Biblical Allusions in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

Often, we find ourselves in need of a savior to deliver us from the monotonous routines of society to freedom and individualism. We find such a savior not only in Christ, himself, but also in Ken Kesey’s memorable R.P. McMurphy. Kesey’s repetitive use of Biblical allusions throughout *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* reflects his astute observation of society’s need for illumination that will allow us to break free of our possessed, factory-produced, “Combine”-controlled lives. Scattered throughout the novel, Kesey includes allusions to Hell and its inhabitants, as well as various Christ-like figures.

Kesey’s most obvious biblical reference lies in his exposure of societal flaws. By comparing the psychiatric ward setting to Hell, itself, Kesey’s narrator, Chief displays remarkable insight. Chief’s vision of the Combine, the “huge room of endless machines…swarming with sweating, shirtless men running up and down catwalks, faces blank and dreamy in firelight thrown from a hundred blast furnaces,” paints a vivid scene which can only remind readers of the possessed demons of Hell at work in the fiery pit of eternal damnation (Kesey 86). The workers “lateral” one who falls behind “into a furnace,” and even hook a patient from the ward onto “one of those trestle affairs like you find in meat houses…to move
carcasses” (87). This morbid atmosphere, along with the presence of death and brutality, is undoubtedly a parallel to the commonly accepted depiction of Hell, recalling even Dante’s “Inferno,” as the Public Relations man guides visitors through the machinery. Though perhaps not a direct reference to Dante’s guide, Vergil, the Public Relations man does exhibit some traces of pagan culture. His “long undershirt with fancy monograms sewed red on front and back,” suggests perhaps, some pagan hieroglyphs, and his seemingly vulgar action of “running back to the hanging Chronic to rip off another trophy and tie it to his girdle,” recalls another aspect of ancient pagan culture which Vergil, himself, references toward the close of The Aeneid (89). After defeating an enemy, ancient warriors often attached a garment or possession of the enemies to their girdle as a trophy or sign of victory. This particular display of victory may also allude to the authority of the Combine, which our guide makes a point to emphasize. This Hell is, of course, none other than the ward itself, the center of machinery, of fixing, of blank faces.

Following this allusion the machine workers easily correlate with the role of the black boys at the ward, their “dreamy doll faces,” reflecting the porcelain appearance of their mistress, Nurse Ratched (87). Even Harding’s address of Nurse Ratched as an “angel of mercy,” is worth noting (60). Chief’s declaration of Big Nurse’s ward as “the Combine’s most powerful stronghold,” returns to the “Inferno” allusion: Lucifer, of course, at the center of this most organized pit of Hell. Therefore, it is ironic that Harding should assign the term “angel” to Nurse Ratched, who may quite possibly symbolize Milton’s famous fallen angel, Lucifer (305). Thus, as the ward is a representation of society, and Hell a representation of the ward, Kesey exposes society’s weaknesses. As Kesey points out, we have allowed ourselves to be run by the machines of authority, our individualism ultimately defeated at the hands of a single power source.
However, Kesey does not merely present society’s defects without proposing a solution as well. Through several references to Jesus Christ, Kesey stresses the significance of sacrifice and redemption. Though McMurphy most consistently retains a Christ-like role, Ellis is the first reference to this biblical savior. Rather than portray the grace and perfection of Christ, however, Ellis presents quite the opposite. “Nailed against the wall in the same condition they lifted him off the table for the last time, in the same shape, arms out, palms cupped, with the same horror on his face,” (Kesey 16) Ellis appears weak and helpless, even afraid. With Christ’s pool of blood replaced with a puddle of urine, Ellis embodies a demeaning, vulnerable, and utterly defenseless depiction of Our Lord. Many of Kesey’s allusions to Jesus relate to the shock therapy undergone by Ellis, placing particular emphasis on the “crown of electric sparks,” as opposed to one of thorns (69). In this case, the reference is meant to relate the suffering and cruelty experienced by an innocent Jesus Christ to the unjust agony bestowed upon the patients at the ward. Yet, Ellis’s relationship to Christ continues. “Ellis pulled his hands down off the nails in the wall and squeezed Billy Bibbit’s hand and told him to be a fisher of men,” just before the patients embark on their fishing adventure (234). This scene, indisputably recreates Jesus’s call to Peter in Matthew 4:19: “‘Come follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men.’” Although Ellis physically mirrors the image of Christ, McMurphy, as leader of the fishing trip, is actually the savior that these particular patients will “follow.” The fact that Ellis specifies Billy is also significant. If McMurphy plays the role of Jesus, Billy Bibbit represents none other than the Apostle Simon Peter, an allusion reemphasized later when Billy denies association with McMurphy three times when confronted by Nurse Ratched (315-316).

A similar image of Jesus at the cross is drawn from Sefelt’s seizure. “His hands,” like Ellis’, are also “…nailed out to each side with the palms up,” (178). Sefelt’s seizure, however, is
quite different from the electro-shock therapy endured by Ellis. Because Sefelt’s seizures are so violent, he is forced to take medication which subsequently rots his gums. This is predicament alludes to that of Christ. Like Sefelt, Jesus must choose between two bad decisions: allowing his crucifixion and abandoning his duty. This “damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” situation is common throughout the novel, especially in McMurphy’s case (179). Therefore, the situation of both Christ and Sefelt is unbeatable without sacrifice.

Kesey’s final reference to Christ, as stated previously, is of course, McMurphy. Upon further analysis, we find Randle Patrick McMurphy’s life on the ward strikingly similar to Christ’s experience on earth. First introduced as a larger-than-life character, a powerful and confident individual, McMurphy may easily seem to be somewhat supernatural. Nurse Ratched, however, refutes this idea by reminding us of McMurphy’s humanity, acknowledging that he, too, is “subject to all the fears and all the cowardice and all the timidity that any other man is subject to,” (157). McMurphy reverts back to this humanity in the same concern expressed by Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane. Christ, concealed in the darkness of night, pleads that God take away his “cup of suffering”. McMurphy allows a “frantic and strained” expression to cross his face, seen only in the reflection of the car windshield on the way back from the fishing trip, concerned that “there wasn’t enough time left for something he had to do” (258). Both Christ and McMurphy are painfully aware of their upcoming sacrifices. Still, their human nature causes them to fear.

Before receiving electro-shock therapy, McMurphy blatantly, and almost blasphemously, compares himself to Christ. “’Anointest my head with conductant. Do I get a crown of thorns?’” (283) Though, in context, this remark is meant solely for mocking purposes, its distinct religious address should not pass unnoticed. Finally, at the novel’s turning point, the assault of
Big Nurse, McMurphy’s purpose is revealed. As McMurphy draws toward Nurse Ratched, Chief observes that the patients “couldn’t stop him because [they] were the ones making him do it” (318). The patients, like the sinners who needed Christ to die, require this action from McMurphy in order to be saved. Therefore, this sexual assault on Nurse Ratched is the equivalent of Christ’s assumption of sin, both actions subsequently liberating the passive onlookers, and both producing ultimately fatal results: lobotomy and crucifixion. Nurse Ratched’s simple response to inquiries concerning McMurphy’s fate, “He will be back,” is suggestive, however, of resurrection (320). Yet, although McMurphy does escape certain death, not even his followers recognize him in his new condition, claiming that the body lying on the Gurney “ain’t him” and looks “nothing like him,” (321). The patients circle around McMurphy’s living body, observing the scars and muscles and tattoos as the Apostle Thomas had observed the scars of the resurrected Jesus. Thus, as Christ ascends to heaven, leaving only the Holy Spirit behind, McMurphy’s soul and persona depart from his body, leaving his friends with only his memory. In fact, it was this very memory that allowed Chief to finally escape. Though he never physically helped Chief out of the ward, McMurphy, as Scanlon points out did “[show him] how one time.” (323) Therefore, it is the recollected memory of the savior that led Chief to freedom. Similarly, it is not necessarily Christ, in the flesh, that leads a sinner to redemption, but the choice to follow Christ and remember His teachings that frees him. In this way, patients at the ward are liberated from the oppressive Combine and are free to live as functioning individuals as a result of the sacrifice, resurrection, and lingering presence of their savior, R.P. McMurphy.

By constant allusion to the Bible, a commonly recognized source, Kesey further establishes his meaning. Hell, Lucifer, and Christ are familiar icons that often help a reader better understand a work of literature, or even see more clearly the picture the author is trying to
convey. Thus, Kesey’s specific allusions support his overall message that the droning conformity of society must be broken by a single savior to introduce freethinking and individualism. As Kesey suggests, only one voice is required to incite change, to provide illumination for society, which will thereby allow us to be free and independent.