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The Struggle for Individual Autonomy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *1984*

Although created approximately fourteen years apart, both *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey and George Orwell's *1984* are unique novels that function to engage and enlighten their audiences regarding the terrifying outcomes of living in a totalitarian state. Indeed, these works show striking similarities in that each involves a protagonist that seeks to assert his individualism and freedom in light of a strict authoritative rule that is propelled by a thirst for absolute power. Randle Patrick McMurphy is a man who maneuvers his own transfer to a psychiatric institution only to find that he must fight for his individuality and that of his fellow patients against Nurse Ratched, who possesses an unquestioned control over the entire ward, a metaphor for the oppressive society. Winston Smith, on the other hand, is a man who essentially struggles for individuality and freedom in a harsh futuristic nation that demands conformity and absolute devotion to the Party, represented by Big Brother. Most certainly, McMurphy and Winston are characters that fight to thwart the State's goal of destroying their individual autonomy, but it is in their dealings with the State's attempt to establish absolute obedience in devious ways, the State's misuse or misrepresentation of legitimate knowledge and its intolerance to confrontation of its direct control that McMurphy is revealed to be a man of far greater accomplishment in aggressively opposing this authority than Winston, who is more reflective and passive. The fact that endeavoring to achieve individualism ultimately comes at a high cost to both characters speaks to the universal human struggle between societal control and independence.

The State's attempt to destroy individual autonomy through the establishment of absolute obedience in underhanded ways is a key similarity that each protagonist must grapple with. However, the manner in which this struggle is fought demonstrates that unlike Winston, McMurphy aggressively works to oppose tyranny. Designed to shape patient behaviour, the use of auditory stimulation in the

form of taped music that is incessantly played on the psychiatric ward triggers a direct and loud response from McMurphy. While attempting to speak over the music he declares, “*I wish some idiot in that nurses’ hothouse would turn down that frigging music*” (Kesey 79). McMurphy’s objection is clearly and forcefully voiced and the fact that he is able to actively reduce the impact of the auditory input by establishing the Tub Room as a recreational facility underlines his dynamic pursuit of individuality.

Winston, on the other hand, accepts the presence of the telescreen’s constant bombardment of incoming stimulation despite being irritated by it. He informs the reader that “the instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely” (Orwell 4). Here, Winston’s acceptance of the situation without a contemplation of possible alternatives displays his greater timidity towards authority. His immense surprise that O’Brien is able to turn off his telescreen indicates that the possibility of affecting the telescreen in some way has never been actively entertained by Winston.

So too, the State’s attempt to establish trust in a false nurturing figurehead in order to diminish a sense of individuality and instill obedience reveals McMurphy’s clarity of vision in recognizing the façade and boldly vocalizing the reality. Although the Public Relations man tells a ladies club that Nurse Ratched is “just like a mother” (Kesey 37), McMurphy pronounces Nurse Ratched “a ball cutter” (Kesey 60) because he observes her emasculating the patients during a group meeting. Like her uniform, Nurse Ratched is “white and cold and stiff” (Kesey 31) and it is McMurphy who boldly clears the “fog” (Kesey 138) and exposes her for the true power seeker that she really is. Harding highlights McMurphy’s courage when he admits that everyone thinks as McMurphy does, but has not had the courage to voice it aloud. He tells McMurphy, “you are right...No one’s ever dared come out and say it before, but there; not a man among us that doesn’t think it, that doesn’t feel just as you do about her and the whole business” (Kesey 62). With such control, it is no wonder that Nurse Ratched is first introduced to the reader as “the Big Nurse” (Kesey 4), an analogy to Big Brother of 1984.

Winston also recognizes the erroneousness of identifying his nation's figurehead, Big Brother, as a nurturing and protective family member. In a children's history book, Winston recalls how a picture of Big Brother, is "frightening you out of your beliefs, persuading you, almost, to deny the evidence of your senses" (Orwell 83). However, in contrast to McMurphy, Winston keeps such insights to himself, passively utilizing a diary to voice his rejection of Big Brother by repeatedly writing "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER" (Orwell 20).

Furthermore, although the state utilizes propaganda to fabricate reality and instill obedience, it is McMurphy who overtly exploits this propaganda in order to assert his individuality while Winston remains idle. As he leads tours of Nurse Ratched's ward, the Public Relations man in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* attempts to mask the old-fashioned cruelty associated with asylums. He exclaims, "what a *cheery* atmosphere, don't you agree?" (Kesey 10). Moreover, he "points out the TV, the big leather chairs, the sanitary drinking fountains" (Kesey 37), but "never, never looks at the men's faces" (Kesey 38). These words stress how the externals of the ward are designed to deceive visitors into believing that the patients are treated humanely. Despite residing in "a democratic ward" (Kesey 109), McMurphy's decision to sit in front of a blank TV screen in protest of being denied permission to watch the World Series, communicates a direct affront to the destruction of individuality that Nurse Ratched attempts to procure. Harding communicates the patients' fears of standing up to authority when he says "a baseball game isn't worth the risk" (Kesey 121), but McMurphy perseveres. Bromden describes this protest, saying "[McMurphy] don't even let on he knows the picture is turned off" (Kesey 144). Such a defiant act inevitably inspires the other patients to join McMurphy in watching the blank screen and this generates an obvious triumph of individuality over authority. The victory is especially insightful, given that Nurse Ratched exposes her true goal of controlling rather than rehabilitating the patients. She responds to McMurphy's rebellion by sharply exclaiming, "you're committed, you realize. You are...under the *jurisdiction* of me...the staff ...Under the jurisdiction and *control-*" (Kesey 144).

Conversely, Winston more willingly promotes propaganda rather than actively confronting it. This is exemplified when he is faced with evidence that proves Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford are at a party in New York on the very day they had confessed to being on Eurasian soil. Winston states “there was only one possible conclusion: the confessions were lies” (Orwell 81). This revelation should initiate some action against the State. Yet, Winston merely destroys the evidence by dropping it in the memory hole. Winston later reflects on the mistake of doing so when he tells Julia, “it might have planted a few doubts here and there, supposing that I’d dared to show it to anybody” (Orwell 162). Winston’s words confess that he is too passive in dealing with State propaganda and has frustrated an opportunity of having resistance form against the Party. Thus, it is clear that through society’s devious attempts to impose obedience through constant auditory input, trying to establish trust in a false nurturing figurehead and employing propaganda, it is McMurphy rather than Winston who is observed to energetically resist the suppression of individuality.

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Works Cited

Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Toronto: Signet, 1963. Print.

Orwell, George. *1984*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.