

## **Miss Ratched - a monster behind a mask**

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**Abstract:** *the actor goes through a particular method applicable in the construction of the role. Miss Ratched is the antagonist of Ken Kesey's novel, Cuckoo's Nest. While building this character, who on the surface seems to be very composed, powerful and controlled, while on the inside has a chaos roaming around, I have taken into account everything that she hides on the inside, everything hidden behind the mask, everything that turns her into a cruel person. Miss Ratched is the head nurse of the psychiatric clinic Salem State, where she exercises full authority among patients by prescribing their meds and deciding on their privileges, privileges that she is allowed to leave them without in case of misbehavior.*

**Key-words:** *building the character; Miss Ratched; One flew over the cuckoo's nest; role*

### **1. Miss Ratched - a monster behind a mask**

Miss Ratched's role intrigued me since the first lectures of the play, and after many rehearsals, I have ended up taking in all the data regarding the character. The construction of the character did not mean only a period of practice but also a psychological analysis along with the information that can be discovered in Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (further shortened as *Cuckoo's Nest*), because the actor goes through a particular method applicable in the construction of the role. Adaline Starr defines the role as „a behavioral pattern developed by a person based on his/her life experiences in order to manage the situation met.” (The drama within - *A Brief Description of Psychodrama*, PH. D. Tian Dayton, Health Communications, Inc. Deerfield Beach, Florida). At the time when we get a role, we explore the further motives, needs, fears and secondary benefits that lead us to its performance. According to Moreno, while learning a role, we go through three stages: *assuming the role, playing the role, creating the role* (The drama within- *A Brief Description of Psychodrama*, PH. D. Tian Dayton, Health Communications, Inc. Deerfield Beach, Florida). *To assume a role* means a stage of imitation and shaping, while *playing the role* is the stage of putting in practice everything learned while assuming the role and helping with something personal the newly practiced role, experimenting and adapting to it. The trust of letting the things flow spontaneously at a particular moment means *creating the role*.

The action in Ken Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest* takes place in a mental hospital from north-west America. The story is narrated by Chief Bromden, a large Indian the others believe to be deaf and mute. Bromden often suffers from hallucinations, many times feeling that the rooms are covered in mist, a mist created by a system he named the Machine, a system responsible with the control of the world. The institution is run by nurse Ratched, a cold and composed person, with well-thought and mechanical gestures. The story begins when a new patient, Randle Patrick McMurphy is brought to the mental hospital. He is a gamble addict and came from the working camp in Mendleton where he was serving time for raping an underage girl. Nonetheless, he acts normal and reasonable and seems to have come to the institution only to escape from the horrors of jail. Among those who receive him and are impressed on his arrival is Dale Harding, the leader of the patients' council, or Billy Bibbit, a young man in his

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thirties who stutters and is afraid of women. Ratched immediately puts on McMurphy the etiquette of a riot instigator.

In the second part of the novel, McMurphy finds out that he has to stay in the mental hospital until Ratched allows him to leave. Finding out, McMurphy, who previously stated that he intends to annoy the nurse until she gives up, retreats, but too late, since he already managed to embed the idea of freedom in the others' mind. When McMurphy stops supporting Cheswick, the latter ends up killing himself, a moment that makes McMurphy press stop and break a window in order to get back his cigarettes, in the memory of Cheswick.

In the third part of the novel, McMurphy takes the other patients in a fishing trip, accompanied by doctor Spivey, even though Ratched attempted to prevent them from going. In this trip also appears Candy Starr, a prostitute who manages to charm all the men. This trip is helping everyone to show their individuality, and in the fourth part, we can see Ratched trying to convince the other patients that McMurphy does things only in his interest. McMurphy regains his credibility as soon as he defends another patient along with Chief Bromden and both of them are sent to electroshock treatment. Ultimately, Bromden confesses to McMurphy that he is neither deaf, nor mute and he faked it in order to avoid being controlled. Eventually, McMurphy starts planning his escape with Bromden, but not before having one last party, where he hopes to see Billy cured of his fear of women. Candy Starr comes to the mental hospital with drinks and everyone spends time using marijuana and meds taken from the nurses' office. On Ratched's arrival in the morning, she is bound to find chaos in the main room and she discovers that Billy has spent the night with Candy Starr. Miss Ratched uses Billy's weakness and threatens him to tell his mother about it, a thing that eventually leads to his suicide in the director's office. Full of grief, McMurphy attacks Ratched, trying to strangle her, but he is stopped before he manages to.

McMurphy is taken to the chronic ward and many of his friends leave the hospital. When McMurphy comes back, Bromden realizes that he has been lobotomized and he chooses to give him death by suffocating him with a pillow, then he escapes.

The stage representation, named after the novel, does not show all the information available in the novel. It starts with Randle Patrick McMurphy's arrival, who finds the acute patients Billy Bibbit, Dale Harding, Cheswick, and Martini playing cards and the chronic patients Bromden, Ruckly, Ellis, Rose. The chronic patients are people who can barely move while the acute patients can get along and they also are discerning. In this version, the actors built their characters according to the novel and brought in hints of originality.

Miss Ratched is the antagonist of Ken Kesey's novel, *Cuckoo's Nest*. While building this character, who on the surface seems to be very composed, powerful and controlled, while on the inside has a chaos roaming around, I have taken into account everything that she hides on the inside, everything hidden behind the mask, everything that turns her into a cruel person.

Miss Ratched is the head nurse of the psychiatric clinic Salem State, where she exercises full authority among patients by prescribing their meds and deciding on their privileges, privileges that she is allowed to leave them without in case of misbehavior. She created her own world there, and as Harding states: *"She dedicated her life to this work. She has no husband, nor personal life. She only knows work, work, and again work."*

She has her own working system that she insists on imposing on patients as well. They have to discuss about everything that *"keeps making them suffer on the insist"* and in case they hear something interesting, *"they need to immediately report to the head nurse."* She starts believing that this is a normal thing and imposes on the patients the idea of society they have to refer to, while making them believe that they are not able to survive there. She controls the ward by manipulating everyone, patients and staff while using methods of

humiliation and degradation. Daniel J. Vitkus explains these procedures: The ward is run by Nurse Ratched, who controls the process of turning men into machines. This process of transforming the patients into obedient automatons involves the loss of their sexuality, their masculinity, and their individuality.

As Philip Darbyshire (professor in healthcare, writer, and researcher): “*Kesey created Big Nurse as a monstrous figure in every respect. Nurse Ratched’s presence is seen as very intimidating, not only in her omnipresent surveillance of men, but in her near gothic physical proportions*”(Vitkus, “Madness And Misogyny In Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest” in Alif, *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 1994). As she has a main purpose the turning of patients into creatures devoid of souls by using their personality against themselves, she has lost her humanity and turned into a robot, or a living puppet. She ended up being desexualized as well. In the novel we find out that she wears a plain white uniform that seems to be as new at the end of the day, habit that betrays an obsession for order and cleanliness. On the other hand, her uniform is too large in order to hide her femininity. She is not content with her big breasts either: “*A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would of otherwise been a perfect work, and you can see how bitter she is about it.*”(Kesey, K. – One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, 10-11). It seems that she wants to hide any trace of humanity or individuality. Moreover, she uses patients' sexuality against them, thus triggering their psychic blockage.

Even though it would seem that all the patients are suffering of psychic illnesses and came to this hospital in order to be cured, Miss Ratched seems worse than everyone. Her desire to manipulate is her disease and this disease determines her to become at times diabolical.

Miss Ratched knows very well her patients and how to manipulate them by using their weak points. During a session, Miss Ratched, implying a possible impotence of Harding, provokes him a psychic blockage. This is the moment when it becomes obvious that she is the one who provokes chaos among patients and their subconscious, making them publicly debate regarding Harding's possible inexistent manhood. She stirs up these discussions between patients, by scratching through their subconscious.

Billy Bibbit is another patient manipulated by Miss Ratched, who knows his psychological vulnerabilities and determines the measures to be taken in his situation. She has information regarding this patient from his mother and she uses them to make him believe that a girl he claims that she loved him, only approached him because she was interested in his fortune. Ratched does not help Billy in any way regain his confidence. Through this public debates, she wants to prove him that there is no other girl willing to love him. Even though he knows how sensitive Billy is when it comes to his relationship with his mother, she uses this as a form of disguised intimidation and makes her victim retreat in defense by using subtle and indirect warnings: “*What worries me, Billy,*” she said - *I could hear the change in her voice - “is how your poor mother is going to take this.*” These words have this time an effect worse than a psychic blockage and make Billy end his life.

By having her own working system, the entire ward must obey her, because a manipulative person only follows their interest. The manipulative person, as Simon suggests, hides their intentions and the aggressive behavior (Simon, George K (1996). *In Sheep's Clothing: Understanding and Dealing with Manipulative People*). Miss Ratched always hides behind her doll face, her calm smile. She is described in the following manner: “*Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision made, like an expensive baby doll...*”(Kesey, K. – One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, 11). This description shows a creature devoid of humanity, as if when we would look into the beautiful but empty eyes of a doll. With all her self-composure though, she has slip-ups provoked by McMurphy, moments that catch her totally unprepared and she seems to have lost control.

She controls her patients by resorting to intimidation and humiliation and does not leave them a way to escape and each time someone tries to argue with her, she reminds them who is in charge by using their weak points and does not offer a direct answer to a direct question, but creates a diversion, moving the entire conversation to another topic. The patients also know that if they would try to react by wanting to come in, she would know how to turn things against them. It seems that the entire ward led by Miss Ratched is like a closed circle that you cannot escape from. When McMurphy tries to persuade the other patients and tells them that they are not forced to answer her question, they explain in detail her methods: *"If you d-don't answer she just smiles and m-m makes a note in her little book and then she - she - oh, hell!"* (Kesey, K. – *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 91), is Billy's answer while Harding manages to explain clearly the situation: *If you don't answer her questions, Mack, you admit it just by keeping quiet. It's the way those bastards in the government get you. You can't beat it. The only thing to do is blow the whole business off the face of the whole bleeding earth - blow it all up.*

Braiker, (psychologist, best sold author regarding women's problems) identified few modalities used by a manipulative person in order to control the victim. Some of them we can identify as being used by Miss Ratched, namely -the positive recompense - superficial sympathy, facial expressions such as laugh or a forced smile, public acknowledgment. The head nurse is described in the novel as having a face appearing plastic-made, a face that symbolizes an inhuman woman, as Bromden claims that the Machine controlling everyone is, a living robot that does not show an ability to feel something.

It is obvious since the beginning of the novel, via the description of Chief Bromden, that Miss Ratched never shows her true face: They're still down there together, mumbling to one another. They didn't hear her come on the ward. They sense she's glaring down at them now, but it's too late. They should of knew better'n to group up and mumble together when she was due on the ward. Their faces bob apart, confused. She goes into a crouch and advances on where they're trapped in a huddle at the end of the corridor. She's going to tear the black bastards limb from limb, she's so furious. She's swelling up, swells till her back's splitting out the white uniform and she's let her arms section out long enough to wrap around the three of them five, six times. She looks around her with a swivel of her huge head. But just as she starts crooking those sectioned arms around the black boys and they go to ripping at her underside with the mo handles, all the patients start coming out of the dorms to check on what's the hullabaloo, and she has to change back before she's caught in the shape of her hideous real self. By the time the patients get their eyes rubbed to where they can halfway see what the racket's about, all they see is the head nurse, smiling and calm and cold as usual, telling the black boys they'd best not stand in a group gossiping when it is Monday morning and there is such a lot to get done on the first morning of the week (Kesey, K. – *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 10-11).

The arrival of McMurphy turns the world upside down for Ratched. The patients start to ignore the rules and show courage in front of her while her authority is in shambles. McMurphy and Miss Ratched are in permanent opposition, while one of them is the *"rebel psychopath"* who cannot accept monotony and the other means repression, lack of spontaneity, of unpredictable.

Even though McMurphy is the engine of the rebellion of patients since he is the one who always faces Miss Ratched, the culminating point for her is represented by Chief Bromden. He is one of the oldest patients and Miss Ratched does not pay too much attention to him, believing that his is deaf and mute. Bromden's decision to befriend McMurphy and reacting to defend him in public is a hit in Ratched's pride. This is the moment when she realizes that she was tricked, that the Indian managed to find a method to escape her control. Miss Ratched forgets her purposes as nurse in a psychiatric ward and ends up getting revenge

on Bromden and McMurphy by sending them to electroshock treatment. She seems to have everything well planned but is she really realizing the cruelty that she is capable of?

Manuel Munoz, American-Mexican novelist, short fiction writer, professor at University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, discussed about Miss Ratched and stated that, "*The novel does not show Miss Ratched as being a powerful woman, but a monster in this network.*" (Muñoz, M. - "A Veritable Angel of Mercy": *The Problem of Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. *Southern Review* 49:2 (2013): 668- 671). Miss Ratched is truly a malicious person, who tries to humiliate the staff and the patients in order to make them submit to her terror.

In conclusion, even though we can simply assume that Miss Ratched is a monster behind her well thought mask, it is necessary an in depth analysis in order to build a character. To create a character such as Miss Ratched, it is not necessary only to start with the idea that she is an evil person, as in our everyday life, people are good or bad from different perspectives. In a theatrical performance, an actor has to perform several actions, hence the scene analysis reveals some key details, useful in building the character. This analysis has helped me discover Big Nurse's manipulative techniques in order to enact them later. Such an analysis of character is necessary in order to build a role. An actor needs to know what determines his/her character to act in such a way at a particular moment and this is the reason why there are these types of analysis that must contain the relationships with the other characters, the character's vision concerning the world, the character's secrets, their wishes, their motivation, their evolution during the representation. All these are necessary in order to apply the stanislavskian method of teaching the actors that they must always ask themselves question regarding their roles, that they must always go through their emotions, sensations, feelings, that they must resort to affective memory, that they must resort to the magical "*If*" that makes you act as in a particular situation. How can an actor apply Stanislavski's system without a proper investigation regarding their character?

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