



Nurse Ratched and the Cuckoo's Nest  
Professor Joanna Bourke

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*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;  
That is the madman....*

You might recall those words, spoken by Theseus in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The madman "sees more devils than vast hell can hold". Today, we will enter the abode of madmen, an asylum imaginatively bodied forth (as Theseus said later in his speech) by a lunatic (Native American Chief Bromden), a lover (white American Randle McMurphy), and a poet (the white American novelist, Ken Kesey). As in so many of these talks about "Evil Women", the Evil One is not given a voice to defend herself. In the novel, her presence is only invoked through the unreliable narrative voice of the schizophrenic Chief, who was himself conjured up by a notoriously misogynist Kesey, "in a fine frenzy rolling".

The Evil Woman we turn to today is Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The novel (which is considered one of the best in the English-language) was published in 1962 and celebrated filmmaker and Czech émigré Miloš Forman turned it into a five-times Academy Awards winner in 1975. There have been numerous theatre versions of the story.

Nurse Ratched shares some characteristics with our other Evil Heroines, but she is not the *first* sinner plucking apples from a tree (indeed, her malevolence is presented as *typical* of womanhood), her skin is smooth (not craggy with age), she has not murdered infants (her prey is adult men), and she is sexually frustrated rather than voracious. She is the Female Evil as the emasculating woman, forcing men to conform to matriarchal norms and practices. She is particularly interesting for us today because she illustrates how notions of female evil change over time: as we shall see at the end of this talk, twenty-first century audiences view her differently to earlier generations. But between 1962 and the 1990s, Nurse Ratched held a prominent position in the catalogue of vice. Nurse Ratched has been portrayed as Abstract Evil, Diabolical Machine, Devouring Mother/Nurse, and Amoral Agent in a wider landscape of societal malevolence.

Let's look at these in turn.

Nurse Ratched as the epitome of abstract evil was central to early analyses of her character. In a 1976 article entitled "Americana, Sweet and Sour", prominent film critic Stephen Farber mused that Nurse Ratched was "an abstraction of evil, without any of the human eccentricities that a truly dangerous tyrant has". Nearly a decade later, Robert F. Moss made a similar point in an article exploring the film version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He contended that,

*“So savagely is this prim despot characterized in the film, both in the writing and in [Louise] Fletcher’s frighteningly persuasive performance, that students view the monstrous evil she perpetuates with the horrified fascination that the filmmakers intended to evoke. The fact that such a formidable villain is only a lowly psychiatric nurse makes the film’s achievement all the more extraordinary.”*

He contended that Nurse Ratched was “as vivid an example” of a sadist “as any teacher could want”.

This *abstract* portrayal of feminine malevolence is less persuasive than evil as a Diabolical Machine, devoid of humanity or even a soul. In the novel, readers are informed that she “walks stiff” and carries a wicker bag filled with “wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter, tiny pills that gleam like porcelain, needles, forceps....”. The lipstick stain that she leaves on the rim of a coffee cup is not a trace of femininity but simply due to mechanical overheating – as the Chief says, it “must be from heat, touch of her lips set it smouldering”. The Chief describes her in terms of an electrical current that “extends in all directions on hairlike wires too small for anybody’s eye but mine: I see her sit in the centre of this web of wires like a watchful robot”. She is both machine and beast. In the Chief’s words,

*“Her nostrils flare open, and every breath she draws she gets bigger.... She works the hinges in her elbows and fingers. I hear a small squeak. She starts moving, and I get back against the wall, and when she rumbles past she’s already big as a truck, trailing that wicker bag behind in her exhaust like a semi behind a Jimmy Diesel. Her lips are parted, and her smile’s going on before her like a radiator grill. I can smell the hot oil and magneto spark when she goes past, and as every step hits the floor she blows up a size bigger, blowing and puffing, roll down anything in her path.”*

Her name is a near-homophone of “ratchet”, which is a mechanism with “inclined teeth into which a pawl drops” – it allows “effective motion in one direction only”. The only direction of movement is hers. Her main aim is to run her ward “like a smooth, precision-made machine”. While the hero of the book is the Nature’s masculine embodiment – McMurphy, with his relentless humour, sexual cockery, and irreverent quips – Nurse Ratchet is all steel, sharp corners, and blistering heat. She is a mechanical “dragon of the Apocalypse”, which Kesey mentions in the novel’s dedication.

The third – and most dominant – conception of evil is the Evil Mother/Nurse. Nurse Ratched is a “classic Great Bitch Mother who devours or cripples her wayward children”, one critic explained in 1980, adding that the “gentle haze of natural earth imagery which once surrounded the image of mother has been replaced by the imagery of mechanical bestiality”.

Big Nurse is the devouring Mother. The Chief calls her a “smiling flour-faced old mother” with “too-big boobs”. Her lips are coated in “the too-red lipstick” and are “like a doll’s lips ready for a fake nipple”. Unlike the nurturing qualities of a Good Mother’s lips and breasts, Ratched’s ones are mockeries of motherhood, in part because she denies her own femininity with the same stubborn tenacity as she disallows McMurphy’s masculinity. Chief observes that she chose “to ignore the way nature had tagged her with those outsized badges of femininity, just like she was above him, and sex and everything else that’s weak and of the flesh”. Ratched is evil because she takes on the male role. McMurphy complains that,

*“Seen ‘em all over the country and in the homes – people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line.... You ever been kneed in the nuts in a brawl, buddy?... If you’re up against a guy who wants to win by making you weaker instead of making himself stronger, just watch for his knee, he’s going for your vitals. And that’s what the old buzzard is doing, going for your vitals.”*

She was doing what men do in a brawl – “knead you in the gut” – but this is even more emasculating when performed by a woman.

In the novel, women – especially mothers and wives – are the nemesis of virile manhood. Billy Bibbit’s first word was “M-m-m-mama”. He is infantilised by Big Nurse and when she threatens to tell his mother about his first sexual encounter, he kills himself. The only thing lobotomised Ruckley says is “Ffffuck da wife”. Similarly, Dale Harding was unable to sexually “please” his promiscuous wife, intimidated by her “ample” breasts. He is the first to acknowledge to the newly admitted McMurphy that “We are all victims of a Matriarchy here”. The only man spared the emasculation of a “wife wanting new linoleum” is McMurphy, although even he has found himself in prison and then psychiatric institution for the statutory rape of a girl “15 going on 35”.

And it is not just the patients whom Nurse Ratched oppresses. The male doctors are also in her grip. This is made clear by Harding, who observes that Doctor Spivey,

*“is exactly like the rest of us... completely conscious of his inadequacy. He’s a frightened, desperate ineffectual little rabbit, totally incapable of running this ward without our Miss Ratched’s help, and he knows it. And, worse, she knows he knows it and reminds him every chance she gets. Every time she finds he’s made a little slip in the book-work or in, say, the charting you can just imagine her in there grinding his nose in it.”*

The doctors are the mirror image of the patients: all are rabbits for Ratched. What the patients need, readers are told, is a “good strong wolf like the nurse to teach us our place”.

Evil as the Bad Mother/Nurse is part of a long tradition of anxieties about women, especially mothers and nurses who hold positions of power over vulnerable boys and men. When Kesey was writing, this was represented most powerfully in the concept of Momism, a term popularised by Philip Wylie in his 1942 collection *Generation of Vipers*. Wylie book was a best-seller and, in 1950, was selected by the American Library Association as one of the most important nonfiction books in the first half of the century. In it, he argued that the “mealy look of men today is the result of momism and so is the pinched and baffled fury in the eyes of womankind”. He contended that modern, white Moms were smothering and feminising their male children. “Mom”, he wrote, is,

*“a middle-aged puffin with an eye like a hawk that has just seen a rabbit twitch far below. She is about twenty-five pounds overweight... with sharp heels and a hard backhand which she does not regard as a foul but a womanly defense. In a thousand of her there is not sex appeal enough to budge a hermit ten paces off a rock ledge.”*

(For those who have read the novel, a very similar comment was made by McMurphy about Nurse Ratched.) Wylie contended that American women sought the “possession of the spirit of a man” in a way that resembled “slavery”.

These themes appeared time and again in post-war American discourse – a misogynist response to Cold War fears of impotence against an almighty Soviet empire. For this, women (especially mothers) were to blame. They were both “overprotective” and the opposite, “maternally cold”. They were promiscuous, yet frigid. Scientific weight was lent to such arguments by the prominent psychiatrist Edward Strecker (who had been President of the American Psychiatric Association), most notably in his *Their Mothers’ Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*, which came out in 1946. He wrote about “momarchies” [sic] that failed to “untie the emotional apron string – the Silver Cord – which binds her children [he meant male ones] to her”. As a result, men were militarily useless, emasculated, and immature. Momarchies were fundamentally due to women’s unwillingness to accept their femininity and pre-ordained, deferential role in society.

There were only two ways to deal with the Evil Mother/Nurse. The first was rape, which, in the novel, not only puts the Big Nurse “in her place” but is also celebrated as a form of male bonding. In the novel, the rape of Nurse Ratched takes place in full view of the other men on the ward and the orderlies, but they merely look on. While the patients acknowledge that the *true* enemy is much larger than Nurse Ratched (it is the “Combine”), it is the female representative of the total institution who is attacked. In other words, Evil is individualised and feminised. The Big Nurse is *evil*, while the Combine is simply *all-powerful*. Hatred of women is stronger than hatred of the “establishment”.

The second way of dealing with the Evil Mother/Nurse is through male sacrifice. The hypo-male, Bibbit, is the ritualised sacrificial lamb of the ancient world. He slits his own throat in the psychiatrist’s chair, the equivalent of the holy priest’s throne. The hyper-male McMurphy is sacrificed in accordance with the twentieth century practice of lobotomy as a way of dealing with disruptive people. He “doled out his life for us to live”, the Chief believed.

Unfortunately, many reviewers of the novel *echo* rather than *critique* the Evil Woman motif. For example, in 1976, one reviewer called the 15-year-old girl who was raped by McMurphy a “crafty little slut who set him up for the slaughter”. In 1994, John Zubizarreta (writing in the *Literature/Film Quarterly*) ruled that Nurse Ratched was “monstrous” and the sex worker who gave such comfort to Billy Bibbit was a “squiggling tart”. While he deemed the lobotomy of “our hero” to be the “nurse’s brutal castration of Randle’s randy masculinity”, his review did not even mention his “hero’s” brutal rape of Nurse Ratched. Such problematic – let’s just call it “misogynistic” – reportage is even found in critiques that purport to adopt a feminist line. One critic informed his readers that,

*“In 1962, when the novel was published, many readers were blissfully ignorant of the sexual prejudices that Kesey reinforced. But in the last decade, we have lost our innocence. Kesey’s belligerent machismo no longer seems so charming; we are more aware of the contempt for women that underlies this all-male idyll. The slippery thing about Cuckoo’s Nest is that the profound and admirable values that it champions are inseparable from the insidious sexual prejudices that it perpetuates.”*

It is a statement that erases all the female characters (an “all-male idyll”) and his “we” ignores the numerous feminist critics of the novel who were not so “ignorant” of the novel’s female-hating themes. He also implies that ignorance about misogyny is “blissful” and “charming”. And becoming aware of it results in a loss of “innocence” – a casting out of the wholesome Garden of Eden, presumably by the evil of feminism rather than the devil’s snake.

The trope of the Bad Mother/Nurse is highlighted by the novel’s characterisations of “Good Women”. These are Candy and Sandy, “whores with hearts of gold”. They are sex workers who don’t even want to be paid! There is also a Good Nurse who is (no surprise here for those who heard my last lecture) orientalised. The Japanese nurse not only adopts the feminine role of nurturing patients on the disturbed ward, she also accepts the perspective of the male protagonists. She admits that “I sometimes think all single nurses should be fired after they reach thirty-five”, explicitly endorsing the view that Ratched’s cruelty against men is due to sex starvation.

This dichotomy between the Evil and the Good Nurse is not a new one. We can all think of the black-stocked, short-skirted nurses of “Carry On” films, “Holby City”, and pornography – stark contrasts, for example, to the calculating siren in the works of novelists like Kurt Vonnegut (for example, Nancy McLuhan in “Welcome to the Money House”, who also “gets her just deserts” by being raped).

Indeed, such demonisation has a long history – involving *real* women as well as fictionalised ones. The most notorious example is Lytton Strachey’s 1918 portrayal of Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing. Strachey not only portrays Nightingale as demonic but also a castrator of men. He claimed that “a Demon possessed her” and, when ill, “a demoniac frenzy... seized upon her”.

She possessed a “super-human equanimity”, he maintained, that masked her “dangerous temper – something peevish, something mocking”. What he seems to have found most intimidating was her (in his imagination) masculinity. Strachey claimed that Nightingale dominated her friend and co-reformer Sidney Herbert, effectively demasculinising him. As Strachey put it,

*“It is almost true to say that the roles were reversed; the qualities of pliancy and sympathy fell to the man, those of command and initiative fell to the woman.... She took hold of him... absorbed him, dominated him through and through.”*

The diabolical crime of Florence Nightingale was to be a powerful woman.

There is another, less commented on, aspect to the conception of evil as Mother/Nurse. This implicates race. Nurse Ratched’s supporters in the novel (more so than in the film) are her African American orderlies who, like Nurse Ratched, are bent on humiliating the patients. Readers are told that,

*“Years of training, and all three black boys tune in closer and closer with the Big Nurse’s frequency. One by one they are able to disconnect the direct wires and operate on beams.... They are in contact on a high-voltage wave length of hate, and the black boys are out there performing her bidding before she even thinks of it.”*

They become like her – part of her electrical current that “extends in all directions on hairlike wires”; they too sit “in the centre of this web of wires like a watchful robot” bent on harm.

The final aspect of Nurse Ratched’s evil lies in her location within totalising institutions, including fascism and psychiatry. After all, the novel recognises that she is not alone in her evil – Nurse Ratched draws her power from something much bigger. The “Combine” was excised in the film version (which causes Kesey much bitterness claiming that it undermined his anti-authoritarian message or “the conspiracy that is America”), but it is a dominant force in the novel. As the Chief acknowledged, “it’s not just the Big Nurse by herself, but it’s the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that’s the really big force, and the nurse is just a high-ranking official for them”.

The most extreme version of this critique sets Nurse Ratched in the context of Fascism and its pernicious tendency towards genocidal obedience. In the words of a 1975 critic, the “humanistic virtues of McMurphy are pitted against the neo-Fascist vices of Big Nurse”. Kesey’s critique, though, was linked more to broader anti-authoritarian concerns at the time. For example, in *When the Lights Go Down* (1980), Pauline Kael sees the Big Nurse as “the smiling, well-organized institutional type – the dean of women who was disappointed in you, the phone-company supervisor who tells you why she has to interrupt your service for nonpayment”. More typically, this wider system of evil was the insane asylum itself. Kesey had worked as a night aide in the Menlo Park Veterans’ Hospital in Palo Alto (California) and had been horrified by what he saw. His concerns were best exemplified by sociologist Erving Goffman in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961). For Goffman, psychiatric hospitals were worse than prisons because they not only dehumanised men but also de-masculinised them, treating them as sexless, dependant women. In Kesey’s novel, this turning of men into women takes place through inserting “controls” or “head installations” into a person’s brain, leading to machine-like conformity. Men become “just another robot for the Combine”.

Within the Combine, Nurse Ratched’s role is to create a therapeutic community based on rigid rules. As she tells the patients, “A good many of you are in here because you could not adjust to the rules of society in the Outside world”. She would enforce obedience. Central to this was the glass station in the ward, enabling the patients to be always observed. As many have noted, this is Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon”, transposed from the prison to the asylum. The Panopticon was designed

around a central tower, where guards could look into every cell. Prisoners always felt that they were under observation (even if they were not), so it was a way of disciplining them. Famously, in *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (published thirteen years after the publication of Kesey's novel), Michel Foucault argued that the panopticon was designed to,

*“induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.... This architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining the power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers.”*

For Bentham, Foucault continued, power,

*“should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.”*

And if the all-seeing eye failed to terrify the patient-prisoners into submission, Nurse Ratched also had access to the greatest power of all: lobotomy or, as McMurphy puts it, “frontal-lobe castration”, adding “I guess if she can't cut below the belt she'll do it above the eyes”.

Finally, have the novel and film made any difference on attitudes to femininity? As I said earlier, they reflected many misogynistic attitudes towards powerful women. That so many male reviewers could echo the tropes of Female Evil is evidence of that. Similarly, the fact that so many feminists pushed back against such characterisations also tells us a great deal about tensions in American gender relations during the Cold War. Accomplished actresses such as Anne Bancroft, Angela Lansbury, Geraldine Page, Colleen Dewhurst, and Ellen Burstyn turned down the role of Nurse Ratched in Forman's film on the grounds that the character was portrayed in misogynist ways: this suggests that a powerful critique of such tropes was circulating widely.

There was also interest in the way that film could make an impact on people's attitudes. This was not new. As early as 1916, Hugo Munsterberg (pioneer in applied psychology) had published *The Photoplay – A Psychological Study* which traced the way melodramas affected viewers. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has elicited many such investigations. In the early 1980s, for example, George Domino was able to show that college students who watched the film developed strong negative views towards mental health professionals, such as Nurse Ratched.

But such negative responses were in decline by the twenty-first century. Attitudes to Nurse Ratched became less punitive. In 2009, for example, a study conducted by Deborah J. Boschini and Norman L. Keltner found more sympathetic responses. Audiences of the film seemed to be more forgiving of Big Nurse's actions. As one psychiatric nurse commented, Nurse Ratched (as played by Louise Fletcher) was an “imperfect psychiatric nurse who does do more things *right* than she does wrong”. She added that,

*“Throughout the film I found myself relating to her circumstances and asking, “how should an effective psychiatric nurse respond?” Many times when patients became angry or confrontational, she maintained her composure. The film seems to suggest that she was a cold-hearted monster because she (almost) never “lost her cool”, when, in fact, it was her job to remain calm and not respond emotionally to challenges from patients – especially not patients with antisocial behavior... [Ratched is] not worthy of the title of “villain”.”*

An older psychiatric nurse agreed. She noted that when Nurse Ratched first appeared in the film, she was “draped in a white uniform, white shoes, and white cap”. Although this was “constructed to

evoke judgments of rigidity, compulsivity, etc.”, in fact “she had the opposite effect on me. It made me long for the days when one could tell who the nurses were as opposed to much of the sloppy apparel, long fingernails, and unprofessional behavior one encounters today”. In other words, the Big Nurse was a nostalgic reminder of a more orderly society, where everyone *did* know (and perform) “their place”.

Some of these responses to Nurse Ratched seem to be generational. This was what Jennifer Lambe concluded when, in 2019, she compared attitudes of her students and “baby-boomers” (1960s-80s). The earlier generation of interviewees were nearly unanimous in concluding that Nurse Ratched was evil. This was strongly contested by the students. In the words of one,

*“Yes, she’s mean. But in my opinion you don’t get the sense she’s evil. You feel that she’s tough but not necessarily mean-spirited, and that she actually may want to do what’s best for the patients, even if she doesn’t know exactly how to accomplish that.... [She] doesn’t seem evil, she just seems institutional.”*

Lambe concluded that more recent readings of the film by younger audiences resulted in an “upside-down reading of the original cultural script with the villains turned into objects of some sympathy and the iconic anti-hero no longer the principal source of the film’s appeal”. Interestingly, the redemption of Nurse Ratched went hand-in-hand with the deteriorating standing of the anti-hero McMurphy. This was particularly evident in the contrasting interpretations of the scene where McMurphy asks his girlfriend to have sex with Billy Bibbet. While the older generation interpreted this act as “heroic and therapeutic”, the younger students found it “exploitative, coercive, and inappropriate”. They did not label it “evil”, however.

In conclusion, let us return to Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He tells us that,

*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;  
That is the madman....*

This whole series of lectures has circled around questions of evil, of madness, of femininity – of the innumerable ways (more “than vast hell can hold”) that Devil-Women have been portrayed and used to diminish the lives of flesh-and-blood ones. Today, we have explored these issues through the lens of novelist Ken Kesey and filmmaker Miloš Forman, with their creative “eye[s], in a fine frenzy rolling”. They have given substance to Nurse Ratched, the Big Nurse, Bad Mother, and castrator of primal masculinity. In Theseus’ words, their “imagination bodies forth/ The forms of things unknown” and “turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name”. Readers and audiences, too, “body forth”, giving contexts and naming what we desire and fear. The power of critique is that of reinterpreting the stories we are told, including tales of Good and Evil. Today, Nurse Ratched is back on our screens, in the TV series called “Ratched”, which premiered last year. What will this Ratched convey about badness, madness, and evil as we imagine it today?

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Further Reading

Joanna Bourke, *Fear. A Cultural History* (London, 2005)

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, first 1975 (London, 1977)

Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (London, 1962)

Jennifer Lambe, "Memory Politics: Psychiatric Critique, Cultural Protest, and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*", *Literature and Medicine*, 37.2 (fall 2019)

For those who are interested, here is Theseus' speech in Act V, Scene 1 of William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;  
That is the madman: the lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;  
Or in the night, imagining some fear,  
How easy is a bush supposed a bear?*

See my personal website:

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/our-staff/profile/8008363/joanna-bourke>

See the website for Sexual Harms and Medical Encounters (SH+ME): <https://shame.bbk.ac.uk>

Follow me on Twitter: @bourke\_joanna and @shme\_bbk

### Question & Answer Session:

Men feeling de-masculinized just by being told what to do by a nurse in hospital while being in a weak position as a patient which leads them to demonize nurses? (because being told what to do by a woman doesn't fit in their concept of masculinity)

- **Joanna Bourke:** alas, unfortunately. I will be discussing this in a WOW event on Sunday at 6.30pm. Free, but book for this free event here [bit.ly/2Qkfi6D](http://bit.ly/2Qkfi6D) Pls share with male friends & allies

Nurses are often either demonized or sexualized. (and often real nurses have to face sexual assault by male patients)



- **Joanna Bourke:** The sexual assault of nurses is one of those suppressed facts; and nurses expected to act according to a "duty of care" to patients. Was about the duty of care of the institution towards nurses? Am writing an article about this at present.