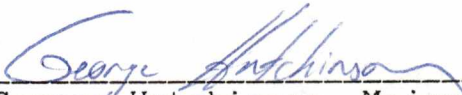
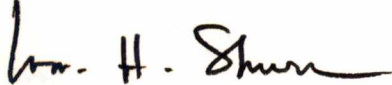


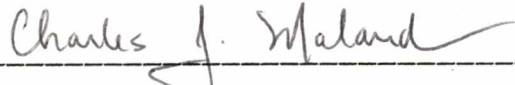
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COMEDY AND MODERN RELIGION:

The Process of Paradigm
Interaction in *One Flew
Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Joe Neal Stone

August 1989

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Abstract

Although there seem to be as many critical interpretations of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as there are literary scholars, few have examined the book without reference to some concept of religion. It seems, then, that an enlightening venture would be to examine Ken Kesey's 1962 novel with the aid of recent scholarship in the field of anthropology. Anthony Wallace's widely accepted definition of religion provides the groundwork upon which a foundation discussion of the unique relationship between religion and literature is built.

From this anthropological perspective, *Cuckoo's Nest* appears as a distinctly American "religious comedy" with myth and ritual providing ingredients basic to the novel's form and content, for Kesey's narrative owes much to religion's comic rituals of rebirth and transcendence. Additionally, the book's first person perspective gives the narrative mythic proportions. As is typical of myth, *Cuckoo's Nest* relies heavily on symbolic language, and the archetypal conflict between McMurphy and the Big Nurse comes to stand for the much larger conflict of antithetical paradigms--a rigid, structural paradigm on the one hand and a fluid, anti-

structural paradigm on the other.

Through the interaction of these "bound" and "unbound" elements of human existence, old structures evolve and erode while elements of new paradigms are absorbed into and merged with the existing social structures to form new social and religious paradigms. It seems, then, that Kesey's book provides a model for social growth and spiritual transcendence which mirrors the comic Christian paradigm and in so doing, reflects its traditional moral and spiritual values. This rejuvenated religion finds embodiment in the figure of the narrator, who manages to achieve the proper balance between McMurphy's unbridled freedom and Nurse Ratched's strict order. That he has found such a balance is indicated by the narrative he relates, which combines artistic freedom with formal discipline as all true art should. So in telling his tale, Chief Bromden comes to represent a complete human being reborn into a higher level of social and spiritual consciousness.

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Introduction

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest has enjoyed a popularity seldom achieved by works of serious literature. Adaptations to both stage and film have achieved varying degrees of success as well, and the novel continues to demonstrate a widespread appeal in spite of objections by some. The book's treatment of women and blacks has been found offensive, as have its "obscene" language and explicit scenes. But these objections cannot outweigh the positive responses of the past quarter-century, from the scholar as well as the layman. Nevertheless, even among sympathetic critics, opinions about Ken Kesey's first novel range as widely as do the possible critical perspectives.

Review of Criticism

M. G. Porter's *The Art of Grit* gives a sound examination of Kesey's written works, including his later, less conventional pieces. He praises the characters that populate Kesey's art as well as the craftsmanship with which he wields the written language. The "disturbing effects of dehumanization on modern society" are central to *Cuckoo's Nest* in Porter's eyes,

but he sees fear--the cause of the failure of self-reliance--as the real enemy in *Cuckoo's Nest* (7).

Of the books available on Kesey and his art, Barry Leeds' provides the only examination of all three versions of *Cuckoo's Nest*--novel, play and film--but Stephen Tanner's is by far the best. Tanner's book holds an abundance of information, including a fairly thorough review of critical opinions on *Cuckoo's Nest*. Professor Tanner notes the book's remarkable popularity and goes on to observe that the amount of commentary provoked by *Cuckoo's Nest* "demonstrates its impact during the last twenty years" (Preface). He sees elements of oversimplification in Kesey's novel but feels that it "touches upon root motives and conflicts that have many branches" (20). For Tanner one of the novel's main branches is rescue or salvation (22), and he later remarks on Kesey's "persistent fascination with the transcendent, his impatience with the attitude that dreams are only dreams and imaginative experiences are just fictions" (25). Such observations demonstrate the significance of the religious realm to *Cuckoo's Nest* as well as to its author.

Remarks from several scholars lend support to Tanner's observations. Janet Larson, for instance, sees

Cuckoo's Nest as a novel that "models the possibility for genuine transcendence in this world and liberates its readers through a dialectic of myth and parable" (26). Another scholar sees the book in terms of gamesmanship and inspiration: "the novel can be regarded as either an elaborate game or the unravelling of a vision--or both at once" (Foster 116). And one critic goes so far as to say that the novel is "nothing less than the bible for a twentieth century religion" (Wallis 52).

Other scholars, however, have viewed the book from a variety of widely differing perspectives. Some read the work as tragedy, some as romance, still others as black comedy. For one critic, "no psychologically informed reading of Kesey's novel can ignore the repressed homo-sexuality that seems to pervade it" (Forrey 229), but another praises the book for communicating positive "ethical, social, and political ideas" (Hoge 382). Other scholars have written of frontier heroes, comic strip characters, politics of laughter, and attitudes towards sex in relation to *Cuckoo's Nest*.

Ken Kesey's 1962 novel has drawn a wide variety of critical responses, and though there seem to be as many

interpretations of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as there are scholarly critics, few have examined the book without reference to some concept of religion. It seems, then, that an enlightening venture would be to examine Kesey's book with the aid of recent scholarship in the field of social anthropology. A good starting point is Anthony Wallace's definition of religion as "a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature" (107).

The Supernatural

Professor Tanner provides an accurate assessment of the supernatural powers in question when he addresses the "central conflict" of *Cuckoo's Nest*. It is, he says, a unique portrayal of the struggle between the forces of good and evil (26). Given the abstract nature of these spiritual forces, they are--at best--difficult to observe in life or in literature, and evidence of their existence greatly depends upon the perspective from which the observer interprets their manifestations. Since Chief Bromden narrates the story, his unique viewpoint affects any subsequent perspective on the

events he relates, making the identification of supernatural forces a tricky matter.

In the words of one scholar, Bromden's perspective is the most crucial feature "for understanding how the novel achieves its power and force" (Hunt 27). As a victim of schizophrenia, the Chief narrates a story filled with hallucinations, dreams and memories, but through these illusions he is able to communicate "the truth even if it didn't happen" (13). From an anthropological perspective, this truth is a transcendent truth, expressed symbolically.

Both psychologists and anthropologists acknowledge the common foundation of symbolic language upon which personal dreams and religious myths are built. Joseph Campbell notes that "dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream" (19). So Bromden's dream-like narrative symbolically expresses a spiritual truth that is as universal as it is personal; in other words, his tale functions exactly as the religious myth to reveal "a higher, better, more supernatural reality" (Malinowski 91).

Bromden's supernatural reality reveals the forces that pass unnoticed by a more "normal" perspective, but his symbolic expressions of the supernatural lie beneath

the surface simplicity of the language with which he communicates. Throughout the novel, Bromden employs the language of modern technology to reveal the supernatural forces of evil behind surface appearances. After introducing Big Nurse's hate-filled orderlies, he relies on his technology metaphor to reveal the force of evil that links these villainous characters to their cold-hearted mentor. "They are in contact on a high-voltage wavelength of hate," says the Chief, "and the black boys are out there doing her bidding before she even thinks it" (29).

As Bromden's narrative unfolds and the Big Nurse's power begins to erode, the forces of good begin to appear in the symbolic guise of nature. A Native American, Bromden himself is a man of nature trapped in the evil technological system of Big Nurse's Ward, and one of the most significant expressions of transcendent good in the novel is an image from the natural world.

The narrative scene occurs at night after Bromden has failed to receive his usual medication: "most nights ... they gave me this pill, knocked me out and kept me out" (154). Without the effects of the pill, Bromden awakes that night, and sees "for the first time how the hospital [is] out in the country" (155). As he stands

gazing out at nature for the first time in years, he hears the honking of Canadian geese:

Then they crossed the moon--a black weaving necklace, drawn into a V by that lead goose. For an instant that lead goose was right in the center of that circle, bigger than the others, a black cross opening and closing. (156)

The significance of this symbol lies in its unification of the power of good associated with nature and the power of good embodied in the central symbol of Christian religion--the cross. As Janet Larson concludes, the force of supernatural good manifest in the Chief's narrative is "not a sky-god, transcendent and distantly beautiful, but a black cross, opening and closing, moving into the dark" (40).

Religion and Literature

Obviously, the concept of religion is central to this anthropological approach, but since the novel itself exists in the realm of literature, the unique relationship between religion and literature should be an important consideration. At this point, the elements of myth and ritual offer a convenient avenue of approach to an ancient scholastic intersection.

Myth and Narrative

The etymology of the term "mythology," indicates the ties between myth and the literary narrative. "Mythos is used for 'word' in Homer and the Greek poets, as differentiated from logos, 'tale' or 'story'" (Levin 224). So the myth, like the novel, employs verbal communication, "the word," in the form of a narrative; or the myth offers "a story which expresses, in symbolic language, religious and philosophical ideas" (Fromm 195). Myth, then, "has its literary aspect" (Malinowski 87) and like any truly literary work, it expresses ideas or meaning.

But what else can be said of myth? Erich Fromm finds one thing that "all myths" have in common: "they are all 'written' in the same language, symbolic language ... a language in which inner experiences, feelings and thoughts are expressed as if they were sensory experiences, events in the outer world" (7). So the symbolic language of myth finds a mirror image in literary symbolism, and the literary narrative seems to constitute the secular form of the religious myth. In fact Mircea Eliade believes that "there is a structural analogy between the universe of meaning revealed by religious phenomena and the significant messages

expressed in literary works" (176). A close examination of myth and narrative, then, suggests that the distinction between the two simply indicates separate ends of a single continuum. At both ends we find tales or stories that communicate through symbolic language, and as Eliade indicates, even the messages conveyed mirror one another.

Cuckoo's Nest falls under the narrative heading, and scholars have recognized the story's symbolic levels since the time of its publication. "The central conflict is a singular version of the archetypal struggle between forces of good and evil or freedom and bondage in which victory is achieved through the intervention of a savior or sacrificial hero" (Tanner 26). The story does, then, take on mythic proportions through the first person perspective of Chief Bromden. As Kesey explains in a letter, Bromden's perspective is necessary "to make the characters big enough to be equal to their job. McMurphy, viewed from the low-angle point of view of the Chief, is a giant, a god" (quoted in Tanner 23). So Kesey himself sees the characters in mythic proportions, indicating that Chief Bromden's story is perhaps more sacred than it is secular.

Religious Ritual and Literary Form

To a great degree, then, the narrative of literature--*Cuckoo's Nest* in particular--resembles the myth of religion, which brings us to the ritual element of religion. "Ritual is an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion" (Myerhoff 199). As act or action ritual stands as the historical predecessor to literary drama; in fact, "comedy and tragedy alike sprang, both in ancient Greece and in medieval Europe, from diverging treatments of ceremonial performances" ("Comedy" 98).

As a novel, *Cuckoo's Nest* falls outside the literary genre that grew directly out of the religious ritual. Northrop Frye notes, however, that "tragedy and comedy may have been originally names for two species of drama, but we also use the terms to describe general characteristics of literary fictions, without regard to genre" (162). The narrative form of a text, then, has its roots in the religious soil of ritual, the form of which "gives certain meanings to its contents" (Moore 8). In fact, the form of ritual "is always an essential carrier of its unique message" (Moore 19).

For Frye, "The pull of ritual is toward pure

cyclical narrative" (105), but only comedy encompasses the entire ceremonial cycle. "The tragic arc is only birth: struggle: death," while comedy includes rebirth or resurrection (Sypher 220). The comic and tragic are therefore significant distinctions for both ritual and literature, for while one form ends with defeat at the hands of death, the other leads to new life and completeness by transcending the tragic mirror of physical mutability. From our anthropological perspective, then, *Cuckoo's Nest* appears as a distinctly American "religious comedy" with myth and ritual providing ingredients basic to the novel's form as well as its content.

Chapter 1

Cuckoo's Nest as Comedy

Regardless of the significance of religion to *Cuckoo's Nest*, an examination of its narrative form can only serve to enhance discussion in later chapters. Some have read the novel as tragedy, based on the conception that McMurphy acts as the novel's protagonist. Since McMurphy dies in the book, his story is in fact a tragic one, but his story fails to represent the ultimate truth of the novel. "The narrator's own story at once arises from and incorporates the story he tells. In doing so, it transcends it, finds its own touchstone, and achieves its own truth." As the "larger vision" (Hunt 32), it is the story of the narrator that determines the novel's form, making Bromden himself the actual protagonist; and since Bromden does not die but actually grows during the course of events, the novel cannot be a tragedy.

Other readers have seen the novel as a romance, and even though romantic characteristics appear in the book, they by no means point to a definite conclusion. Like the romance, *Cuckoo's Nest* expresses transcendent truths; and Kesey incorporates the traditional romantic antitheses--self and society, nature and civilization,

freedom and control--into his novel. But as a form the romance lacks the definite structure that *Cuckoo's Nest* has, and the classification itself lacks the literary depth of forms such as tragedy and comedy--about seven hundred years' worth. At any rate, initial indications point to the comic as the most enlightening avenue of approach.

The Comic Form

According to Frye, "The clearest example of high mimetic comedy is the Old Comedy of Aristophanes" (43). A brief look at Aristophanes' *The Frogs* reveals characteristics of the early Greek comedies, for it captures the flavor of the annual pilgrimage from Athens to Eleusis where the Greater Mysteries were celebrated in honor of Demeter (Martin 66). Led by Iacchos, "the jubilant deity of life," the pilgrims in *The Frogs* make a festive journey along the Sacred Way to the sanctuary of Demeter where the annual fertility rites are performed. In fact, a part of the public ritual often included the comedies of such playwrights as Aristophanes (Martin 67).

Ronald Wallace sees in the novel's form a reflection of these ritual roots of comedy; *Cuckoo's*

Nest, he says,

is virtually structured on the four elements of the fertility ritual F. M. Cornford describes in *The Origin of Attic Comedy*: the carrying out of death and the subsequent renewal of life; the fight of summer and winter; the struggle between the young king and the old; and death and resurrection. (99)

If the book is comic, then as Wallace indicates, implicit in its form is the affirmation of life, rebirth of the psyche, and transcendence over the tragedy of death that comic ritual embodies. In his treatment of *Cuckoo's Nest*, Professor Wallace demonstrates a number of comic elements in the novel, in addition to its comic form. In fact, reading the novel as comedy seems to answer many of the negative charges aimed at the book.

Comic Incongruities

The basic ingredients of comic literature are humor and wit, both of which have come to be associated with the laughable. While wit can be said to deal with incongruities of arbitrary ideas, humor "deals with incongruities of character and circumstance" ("Wit and Humor" 530). Wallace sees such incongruities in what he calls "comic reversals," an indication that the world is out of balance (93). Most obvious is the humorous

reversal of traditional roles in the novel's characters--male/female, black/white and so on. Seen as comic role reversals, Kesey's portrayals of blacks and women seem more humorous than sexist or racist; and the incongruities of humor abound in *Cuckoo's Nest*, strengthening arguments for a comic reading of the book. McMurphy indicates another comic reversal when he tells the ward patients, "I been surprised how sane you guys all are. As near as I can tell you're not any crazier than the average asshole on the street" (63). This transfer of sanity helps expose the limitations of the almighty 'Combine' system, "the social structure that threshes and levels individuals, turning them into caricatures" (Wallace 93).

Comic Roles

In addition to the novel's humorous incongruities, the characters reflect the comic tradition in the roles they assume. Frye lists four types of comic characters, beginning with "the *alazons* or impostors" and "the *eirons* or self-deprecators." These two characters are the chief players, for the contest between them "forms the basis of the comic action" (172). Ronald Wallace observes such a contest between Nurse Ratched and Randle

McMurphy, "Like the typical villain of traditional comedy, the Big Nurse is a boastful impostor and self-deceived pedant who pretends to know more than she does" (94). Likewise, McMurphy plays the typically heroic role of *eirón* through "pretended ignorance and wise laughter" (Wallace 99), or as Chief Bromden puts it, "He's making sure none of the staff sees him bothered by anything; he knows that there's no better way in the world to aggravate somebody who's trying to make it hard for you than by acting like you're not bothered" (113).

McMurphy's pose as *eirón* awakens memories of Bromden's father, who parallels McMurphy in Bromden's flashbacks.

Papa used to be able to do it--spraddle-legged, dead-panned, squinting up at the sky that first time the government men showed up to negotiate about buying off the treaty. "Canada honkers up there," Papa says, squinting up. Government men look, rattling papers. "What are you--? In July? There's no-uh-geese this time of year. Uh, no geese" By the time it dawned on them that they were being poked fun at ... they [the Indian council] had all busted up laughing fit to kill.
(91-92)

McMurphy knows the value of this role from his experience as a con man, but unlike Nurse Ratched, his role is "a consciously adopted comic pose, indicating

his perception of the comedy of things" (Wallace 96). As *alazon*, the Big Nurse is an actual impostor. Acting as if she were a "veritable angel of mercy" (59), she more closely resembles a comic-strip villain, "a mechanical genius who tries to defeat the superhero by means of her technology and scientific know-how" (Wallace 95). Even at the end of the book when Ratched has been exposed, she cannot step outside her narrow, two dimensional character, exemplifying the product of the rigidly controlled Combine system.

McMurphy, on the other hand, moves freely from one role to another, adopting each with a comic sense of its limitations. His "bull goose loony" act with its western showdown flavor prompts Bromden's observation:

Nobody's sure if this barrel-chested man with the scar and the wild grin is play-acting or if he's crazy enough to be just like he talks, or both, but they are all beginning to get a big kick out of him.

(18)

His life seems to be a succession of folk hero roles--swaggering lumberjack, "Fighting Leatherneck," cunning gambler and comic book hero--but he does at least possess a comic perspective on the limitations of a single, strictly defined role. Even as the novel progresses, McMurphy, faced with life's unexpected twists, adopts new roles to combat the villainous Big

Nurse. Finally, though, Wallace himself comments, "McMurphy eventually moves beyond humor to myth, reflecting the primitive origins of comedy itself" (99).

The Comic Spirit

But Wallace's use of myth here is a bit vague, and taken in context, the statement seems to describe more accurately the wider realm of religion. Regardless of the intended meaning, however, the statement mirrors the position held by Kierkegaard. The Danish philosopher saw humor as the step preceding the leap of faith into the religious sphere of existence--the action required to escape the despair generated by existential suffering. In other words, Kierkegaard's progression towards the religious sphere of existence presupposes suffering: "In suffering, religiosity begins to breathe" (390). At one point he compares the naive individual--the "immediate"--who suffers to grain ripe for harvest by the scythe of "comic spirit":

The task of cutting is a festive deed ... and though it is the sharp blade of the comical and its biting edge that compels the immediate to yield, its yielding is not unbeautiful, and even in falling it is supported by the cutter. This comic spirit is essentially humor. (251)

In Kesey's novel, every patient on the ward is suffering to some extent, and McMurphy is the comic spirit who leads the men from despair to humor and beyond, for "... humor is not yet religiosity, but lies on its boundary" (Kierkegaard 447).

In the second role he adopts in his battle against Ratched, McMurphy moves toward the religious sphere of existence but remains on the boundary of humor. Resembling Aristophanes' frolicking Iacchos, McMurphy becomes a self-proclaimed "Lord of Misrule, bringing the festivity and revelry of ancient ritual to the ward" (R. Wallace 99). McMurphy's actions do in fact resemble this comic ritual figure, for "from the earliest time comic ritual has been presided over by a Lord of Misrule, and the improvisations of comedy have the aspect of a Feast of Unreason, a Revel of Fools" (Sypher 221). McMurphy utilizes this role into the final section of the book in an effort to awaken within the patients the comic spirit that will enable them to escape from the fear and despair that imprison them in useless inactivity.

Professor Wallace notes the festive elements in *Cuckoo's Nest* that characterize this Dionysian figure and his ancient rites of fertility. The most basic of these elements is laughter, which, for ancient Greeks

and medieval Europeans, expressed disdain or repugnance. That McMurphy's laughter expresses disdain for his authoritarian nemesis is quite obvious, but Wallace points to another, perhaps Freudian function of laughter in the novel.

For Freudians, laughter is an upsurge from the unconscious, releasing powerful archaic impulses. Laughter celebrates and frees the irrational as a means of countering the repressive demands of the superego. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, laughter releases repressed energies in the patients, helping them recover a portion of their atrophied instinctual lives. (100)

As Wallace and others have noted, a barometer of this recovery is the narrator himself, for Bromden begins to regain his senses, beginning with his sense of smell. First, he notices the smells of his institutional environment, "smells of germicide, zinc ointment, and foot powder, smell of sour piss and old man manure, of Pablum and eyewash... the acid stench of morning mouths and the banana smell of machine oil" (98). He later notices the smells of nature and rediscovers tactile sensations: "I felt the cold tile with my feet and wondered how many times, how many thousand times had I run my mop over this same tile floor and never felt it at all" (154).

Since McMurphy's second role grows from ancient fertility rites, the sexual and scatological nature of his humor seems most appropriate. McMurphy's lockerroom humor has elicited charges of linguistic filth, but as Wallace demonstrates, this humor finds further justification as an instrument for reawakening the instinctual in the lives of the men.

But McMurphy does not use jokes and laughter alone to restore instinctual life to the ward. According to Freud, alcohol and sex are even more effective restoratives, and McMurphy is quite prepared to oblige. (Wallace 101)

In the words of Chief Bromden, "I smelt the air and felt the four cans of beer I'd drunk shorting out dozens of control leads down inside me" (234); likewise, the mere presence of Mac's lady friend, Candy, burns out electronic instruments "all over the ward" (219). But as the novel progresses and his choices are narrowed, McMurphy chooses to play a final role that takes him to the heart of the religious sphere of existence.

In writing his novel Kesey leaves no doubt that McMurphy is a Christ figure, and for the portrayal Kesey has been accused of needlessly overt symbolism. But it is Christ that McMurphy emulates in his final comic role as sacrificial redeemer, giving his life so that the

other men might regain theirs. "In his role as Christ figure, McMurphy thus parodies a comedy, the Christian drama inherent in the plot, rendering the novel at once more comic and more serious" (Wallace 102). As a comic figure Mac is a limited, humorous reflection of Christ, but his sacrificial death nevertheless affirms the values inherent in the Divine Comedy of Jesus.

Chapter 2

Religious Paradigms and Social Drama: The Combine System

With the comic nature of the novel established, perhaps a more anthropological perspective upon it will prove to be enlightening. As Chief Bromden relates from Dr. Spivey's "Therapeutic Community" speech, the Big Nurse's ward is an American microcosm, "a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside" (47). The ward population, then, exists as a mirror of American society, a representative American social group. And human social groups "tend to find their openness to the future in the variety of their metaphors for what may be the good life and in the contest of their paradigms" (Turner 14).

Anthropology would tend to see the ward itself as an "arena." "Arenas are the concrete settings in which paradigms become transformed into metaphors and symbols ... and in which there is a trial of strength between individual paradigm-bearers" (Turner 17). So from a more anthropological perspective, the typical comic conflict of two archetypal characters (Wallace 97) becomes a

"social drama" of conflicting paradigms, "a phased process of contestation" (Turner 15).

Chief Bromden perceives the conflict between Big Nurse and McMurphy as such a social drama, and it is the Chief's perspective that transforms the conflicting paradigms into comic hero and villain. Taken together, these paradigms make up the antithesis so often referred to by critics, generally as primitive/civilized or natural/mechanical. Bromden's repeated use of mechanical terms to describe Nurse Ratched leaves no doubt that she represents the mechanical, civilizing force in society, a sort of technocratic American Civil Religion that the Chief calls "the Combine" (6). Perhaps, then, a closer examination of the novel will bring this paradigm into sharper focus, providing insights into the nature of Kesey's work as well as the America his book reflects.

The Combine paradigm is obviously a social paradigm, but the chief concern at this point becomes whether or not it possesses the characteristics of a religious paradigm. Janet Larson believes Bromden's story exposes the "bogus myths" of the Combine (27), indicating the existence of at least one chief element of any religion. Larson points to the "pseudomyth of gain" as but one part of the overall Combine mythology.

The Myth of Gain

In the early parts of the book, McMurphy is "deluded even into learning the system's own methods: fittingly, it was in the army that McMurphy learned how to play poker" (Foster 122). But the men had been playing Monopoly on the ward long before McMurphy arrived, and it would not seem at all unreasonable to view these games as the rituals rationalized by the American myth of capitalistic gain.

Modern scholars have noted the close kinship between ritual and game, and just as participants in certain tribal rituals "play" at battle, so do the patients play at capitalism when they roll the Monopoly dice. In other words, "The ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play" (Huizinga 18), and like other distinctions, the difference between play and ritual seems to indicate a difference in degree along the sacred/secular continuum of ritual action. Huizinga finds support for his arguments in the infancy of Western Civilization:

The *agon* of Greek life, or the contest anywhere else in the world, bears all the characteristics of play, and as to its function, belongs almost wholly to the sphere of festival, which is the play-sphere. It is quite impossible to separate the contest as a cultural function from the "play-festival-rite."

(31)

So it would seem that the Combine paradigm, regardless of its other characteristics, possesses at least one myth and the rituals to reinforce and affirm it.

The Myth of Control

The doctor's "Therapeutic Community" theory reveals much of the Combine mythology, including instructions for washing one's "sins" through ritual confession in "the sight of all" (47). In fact, patients should confess not only their own sins, but those of their neighbors as well, perhaps a reflection of the Red Scare that swept across Kesey's America. Nevertheless, this perverse ritual of confession finds its rationale in what could be called the myth of control, as indicated when Bromden relates the doctor's theory:

how a guy has to learn to get along in a group before he'll be able to function in a normal society; how the group can help the guy by showing him where he's out of place; how society is what decides who's sane and who isn't, so you got to measure up. (47)

By laying bare his soul in public, a person exposes his every thought and action to the scrutiny and control of society's impersonal mass.

Appropriately, the patients' attire is strictly controlled--identical institutional green "convalescents" are part of "ward policy" (94)--to create the appearance of generic conformity. The strict schedule of daily ward activities creates a sort of ongoing day-long ritual of control, and the regularly scheduled communion of "medication" further contributes to homogeneity and passivity through chemical control.

The Myth of Psychotherapy

Perhaps the most visible of the Combine myths is the one responsible for the existence of the ward itself --the psychotherapy myth. Actually, psychotherapy is only one manifestation of the more deeply rooted myth of reason, which grew out of the eighteenth century decline of traditional religion in the form of scientific thought. "Freud realized that the great legitimizer of the age was not religion but science. He insisted, therefore, that psychotherapy was a science, and he called his own version of it psychoanalysis" (Szasz 181). As a result, "the cure of (sinful) souls, which had been an integral part of the Christian religions, was recast as the cure of (sick) minds" (Szasz xxiv).

Szasz's remarks are less than kind to the

psychiatric profession: "in the so-called mental health field ... the psychiatric and psychotherapeutic mythology is now used to disguise deception and conceal coercion" (xxiv); but they accurately describe the mental ward portrayed in *Cuckoo's Nest*. In evidence of his assertions, Szasz points to Freud's acknowledgement of electroshock therapy as "pretense therapy" (93). "Freud began his practice as a nerve doctor by using electrotherapy. He switched to the ritualized repression called hypnosis and the ceremonial conversation which he called 'psychoanalysis'" (97), indicating his rejection as a viable treatment of the electroshock therapy that was used through the 1950s in America. (Kesey actually arranged to undergo an EST session while working on a mental ward after college.)

In *Cuckoo's Nest* the ceremonial conversation of Freudian psychoanalysis has become the ritual confession of group therapy, justified by the myth of psychotherapy. And the electroshock therapy that even Freud acknowledged as pretense is as much a part of ward life as the rack was a part of the Spanish Inquisition. Harding, the intellectual on the ward, indicates the inadequacy of the Freudian myth near the novel's end. In trying to help Mac understand what causes so many people

to lose themselves in "mental illness," Harding replies, "I don't think I can give you an answer. Oh, I could give you Freudian reasons with fancy talk, and that would be right as far as it went. But what you want are the reasons for the reasons, and I'm not able to give you those" (294).

The Myth of Democracy

Given the rigidly controlled nature of the Combine system, it should come as no surprise to learn that the myth of democracy is little more than words emptied of true meaning. Again, Doctor Spivey's theory of the Therapeutic Community (the City on the Hill for the Insane?) verbalizes the myth in question:

the goal of the Therapeutic Community is a democratic ward, run completely by the patients and their votes.... Any little gripe, any grievance, anything you want changed, he says, should be brought up before the group and discussed instead of letting it fester inside of you. (47)

In theory this community sounds wonderfully egalitarian, but the actuality portrayed in the supporting ritual--i.e., the voting process--proves the hollowness of the institutionalized myth of democracy.

The key incident occurs at the end of the first section, and the issue in question is the World Series. Watching the games on television would involve changing the rigidly structured schedule of daily activities, and after an initially "poor voter turnout," McMurphy calls for a second vote that plainly demonstrates the oppressive nature of the Combine power structure.

"I count only twenty, Mr.McMurphy."
"Twenty? Well, why not? Twenty is all of us there--" His voice hangs as he realizes what she means. "Now hold on just a goddamned minute, Lady--"
"I'm afraid the vote is defeated."
"Hold on just one goddamned *minute*!"
"There are forty patients on the ward, Mr.McMurphy." (134)

Even though the twenty patients in question are considered chronically insane, Nurse Ratched's "ward constitution" allows her to undermine any possibility of democracy. And when Chief Bromden casts the one deciding vote for McMurphy, she declares that the meeting is closed (136), again manipulating ward "law" in order to maintain the rigid system that keeps her in power.

Taken together, these religious elements shape and sustain the "all-encompassing" Combine paradigm, which seems to reflect the repressive tendencies of American Civil Religion in the fifties--tendencies that stress control of the individual through a rigid,

institutionalized system and that led to the injustices of the Red Scare and McCarthyism. For Janet Larson this religious system is one "ridden by bogus myths that make false promises to order our existence and bring delusive comfort" (29). The Chief's internal monologues on his "safety" in the fog point to her conclusion, as does the incessant mechanistic metaphor associated with the Combine, for the order of the Combine is achieved through dehumanizing mechanical "adjustments." "The Big Nurse tends to get real put out if something keeps her outfit from running like a smooth, accurate, precision-made machine" (26).

Chapter 3

A Paradigm in Formation: The Alternative

Nurse Ratched's institutionalized "establishment" religion commands authority from the novel's beginning, but as the Chief relates his tale, the process of contestation begins. Actually defining McMurphy's "counter"-paradigm, however, requires a great deal of care because of his personal and religious growth over the course of the narrative. Whether this growth is perceived as progression of roles or Kierkegaardian movement to a higher sphere of existence (see Ch. 2), it mirrors the development of McMurphy's alternative paradigm.

The Myth of Comedy

Given the comic nature of *Cuckoo's Nest*, it only seems appropriate to examine the comic in McMurphy's "movement." Northrop Frye defines the "*mythos* of comedy" as follows:

the hero's society rebels against the *senex* and triumphs, but the hero's society is a Saturnalia, a reversal of social standards which recalls a golden age in the past before the main action ... begins. (171)

As one scholar notes, "McMurphy leads a rebellion of twelve inmates against Big Nurse" (Hauck 501), and as the symbolic embodiment of the established system, Big Nurse represents the *senex* against which he rebels. In spite of the fact that Mac's movement begins as an almost adolescent rebellion against the Combine, this early ingredient points to the myth of comedy as a significant paradigm component.

Rebellion and Ritual

True to the *mythos* of comedy, Bromden's hero begins to rebel as soon as he arrives on the ward. First, he refuses to take the required shower; then, he gets up too early, bathes too early, and generally tries to disrupt the pre-planned schedule. But the ritual action that reinforces this mythic rebellion is gambling, primarily in the form of poker. The symbolic action of breaking the rule against gambling expresses the patients' inner opposition to the repressive Combine system.

The actual rebellion of the whole group, however, does not begin until the end of the first section when the men take their first collective action in protest against Ratched's authoritarian paradigm. The basic

issue involves the schedule, a fundamental element of the ritual of control, and changing it in order to watch the World Series games. After the Combine myth of democracy has been shown false by Ratched's manipulation of the voting process, McMurphy turns on the television anyway.

Of course, Nurse Ratched cuts the power, but Mac-- in true *iron* form--pretends ignorance by acting as if the picture were still on-screen. He even begins to narrate the game himself, laughing and creating an atmosphere of festivity such as Huizinga associates with the ritual-game (18). It takes little time for the other patients to abandon their scheduled duties and for Big Nurse to lose her calm, cool facade:

And we're all sitting there lined up in
front of that blanked-out TV set,
watching the gray screen just like we
could see the baseball game clear as day,
and she's ranting and screaming behind
us. (138)

Taking this first step of defiance, at least for the Chief, also begins the journey towards mental health and a comic perspective. For the first time the Chief sees the humor in his situation and "almost" laughs (138), but he cannot truly laugh until McMurphy has led the new disciples to their transformation on the waves of the

ocean.

Laughter and Humor

In the role of comic *seiron*, McMurphy's primary means of rebellion is laughter, as others have noted. Nicolaus Mills, for instance, discusses Mac's laughter in terms of politics, but for Stephen Tanner, McMurphy is "a kind of profane savior preaching the gospel of laughter" (25). Laughter, of course, is only an outward reflection of an individual's comic perspective or sense of humor. Over the course of the novel, laughter actually comes to represent this "enlightened" perspective.

McMurphy's first appearance indicates the significance of his symbolic laughter:

it's free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it's lapping against the walls all over the ward.... I realize all of a sudden it's the first laugh I've heard in years. (11)

So before he even sees his redheaded hero, Bromden hears "the word" of the myth of comedy. Laughter remains a significant symbolic element in this anti-Combine movement, and by the time of the fishing trip, the men are ready for the climax of laughter that constitutes their initiation rite into this loosely formed comic

religion. This climax, in fact, portrays "one of the most subtle and analytically elusive ... consequences in ritual" (Moore 13). This consequence is what anthropologists call "a transformation of state," the third essential element in Anthony Wallace's definition of religion (see Introduction).

The ritual transformation occurs when George steers the boat into a school of silver salmon and the fish begin to bite. Immediately all the poles bend double as a fishing chaos begins, and McMurphy looks on in laughter. With everyone yelling at once for him to help, he begins to laugh:

spreading his laugh out across the water-
-laughing at the girl, the guys ... and
the Big Nurse and all of it. Because he
knows you have to laugh at the things
that hurt you just to keep yourself in
balance.... 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. (237-38)

McMurphy's laughter demonstrates his enlightened comic perspective and provides the invitation for the patients to experience the religious transformation that will save them from the despair born of existential suffering.

This religious phenomenon, in the words of one anthropologist, operates more like a fountain than a

machine; therefore, a spiritual transformation of state is "invited but not commanded by ritual" (Moore 13). But the new initiates follow Mac's example, and everyone on the boat begins laughing. "It started slow," the Chief says,

and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger. I watched, part of them, laughing with them--and somehow not with them.... swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther. (238)

No longer are these men the whimpering rabbits that McMurphy has found on the ward--they have gained a comic perspective that makes them "bigger," or in terms of Christian existentialism, they have reached the boundary of humor that precedes the religious sphere of existence.

Stephen Tanner notes that after this "Pentecost, the group radiates a new aura that is immediately apparent to the loafers on the dock" (Tanner 41):

They could sense the change that most of us were only suspecting; these weren't the same bunch of weak-knees from a nut-house they'd watched take their insults on the dock this morning. (242)

Never have the Big Nurse's ritualized group confessions achieved such a positive transformation in one patient, much less a whole group. So even though they still must

face the Big Nurse and her Combine, the men have taken a major step toward mental and spiritual health by gaining a comic perspective upon themselves as well as their society.

The Saturnalia

As the scene on the fishing boat indicates, Bromden's rebellious hero does establish a new society, and small though it may be, it affirms the *mythos* of comedy by reversing Combine standards in favor of a less technologized age in the narrative past (Frye 171). That the men are fishing for salmon when they establish their new order links them to the salmon-spearing Native Americans of Chief Bromden's childhood. Ultimately, McMurphy is responsible for recalling these memories of a simpler, more natural life in the tribal village, and in turn these images come to represent the golden age in the narrative past that the Saturnalia recalls.

In particular, the scene parallels the memory of a time the Chief's father used laughter to combat the Combine. Playing the *eirōn*, he acted as if he spoke little English while the "government men" were attempting to take the Indians' land for a dam on the river. By the time it dawned on the men that they were talking to a crafty, intelligent individual, all the Indian men were laughing, and "Uncle R & J Wolf was rolling on the ground, gasping with laughter" (92). Likewise, on board the boat, "Harding is collapsed beside McMurphy and is laughing too. And Scanlon from

the bottom of the boat" (238). Finally, since Bromden is the only character in the novel with an actual past, his is the only society in the narrative past that the new order can recall.

The Fertility Myth

In light of the narrator's heritage, the mention of fertility brings to mind images of Native American corn myths and ritual dances--reflections of the religious atmosphere in the Chief's golden age. Additionally, as the predecessor of comedy, the fertility myth must play at least an implicit role in McMurphy's growing comic paradigm. Not unexpectedly, symbols of the fertility myth are first evident when McMurphy swaggers into the quiet little ward on the morning of his arrival. "Mighty nice fall day," he says, as he "flicks" a paper Halloween decoration (11). Besides arriving during the harvest season, his "farming" in the Pendleton pea fields also speaks of fertility. Of course, his own deck of cards suggests a different aspect of fertility. "I brought along my own deck," he says, "and check the pictures, huh? Every one different. Fifty-two positions" (12).

Appropriately, McMurphy's mouth speaks "the word"

of fertility incessantly, in the form of both sexual and scatological discourse. Generally, these words of fertility are spoken in the true comic spirit with humorous intent. When Nurse Ratched gives Mac latrine duty, he

went to her office and knocked on that window of hers and personally thanked her for the honor, and told her he'd think of her every time he swabbed out a urinal (151).

And when he fails to clean the toilets to her approval, he stands "hanging his head," and saying, "I *try* and *try*, ma'am but I'm afraid I'll never make my mark as head man of the crappers" (151).

Perhaps even more prevalent than the scatological is the sexual element in Mac's humorous espousal of fertility. In his first Group Meeting McMurphy eagerly volunteers to "touch upon" the subject of the "ample bosom" of Harding's wife (42). Later, McMurphy relies on sexual humor to make the Chief "big again." "In the dark there he went on, spinning his tale about how it would be, with all the men scared and all the beautiful young girls panting after me," but to prove the potency of his words, Mac turns back Bromden's covers. "Look there, Chief. Haw. What'd I tell ya? You grewed a half foot already" (212).

The outrageous scene in "Part Four" provides an excellent example of ritual action affirming the myth of fertility. McMurphy--primarily for the benefit of timid Billy--has arranged a party that includes the "twitches from Portland," Candy and Sandra, and takes place on the night he returns from electroshock therapy. The sexual humor abounds as the evening unwinds towards bedtime. "By then there was a festive, county-fair feeling on the ward as the men whispered of the possibility of having a party if the girls came with drinks," says Bromden of the evening (280).

When the girls finally arrive--with three bottles of alcohol--the festival begins with all the celebration of the ancient rites of fertility. McMurphy, acting as ritual Lord of Misrule, mixes an odd concoction of narcotic cough syrup, vodka, and wine. Mr. Turkle's "cigarettes" add to the refreshment for the evening, but the alcohol and herbal smoke only serve to release repressed sexual energies, encouraging the men to experience the ancient rites of fertility.

In particular, Sefelt, an epileptic patient, consummates his encounter with Sandra by transforming his handicap into a positive sexual capability. As Chief Bromden relates,

we heard one of Sefelt's convulsion cries and went to find him sprawled twitching beside that big girl, Sandy. She was sitting on the floor, brushing at her skirt, looking down at Sefelt. "I never experienced anything like it," she said with quiet awe. (290)

Harding even says a prayer as he sprinkles them with pills, emphasizing the ritual nature of the experience, and the girl says again, "Never in my life experienced anything to come even *halfway* near it" (291).

Billy, however, has yet to experience the ritual transformation that he needs to escape his suicidal despair, and with the hours of early morning slipping away, Mr. Turkle leads a small wedding procession to the Seclusion Room under an arch of flashlight beams. Then, in Seclusion Billy is finally transformed from a sexually repressed "boy" with a stutter to the reasonably articulate man of thirty-one that he should be.

Christian Mythology

Just as the comic cycle of seasonal fertility is embodied in religious rituals from virtually every part of the globe, so the comic cycle of spiritual rebirth is embodied in the resurrection of Christ. In fact, it takes little imagination to see the Biblical myth of

love as a more enlightened or sophisticated form of the tribal myth of fertility since both exemplify the comic principle of rebirth. Ultimately, then, by adopting the role of sacrificial redeemer and emulating Jesus, McMurphy reflects what Turner calls "the central Christian root paradigm"--the offering up of self as a prerequisite for eternal life (68). As it turns out, self-sacrifice is but one element recorded in the New Testament books of Christian mythology that McMurphy's actions affirm.

Central to New Testament writings is the myth of love, as John 3:16 makes quite clear. Though this is not the place for a full discussion of New Testament theology, the apostle Paul indicates a third element of Christian teachings that seems especially relevant to McMurphy's paradigm: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (II Corinthians 3:17). In fact, freedom of choice is deeply embedded in Christian mythology, for God gave this freedom to Adam and Eve. Unfortunately, their decision brought the tragedy of death under God's law, but the sacrifice of the Messiah offers mankind a comic alternative that leads to freedom from death.

The Myth of the Messiah

Jesus taught that God is love, and as it is written, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13, *NIV*). In spite of the limited, almost comic book nature of McMurphy's reflection of Christ, laying down his life for the lives of his fellow inmates is precisely what McMurphy does, emulating the example set by Jesus himself.

As mentioned, the Christ imagery associated with McMurphy is explicit to the point of parody; it does, however, serve to reinforce the significance of Christian elements in McMurphy's "movement." For example, the "shock shop" contains "a table, shaped, ironically, like a cross, with a crown of electric sparks in place of thorns" (67). When McMurphy has finally accepted his role as sacrificial redeemer, his crucifixion begins on the electroshock therapy table.

They put the graphite salve on his temples. "What is it?" he says.

"Conductant," the technician says.

"Anointest my head with conductant. Do I get a crown of thorns?"

They smear it on....

Put on those things like headphones, crown of silver thorns over the graphite at his temples. (270)

After his shock therapy--three "treatments" in one

week--McMurphy returns from the chaotic void of the "Disturbed Ward" for his final cognitive hours. When he finally does give up his life for the lives of others, his actions fully affirm the *New Testament* teachings that he so often parodies. McMurphy's religion, then, seems best described as a revitalized Christian paradigm, but a full understanding of it requires a close examination of how the remaining Christian elements contribute to this alternative religious movement.

Freedom of Choice

An early manifestation of the Christian elements in Mac's paradigm is the freedom that directly opposes the Combine's myth of control. Chief Bromden hints of this element early in the story, commenting, "you never can tell when just that *certain* one [new admission] might come in who's free enough to foul things up right and left" (39). McMurphy proves to be that *certain* one, and as is typical of anti-establishment movements, this one holds high the banner of "freedom" to combat the enemy's "power of control" (96).

McMurphy's repertoire of frontier and folk hero roles also points to freedom or liberty--which has played such a large part in the history, culture and

literature of America. Just as frontier settlers headed west to find freedom in the wilderness, so McMurphy has headed into the Cuckoo's Nest to be free of hard labor at the Pendleton Work Farm. But finding only more institutional control, McMurphy must strive for any freedom he may get, generally through his adoption of comic roles.

Nevertheless, as Paul writes of his freedom, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone" (I Corinthians 9:19 *NIV*), so Bromden's hero gives up his own freedom after Big Nurse causes Billy's suicide:

It wasn't the nurse forcing him, it was our need that was making him push himself slowly up from sitting, his big hands driving down on the leather chair arms, pushing him up, rising and standing like one of those moving-picture zombies, obeying orders beamed at him from forty masters. (304)

By enslaving himself to the other patients, then, McMurphy temporarily loses his own freedom, but--according to the Christian mythology that he affirms--he insures his eternal freedom from death, because, as Paul says, "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2 *NIV*).

The Myth of Love

Central to Christian teachings is the myth of love, which McMurphy affirms by laying down his life for others (John 15:13). Since love "is not self-seeking" (I Corinthians 13:5), this particular myth comes into direct conflict with the Combine's myth of gain (i.e. capitalism). Unfortunately, McMurphy affirms the latter myth throughout much of the novel by gambling and hustling the patients for his own financial gain. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Combine minions, McMurphy, as Harding says, "has a healthy and honest attitude about his chicanery, and I'm all for him, just as I'm for the dear old capitalistic system of free individual enterprise" (254).

Despite McMurphy's honesty and openness about his capitalistic attitudes, his card games and bets--even though they affirm the myth of revolution--are basically rituals that perpetuate the Combine's myth of gain. Nurse Ratched recognizes this fact and uses it to discredit McMurphy in the eyes of the other men. Even Bromden, the recorder of McMurphy's "gospel," begins to doubt his comic savior.

I still had my own notions--how McMurphy was a giant come out of the sky to save us from the Combine that was networking the land with copper wire and crystal,

how he was too big to be bothered with something as measly as money--but even I came halfway to thinking like the others.
(255)

The myth of gain, in fact, stands as the last hurdle that McMurphy must leap before he can achieve the religious sphere of existence. McMurphy does make the leap of faith that enables him to see his suffering and sacrifice as positive actions, and by offering up himself, he truly embodies the Christian root paradigm. However, as the fertility elements suggest, perhaps this paradigm is more accurately represented as a fusion of tribal religion--Native American, for example--and New Testament teachings, a type of revitalized Christian paradigm not uncommon among Native Americans today.

Chapter 4

Antithetical Archetypes

Since Victor Turner's concept of social drama involves the transformation of conflicting paradigms into metaphors and symbols, perhaps we can further delineate the paradigms in question by examining their chief symbolic manifestations in the novel. Central to any social drama are the two paradigm champions who vie against one another in a trial of strength (Turner 17), and in the case of *Cuckoo's Nest*, these mythic characters come to embody their respective paradigms. Consequently, the Big Nurse and R. P. McMurphy stand as the fullest metaphoric expressions of their respective paradigms.

The Combine Champion

As the symbolic representation of the Combine paradigm, Nurse Ratched is literally a chilling figure. The first glimpse Bromden gives us of her occurs on the opening page.

I'm mopping near the ward door when a key hits it from the other side and I know it's the Big Nurse by the way the lock-works cleave to the key, soft and swift and familiar she been around locks so long. She slides through the door with a

gust of cold and locks the door behind
her and I see her fingers trail across
the polished steel. (3-4)

Two important elements are introduced in this passage. Big Nurse's familiar interaction with the lockworks previews a mechanical metaphor, while the gust of cold effectively introduces the narrative's winter symbolism. The genius of these metaphoric images, however, remains hidden until Kesey fully reveals Bromden's hallucinatory perspective.

The Technological Machine

A solid understanding of the Big Nurse must include an examination of the machine imagery associated with her and her ward. At one point our Native American narrator describes the Big Nurse as she transforms into "the shape of her hideous real self," a machine as big as a tractor (5). Later, Bromden sees her change forms again:

when she rumbles past she's already big
as a truck Her lips are parted, and
her smile's going out before her like a
radiator grill. I can smell the hot oil
and magneto spark when she goes past, and
every step hits the floor she blows up a
size bigger. (93)

In Bromden's eyes, then, Nurse Ratched is not even human, she's simply the mechanical "adjuster" of her automated ward (26), which is but one component of the

behemoth Combine machine.

As a mechanical adjuster in this social machine, the Big Nurse carefully controls and manipulates each patient until he himself becomes "just another Combine robot" (16). Before McMurphy's arrival, in fact, Nurse Ratched's ward is so well-adjusted that Bromden perceives electronic circuitry and wiring through which she controls every patient's actions. "I see her sit in the center of this web of wires like a watchful robot," says the Chief at one point (26). Later, as the first day's schedule begins, Bromden watches her push a button to automate the frozen patients into mechanical activity. The scene he sees is:

Like a cartoon world, where the figures are flat and outlined in black, jerking through some kind of goofy story that might be real funny if it weren't for the cartoon figures being real guys. (31)

Symbolically, then, Ratched represents an inflexible, mechanistic paradigm that denies humanity by allowing no growth or change.

Winter Symbolism

Images of winter--Frye's season of irony--also surround the Big Nurse, as her appearance on the opening page suggests. Her face has the whiteness of a porcelain doll, and the ward she controls reflects the frigid

nature of her character. "It's a little cold where the Big Nurse just went past," says the Chief, "and the white tubes in the ceiling circulate frozen light like rods of glowing ice, like frosted refrigerator coils rigged up to glow white" (142).

At one point Bromden even sees the Big Nurse as pure "snow-white anger" (51), an image reflected in the hate-filled orderlies that she has so carefully selected and trained: "all three of these boys' uniforms are always spotless as snow. White and cold and stiff as her own" (28). The very presence of a Ratched orderly can cause a wintry frost to form on a patient's cheek (29).

At other times, Bromden's hallucinatory perspective reveals images of winter sterility that characterize the Combine's champion. The Oriental nurse on the Disturbed ward divulges the fact that Nurse Ratched remains unmarried past the age of thirty-five (266), and even the virulent McMurphy admits, "I couldn't get it up over old frozen face in there even if she had all the beauty of Marilyn Monroe" (69).

Appropriate to her cold, wintry presence, the "sterile" Big Nurse is an ironic character, for she does possess "some rather extraordinary breasts" (69). But in the typically self-deceived role of comic *alazon*, she

chooses, "to ignore the way nature had tagged her with those outsized badges of femininity" (151). With evidence of her natural fertility so evident, Ratched's cold, mechanical sterility demonstrates the repressive deception that she and the secular religion of her paradigm perpetuate. The sterility of Big Nurse, however, is but a surface manifestation of the perverse nature at the heart of the Combine.

While serving to reinforce the imagery surrounding Big Nurse, her orderlies also function to disclose the depth of the perversity that stands behind her icy sterility. That these black orderlies represent perversion is evident from the first page of the book, which opens with these lines: "They're out there. Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped before I can catch them" (3). Bromden also tells of the times when these Ratched subordinates take new admissions into the privacy of the showers to be initiated with a gallon jar of vaseline (10). Altogether, the images of sterility and perversion that characterize Big Nurse and her orderlies indicate the aberrant nature of the mechanical Combine paradigm.

The Comic Hero

McMurphy's first appearance in the narrative provides quite a contrast to the cold severity of Nurse Ratched's enamel facade:

He talks a little the way Papa used to, voice loud and full of hell, but he doesn't look like Papa.... This guy is redheaded with long red sideburns and a tangle of curls out from under his cap, been needing cut a long time. (11)

Here again Bromden's words foreshadow the pattern of imagery, and by comparing McMurphy with his full-blooded Indian father, the Chief symbolically aligns his hero with the natural world of tribal man. Additionally, the long red curls and untamed manner of Randle McMurphy portend images of spring warmth and vitality.

The Natural Organism

Even though McMurphy lacks many of the qualities basic to tribal man, Bromden repeatedly employs organic imagery in portraying his boisterous hero. Comparisons to Bromden's father, "Tee Ah Millatoona" or "The-Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-on-the-Mountain" (207), recur throughout the narrative, and McMurphy even smells natural. The Chief is sweeping "dust mice" under Mac's bed when he catches the smell of something alien to the ward, "the man smell of dust and dirt from the open

fields, and sweat, and work" (98).

McMurphy's hands function significantly in this body of organic symbolism, and Bromden notices "how big and beat up his hands are" from the first moment he sees him (11). The size of these hands comes to symbolize the power of Mac's organic religion, while the scars bear testimony to decisive action and natural regeneration. For example, when the gas station attendant accuses Mac of being "a back-lot bull-thrower," he uses his hands to symbolize the actions that lie behind his words. The redhead holds his hands in the greasy mechanic's face, "You ever see a man get his poor old meathooks so pitiful chewed up just throwin' the *bull*?" (225). Not willing to deal with a man of strength and action, the attendant backs down.

These scars, however, also indicate the natural process of regenerative healing, for it is this natural regeneration that allows "Red" McMurphy to regain the strength he loses by breaking Big Nurse's glass barrier (190, 195). As a reflection of Mac's paradigm, then, the organic images clothing him indicate an active, growing religion that accepts the limitations of flesh and makes the most of human strengths and abilities.

Spring Symbolism

Besides Mac's healthy head of red hair, his suntanned skin points to the warm images of spring that follow him through the novel. "His face and neck and arms are the color of oxblood leather from working in the fields" (12). Even the records in McMurphy's folder speak of his "warmth," as he himself points out:

Right here, Doc. The nurse left this part out while she was *summarizing* my record. Where it says, "Mr. McMurphy has evidenced *repeated* ... outbreaks of passion that suggest the possible diagnosis of psychopath." (44)

Appropriately, the Irish psychopath's hot-blooded passion ultimately points to images of fertility that further reinforce his metaphoric association with springtime.

McMurphy's humorous tale of "the first girl ever drug me to bed" (244) sharply contrasts with his earlier comments about "frozen face" Ratched. As it turns out, his career as "dedicated lover" was begun at the age of ten by a nine-year-old. "and it's the God's truth:" he says, "that little nine-year-old kid from my youth's the one who's to blame.... Taught me to love, bless her sweet ass" (244-45). A lover since the age of ten, McMurphy stands as a living symbol of spring's fertility

fighting to overcome the sterilizing Ratched winter. That McMurphy, like Byron's Don Juan, is more parody than actual red hot lover simply reflects the comic form of the seasonal battle between winter and spring.

Consequently, the orderlies that symbolize perversion find a diametrically opposed symbolic expression in McMurphy's Portland lady friends, Candy and Sandra. These girls, while reinforcing images of fertility, come to represent sexual and mental health, as their juxtaposition with the sadistic orderlies indicates. The fact that one night with Candy cures Billy of his stutter points to such a reading, as does her first narrative appearance:

But seeing her coming lightfooted across the grass with her eyes green all the way up to the ward, and her hair, roped in a twist at the back of her head, jouncing up and down at every step like copper springs in the sun, all any of us could think of was that she was a girl, a female who wasn't dressed in white from head to foot like she'd been dipped in frost. (218)

So just as the figures of Nurse Ratched and her orderlies reflect the mechanical perversion of their paradigm, the images of McMurphy and the girls harmonize to produce a fuller metaphoric expression of a healthy, organic paradigm.

Chapter 5

Religious Growth and The Social Process

Victor Turner perceives that society, as we experience it, "is a process involving both social structure and *communitas*, separately and united in varying proportions" (238). In other words, the social process involves the interaction of two social dimensions--the ordered or bound dimension and the free or unbound dimension (269).

Communitas or "anti-structure," despite its negative connotations, simply denotes the condition of being "outside the structural arrangements of a given social system." These structural outsiders--such character types as shamans, diviners, mediums, hippies, hoboes, rebels and so on--can play essential roles in the formation and rejuvenation of social and religious paradigms (Turner 233), which leads to the conclusion that human history involves "a continuous tension between structure and *communitas*, at all levels and scales of complexity" (Turner 274).

Turner's holistic approach to the social process offers an excellent perspective from which to examine

Kesey's portrayal of paradigm interaction. From such a vantage point, Kesey's opposing religious paradigms appear as the dialectical forces that drive the social process. Kesey's book, in fact, portrays the interaction of these forces through a progression of four cyclical phases. "At the beginning of each cycle the Big Nurse is either ascendant or biding her time incubating a new strategy of attack, and at the end McMurphy or what he represents is ascendant" (Tanner 26).

The Combine Structure

As the archetypal embodiment of the rigid Combine paradigm, the Big Nurse comes to represent the structuring force in society. The Combine itself provides a vivid representation of the structural element in society, which Turner defines as "a more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of social positions and/or actors which they imply" (272).

The mutually dependent nature of Combine institutions is made evident throughout Chief Bromden's narrative. "This is what I know," he says, "The ward is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the

churches, the hospital is" (38). Each of these entities represents an element in the distinctive arrangement of interactive institutions known as "the Combine." As a microcosm of society, the mental ward--with its various floors, wings, and wards--exemplifies the extent of this structured institutionalization.

The social positions portrayed in this microcosmic structure, though sharply distinguished, are limiting at best, varying only in degree of control or lack thereof. At the top of the ward power structure sits the Big Nurse, who controls her staff and the patients through tiny electronic wires extending in all directions (26). Of course, even the Big Nurse is ultimately controlled by the Combine, which has shaped her into a narrow, rigidly defined component in its larger institutional structure.

The Combine system, then, mirrors this anthropological concept of "all that which holds people apart, defines their differences and constrains their actions" (Turner 274). Therefore, as the symbolic representation of social structure, Nurse Ratched provides an apt figure precisely because of her rigidly defined character. Her literal position inside her glass booth effectively separates her from others, defines her

position of control, and constrains her actions to mechanical manipulations.

Furthermore, the fear that Ratched generates through innuendo and suggestion--not to mention threats of high voltage head treatment and frontal lobe "castration"--constrains the actions of every man on the ward before McMurphy's arrival. She even constrains their ability to be men by being a "ball-cutter," and in the process, manages to keep them alienated from one another as their Group Therapy treatment of Harding demonstrates (48).

The Chief's "visionary" perception of Ratched as a mechanical adjuster in the larger Combine machine symbolically reveals the structural element in the social process. Even with contemporary technology, machine interaction is limited to specific, predetermined tasks; and the imposition of a mechanical structure on humans limits the quantity as well as the quality of their social interaction, a fact portrayed in the ward's "clean orderly movement of a cartoon comedy" (34).

Turner asserts that a certain amount of alienation adheres to all social structures, to the degree that "all tend to produce distance and inequality, often

leading to exploitation" (272). Again, Kesey's mechanistic portrayal of these structures exemplifies this condition, and even within the Combine ranks there exists no equality between the "mechanical puppets" who do the dirty work and the Big Nurse who controls them (35). Moreover, surely she is as much a victim of exploitation as are the people she exploits, for she has been robbed of her humanity.

Anti-Structure and Religious Revival

Concerning the social domain of anti-structure, Turner asserts its essentially positive nature as a "generative center" (273) that encompasses the conditions required for "the production of root metaphors, conceptual archetypes, paradigms, models for, and the rest" (50). Discussed in such terms, McMurphy becomes the conceptual archetype of his comic paradigm. But as the conceptual archetype of a paradigm in diametric opposition to the Combine structure, McMurphy actually embodies the anti-structural domain out of which he has grown, indicating the significance of this social "wilderness" to Kesey himself.

Religion and ritual, it is well known, often sustain the legitimacy of social and political systems or provide the symbols on which the legitimacy is most

vitally expressed, so that when the legitimacy of cardinal social relations is impugned, the ritual symbolic system too which has come to reinforce such relations ceases to convince. It is in this limbo of structure that religious movements, led by charismatic prophets, powerfully reassert the value of *communitas*. (Turner 248)

While the Combine's institutionalized religion seeks to perpetuate its lifeless structure, McMurphy vividly demonstrates the social significance of anti-structure by liberating the patients from the confinements of mechanical conformity. Likewise, instead of merging or *combining* individual identities, "*Communitas* ... liberates them from conformity to general norms" (Turner 274). The transformative, laughter-filled scene on board the fishing boat most vividly portrays the liberating force of *Communitas*. The Chief has begun to laugh, and then, "I was off the boat," he says, "blown up off the water and skating the wind with those black birds, high above myself ..." (238). In other words, he finds himself in a transcendent state of freedom from the structural constraints of a physical body as the result of a religious experience.

As this scene indicates, the visionary goal of the anti-structural quest is "emancipation of men from all

structural limitations,... a mystical desert outside structure itself in which all can be one" (Turner 292). This vision of unity is reflected in the communal bond that forms between the charismatic McMurphy and his "apostles." In fact, "to restore the social bond of their communicants" to the fervor of a religion in its early days" is a chief aim of the "revivalistic religious movements" that develop in the realm of anti-structure (Turner 251).

By the end of the novel, the participants in McMurphy's movement amply demonstrate such a communal bond by changing the repressive rules of the perverse power structure (306). As Bromden so succinctly states, "Everything was changing" (305). Things change so much, in fact, that by the time Bromden breaks out of the ward, only two of McMurphy's disciples remain behind, and all have discarded their narrow, inadequate self-images and progressed to a higher level of existence.

Eventually, death brings McMurphy freedom from structural limits that he has sought and come to embody, but for those who have attained the religious sphere of existence, death is only a final ritual transformation prior to achieving spiritual transcendence. That McMurphy has indeed attained religiosity is evidenced by

his final redemptive act that demonstrates a change in his personal motivation, for religiosity is inwardness, and "inwardness is the relationship of the individual to himself before God, his reflection into himself" (Kierkegaard 391). As Bromden relates the event, McMurphy simply acts as "a sane, willful, dogged man performing a hard duty that finally just had to be done, like it or not" (305), just as Jesus performed a hard duty that had to be done.

Artistic Balance and Personal Faith

Despite McMurphy's personal growth, neither he nor the liberating paradigm he embodies completely represents the novel's ideal. McMurphy's character does demonstrate the importance of the charismatic leaders outside society's structural arrangements, without whom the social process would stagnate, leaving nothing but the "bundles of dead or cold rules" of institutional structures (Turner 37). However, through the interaction of these bound and unbound elements of human existence, the old system erodes and evolves while elements of anti-structure are absorbed into and merged with existing structures to form new religious paradigms.

Kesey's book, then, provides a model for such

growth in which neither structure nor anti-structure represents social or spiritual maturity. In the words of Victor Turner:

The great religious systems harmonize rather than oppose *communitas* and call the resultant total field the "body" of the faithful...or some similar term which reconciles love with law, *communitas* with structure. (294)

So Nurse Ratched and her strictly ordered paradigm provide a corrupted reflection of the law of Old Testament religion, and McMurphy, of course, comes to represent the rejuvenated New Testament religion of love. But taken separately, each of these paradigms represents only one half of a total, harmonized religious system.

Consequently, the Chief ultimately represents a new, balanced system. That he has found this crucial balance between law and love--i.e. the straight and narrow way--is indicated by the narrative he relates, for it combines creative freedom with formal discipline as all true art should. So in recording his mythic tale, Chief Bromden comes to represent, on the one hand, a balanced individual reborn into a higher level of existence; and on the other hand, the transcendent society in which contradiction and paradox are

harmonized.

Furthermore, these personal and social levels of symbolism exemplify a duality that underlies the entire narrative--Bromden's personal rebirth indicates the internal aspect of human existence as opposed to the external nature of any social system. The significance of this internal/external dichotomy draws us once again to Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism, for according to the Danish philosopher, "religiosity is inwardness" (391).

Bromden's inwardness--shown by his reflections on his own emotional and cognitive processes--exemplifies this "relationship of the individual to himself before God, his reflection into himself" (Kierkegaard 391). Just as he begins to tell his tale, Bromden indicates his existence in the religious sphere by pointedly reflecting on his own personal limitations before God and audience alike:

I been silent so long now it's gonna roar
outta me like floodwaters and you think
the guy this is ranting and raving my
God; you think this is too horrible to
have really happened, this is too awful
to be the truth! But, please. It's still
hard for me to have a clear mind thinking
on it. But it's the truth even if it
didn't happen. (8)

Besides demonstrating the Chief's inward self-

reflection, this passage also points to faith as the highest stage of growth for an existing individual (Kierkegaard 259). Bromden's plea for the audience to believe his story is actually an invitation for the reader to accept on faith a transcendent truth that can only be expressed symbolically. As one scholar explains, "He [Bromden] is insisting that answers to basic questions cannot hang upon so fragile a peg as 'fact'" (Hunt 28). In other words, the external facts of objectivity only conceal the internal depths of subjectivity where the true religious answer lies.

As a symbol of humanity, Bromden represents the necessity of religious growth through an inward reflection that eventually results in faith, and "from the Christian point of view, there is no advance beyond faith, because faith is the highest stage" (Kierkegaard 259). The story itself represents an act of faith for Bromden, for his ordering of events into a coherent form is an inward reflection that affirms his own spiritual growth--as opposed to the Big Nurse's manipulation of external qualities.

"Normative in the novel, then, is the truth which the story ... yields for *Bromden*" (Hunt 27). As it turns out, this truth is a comic, basically Christian faith in

God that the Chief can only express through the symbolic language of his mythic tale. Appropriately, the comic form of Bromden's narrative reflects the movement toward transcendent unity that lies at the heart of all comic ritual, whether it be Christian baptism or tribal fertility rite.

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Vita

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