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Kesey's Demons:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest was a brilliant comment on the matter of conformity in society by Ken Kesey, whether it is today's society or back in 1962. Milos Forman ingeniously adapts the novel to the screen with fantastic imagery and fairly accurate plot to the original story. But, in truth, you can't really compare the two pieces, as they contain separate messages and, in the opinion of many, separate stories.

Forman cast Jack Nicholson as the timeless McMurphy, and Louise Fletcher as his rival, Nurse Ratched. They both completed the roles with characterization that held true to the original view of the characters. Let's start with costumes: McMurphy always appears with something personal, a shirt, a pack of cigarettes, or his hat, underneath his ward-issued uniform, giving the sense that, no matter how much he blends in on the ward, he will always have something more, something underneath. In fact, all of the men have this trait in their costumes. Nurse Ratched, however, remains in the same starch white



uniform, excepting when she leaves the ward, when she is seen in all black; the good Nurse also wears the same hairstyle at all times in the film: horn-like curls reminiscent of the generally accepted depiction of Satan. Her minions, as they might be called, are almost always dressed in white. In the scuffles that arise during the film, however, these white uniforms are dirtied; in the next scenes, however, their uniforms are returned to their stark white state, like nothing happened, which corresponds to their behavior towards the incidents.

In reading the novel, many might assume McMurphy to be a Christ figure; illusions such as these cannot be maintained after viewing this adaptation: for one, McMurphy still has his bad habits, such as drinking and smoking. Other than that, an assumption that could be made about McMurphy is that his final "sacrifice" for his fellow patients is less of a sacrifice and more of an act of anger. His actions led to his lobotomization, as well as his eventual death at the hands of Chief. Furthermore, as to the motives of Chief and the



friendship between McMurphy and himself, you could find them both to be sorely lacking. Chief often sees McMurphy at angles which are upwards, therefore making McMurphy appear larger than he really is; this same technique is used when it comes to the aide, Washington, and McMurphy in the pool scene, when he learns that the aides, doctors, and nurses control his life more than he thought. All are power situations, and reduce the appearance of friendship between McMurphy and Chief to something in which McMurphy is to gain, less so Chief.

The aides and their leader, Nurse Ratched, are nearly always focused on squarely in the



face, where you can see an overall emotionless, specifically in Nurse Ratched herself. Rarely cracking a smile, she only enhances the image of the Devil with her ice-cold stares and smirks when she gets what she wants. If readers of the novel are correct, this image of the Devil would only be stronger if McMurphy were a Christ figure, making it a very biblically-based film. That would cast the aides as the

Demons, following the lead of Nurse Ratched, Satan.

Fletcher and Nicholson give us a gripping film documenting the battle between freedom and conformity, control and lack thereof, and perhaps even the battle between the Devil and a Christ figure. The techniques used by Forman only enhance these juxtapositions, causing a feeling of intensity. Though the messages of the stories, in the novel and film, are far from the same, they do contain many of the same core themes, such as conformity. The novel-to-film changes, however, sacrificed the necessary friendship between McMurphy and Chief, a critical element in the novel. Overall, the film was a wonderful adaptation, and focused well on the themes that were suggested by Kesey in his novel.

Works Cited

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