

Student 3

The “War” in Ward
Differing views of life in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

A person’s mood, opinions, and state of mind are based on their point of view. When someone encounters conflict, they can see it as game, with room for laughter, fun and happiness, or as a war, a life or death struggle ending in sorrow. In Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, life on the ward is a contest, a constant struggle between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy. These two characters have radically different viewpoints, and influence the ward’s other patients to see the world in different ways. While the nurse treats everything as a war, needing to dominate over the patients, McMurphy treats life as a game, inviting the patients to join in and bring back their own humanity and ultimately find happiness.

The nurse runs the ward as if life were a war, and she causes the men to think this way as well. Her background is as an army nurse, and she sees things through the lens of her war experiences. A nurse from a different ward tells McMurphy and the chief that one problem with the asylum is its staff of “Army Nurses, trying to run an army hospital. They are a little sick themselves” (234). Army Nurses have all experienced the horrors of war, which made them a little sick, and these experiences become a huge influence on how they deal with others. They try to “run an army hospital” because they never fully recovered from the war and still project it on the world around them. The nurse’s “reign”—her network and plan for domination of the ward, is based off of the idea of hate, which is war-like and violent. She chose her staff after a long selection process, which the chief describes, saying, “She appraises them and their hate for a month or so, then lets them go because they don’t hate enough. When she finally gets the three she wants—gets them one at a time over a number of years, weaving them into her plan and her network—she’s damn positive they hate enough to be capable” (31). This shows her precise

military system and strategies that she employs to achieve her conquest. Her goal is to build a network in which people are pitted against each other in hate and war, as opposed to a game in which everyone is included, forming a bonded community. Her point of view dominates the men's lives for many years, influencing their opinions of things until she seems an insurmountable force. The chief believes at one point that "She's too big to be beaten. She covers one whole side of the room like a Jap statue. There's no moving her and no help against her. She's lost a battle here today, but it's a minor battle in a big war that she's been winning and that she'll go on winning. We mustn't let McMurphy get our hopes up any different, lure us into making some kind of dumb play" (101). This shows that the nurse sees life on the ward as a war against the patients, and they're losing: out of help and supplies, cut off by her enormous force that takes up the whole side of the room. Again, this illustrates her strategy, her long term planning and endurance in her quest to "win" the ward. This passage also pits McMurphy as her opponent. His strategy is to make "plays" instead of military battles, but at this point, the nurse has the men turned to her point of view, and playing seems to be the dumb choice compared to her grand scheme of war.

When McMurphy comes to the ward, he shows the men that life is a game, and this allows them their happiness and humanity. From the moment he enters the ward, he begins to see things from his own lighthearted point of view. When the tables are carried out of the ward for the therapy session, which is a serious and sometimes painful experience, McMurphy says that it "leaves the floor... like we was aiming to have us a little dance"(42). He brings a new view of his experiences, fun times like dances and gambling, to the men, who are used to a serious therapy session. He shows them this new view by bringing games to the ward, from blackjack to baseball, basketball and monopoly. His main interest in games is as a gambler, and he gets all the

men to play along. After watching a day of the patients gambling, the chief remarks, “He let them win, and every one of us watching the game knows it. So do the players. But there still isn’t a man raking in his pile of cigarettes—cigarettes he didn’t really win but only won back because they were his in the first place—that doesn’t have a smirk on his face like he’s the toughest gambler on the whole Mississippi” (75). They gamble for cigarettes, low stakes in a game that isn’t very serious. McMurphy isn’t really trying to win, and there is no real winner—everyone ends with what they started. Even though McMurphy is in control, and the game is hardly a contest, the men are still referred to as players, showing that they are still a part of the game. They are included, and this results in their smirks, increased self-esteem, and their feeling of being “tough”. A sign of McMurphy’s influence is his ability to get them to laugh, and their laughter shows how they can again see the fun side of things. At first, the men are reluctant to laugh aloud, but then, in a scene of chaos on a fishing trip, they finally laugh with McMurphy: “you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy. He knows there’s a painful side...but he won’t let the pain blot out the humor no more’n he’ll let the humor blot out the pain. I notice Harding is collapsed beside McMurphy and is laughing too, and Scanlon... and all. It started slow and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger.” (212). This episode shows McMurphy’s take on life, his idea that balance and sanity comes from humor, seeing the lighter side of things, like in a game, while still keeping the competitive edge and respecting life’s pain. The others laugh alongside him, and see the same humor that he does. As they are able to achieve this balance, the men begin to swell bigger and realize their humanity and self importance—their place on the team.

The chief is a good example of the shift in viewpoints, as he has memories from his past as both a football player and a soldier. He associates his war memories with the ward, fear, and being controlled. The Chief links the fog, his escape from the nurse's control, with his memories of the war. He says, "I know how they work it, the fog machine. We had a whole platoon used to operate fog machines around airfields overseas. Whenever intelligence figured there might be a bombing attack, or if the generals had something secret they wanted to pull... they fogged the field" (116). The chief first learned about the fog machine overseas during war times. It was used either in desperate situations, like bombings, to hide the men, or as an attack, but one that only the higher level generals knew about. The war mentality was one of secrecy and terror, as opposed to the friendly atmosphere of a team or community. His memories of football, however, he associates with humanity and happiness. He recalls, "I still had on the jacket they'd given us when we took the championship—a red and green jacket with leather sleeves and a football-shaped emblem sewn on the back telling what we'd won—and it was making a lot of the Negro girls stare. I took it off but they kept staring. I was a lot bigger in those days." (39). Here, he remembers details and color, as opposed to the frenzy and fogged over secrecy of war. "In those days," he was noticed; people stared at him because he still retained his individuality. He was a lot bigger, because he hadn't yet been belittled by the war or years under the nurse and domineering regime.

Though the nurse's influence seems insurmountable at some points, in the end, the men do overcome her, and decide to live with McMurphy's point of view, proving that the lighter, fun side of life gives overall happiness. McMurphy himself dies, but his life was more fulfilling than the nurse's and he managed to "cure" the men and allow them to live normal, happy lives, and escape from the nurse's control. The story ends with the chief heading out to revisit his family's

old home and hitchhike across the country. His problems haven't ended, but he is no longer paralyzed in the ward and now has an idea of who he is and what he wants from life, and, most importantly, he knows how to enjoy the good parts of life instead of only seeing the negative, serious aspects.

Games were originally a practice for war, but evolved to fill this role in a lighthearted and peaceful way. In Arthurian times, games like jousting were created as practice for knights to be ready in times of war. Hunting, as well, was a sort of game created out of a war with nature for survival. Yet these games evolved to the point where they could have meaning in their own right. The poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," revolves around games and bets. It makes many allusions to war, yet war is never an integral part of the plot, while games are essential. The knights in the story use the games to inspire camaraderie and loyalty, and supplement them with feasts, reveling and happiness. Though they are in practice for war, they make their peacetimes happy and use games as a way to relieve their harsh lives, following McMurphy's view of a less serious, more enjoyable lifestyle.

Work Cited

Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. New York: Signet, 1963. Print.