure that individual behavior is brought into line with the requirements of the family unit as a whole. Individual differences are permitted, but they are not allowed to disrupt the smooth functioning of the household. In the process, Mom suppresses sexual activity, physical acting out, and other features of what Erikson terms "mannish behavior" (with the lamentable gender bias of all theories from this period).

If this modern youth has any male role model to try to emulate, it is—in Erikson's view—the grandfather, who at the midpoint of the twentieth century would have been the nineteenth century pioneer or immigrant, carving a brave new identity out of America's frontiers. In general, modern masculine power inheres not in the father but outside the home, in the "boss" who presides over what Erikson calls "the machine," the system of rules and controls that manipulates the adolescent into becoming a cog in our technocratic civilization. As Erikson warns,

> In his early childhood he was faced with a training which tended to make him machinelike and clocklike. [. . .] As an adolescent and man [. . .] he finds himself confronted with superior machines, complicated, incomprehensible, and impersonally dictatorial in their power to standardize his pursuits and tastes. These machines do their powerful best to convert him into a consumer idiot [. . .] and an efficiency slave—and this by offering him what he seems to demand.