

RETHINKING McMURPHY'S IDENTITY IN KEN KESEY'S *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST*

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Randolph Patrick McMurphy's several functions in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (translated into Portuguese as *Um Estranho no Ninho*) offer, so to speak, a large range of possibilities of literary interpretations, on account of the complexity of the decade in which the story takes place rather than the complexity of the character himself, even though one must acknowledge that he is not a flat character at all. I mean, McMurphy's actions and importance within the novel increase and develop in direct proportion to the growth of the antagonistic social forces against which he is going to fight and that ultimately reflect similar forces oppressing millions of subjugated Americans in the fierce and roaring actuality of the 1960's.

In fact, the 1960's were a decade of numerous social fights for freedom, equality and rights in the USA. Lots of minority groups around the country either started perfecting their previous strategies for the social "combat" or engaged in rough social fights for the first time. Amidst such turbulent movements, those headed by black American leaders such as the radical Malcolm X or the pacifist reverend Martin Luther King gained prominence, and epitomized and encouraged the initiatives of other group-leaders that represented feminists, sexual minorities, immigrants, just to name a few of the most important ones. As a result of that time of tumult and bloody riots, many new laws were passed to outlaw and compensate for inequalities. However, as laws themselves do not have the power to deracinate people's old habits and prejudices all of a sudden, a great deal of resistance, cruelty, and all sorts of social injustices were still to be faced by those who dared to challenge the Establishment.

In light of all this, we can say that Ken Kesey's novel stands for a metaphor for the roaring fights of those minorities throughout the American soil in the 1960's, as well as its protagonist – McMurphy – stands for a perfect surrogate of a proper leader to the oppressed group of "mentally disturbed" patients of the hospital's psychiatric ward in which he will also be an inmate. Nevertheless, given that most interpretations of McMurphy's roles generally position him as an anti-hero, the main aim of this article is to argue that it is possible to find out ultimate traces of a leader and a hero behind McMurphy's seemingly anti-heroic façade.

In *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* , Big Nurse incorporates the most repressive aspects of American society, always "backed by the power of a mechanistic 'Combine', a central agency for that society's suppression of individuality", as Barry H. Leeds points out (1981, p. 14). In opposition to the wholly suffocating and dehumanizing order Miss Ratched (Big Nurse) imposes on all the psychiatric ward, there appears the disruptionist figure of Randolph Patrick McMurphy.

Without neglecting the obvious functions of fixing up the “machines” (the “insane” patients) that did not fit the society outside, the hospital can also be viewed as a metaphor for that same external society. Indeed, if on the one hand, all the inmates represent the great masses of subjugated populations whose rights and human dignity are denied by a superior authority, on the other hand, Miss Ratched appears as the perfect representative of the Combine, whose main intention is to maintain strict order and discipline, at the cost of physical and sexual violence, electroshock therapy (EST), narcotic medication, lobotomy, or even death itself.

Feigning insanity, McMurphy manages to escape hard labor on the County work farm, where he has been serving a sentence for assault and battery, and is then committed to the hospital. Chief Bromdem, the Indian narrator who is also committed to the hospital and pretends to be deaf and dumb, describes his entrance to the hospital. He is used to witness the same routine applying to any Admission, and always enacted by the three black boys. Nevertheless, in McMurphy's case he realizes something different, as though he were foreshadowing the importance of the roles the new arrival is going to perform on that ward. The following passage illustrates such a perception on the part of Chief Bromdem:

But this morning I have to sit in the chair and only listen to them bring him in. Still, even though I can't see him, I know he's not an ordinary Admission. I don't hear him slide scared along the wall, and when they tell him about the shower he don't just submit with a weak little yes, he tells them right back in a loud, brassy voice that he's already plenty damn clean, thank you (KESEY, 1992, p. 10).

Even though McMurphy introduces himself to the inmates in a very simplistic way: “My name is McMurphy, buddies, R.P. McMurphy, and I'm a gambling fool.” (p.11), from this moment on, he is going to represent resistance, restoration of feelings and life, sexual desire, self-esteem, pleasure, laughter, salvation, possibility of changes, and, most of all, *disruption* .

It goes without saying then that McMurphy is no doubt the protagonist in the novel. As a consequence, all his actions and his growing importance will ultimately force the reader to reach some opinions about McMurphy himself and the kind of role he is going to perform in the novel. Hence, a number of crucial questions may arise, such as: Does McMurphy fit perfectly his apparently obvious anti-heroic characterizations, or can he be viewed as a hero in spite of not possessing a series of prerequisites a hero should traditionally present? Do heroes necessarily have to follow certain fixed mythological or religious patterns?

In a word, due to the already mentioned complexity of the 1960's as a time of social effervescence and radical changes, portrayed in the microcosm of the psychiatric ward, Miss Ratched and the Combine behind her represent the extreme and ruthless oppression against which McMurphy's natural leadership is going to declare war. Since McMurphy has to react properly to any strategic attack by Miss Ratched, the whole

situation in which they are involved grants his character a certain complexity, which allows by no means the existence of easy answers to the questions about McMurphy and the social relevance of his functions in the novel.

Concentrating the focus of the discussion on the issue of whether or not McMurphy performs the role of a hero, I firmly believe that it is possible to trace a few heroic characteristics in a character presenting so many obvious and strong features of an anti-hero like Randolph P. McMurphy. To begin with, it is necessary to understand the meaning of these so-called anti-heroic characteristics of McMurphy's. The first thing that inevitably comes to one's mind then is that given the harshness of the conditions on the ward McMurphy would not have had any success at all had he played the pacifist Mahatma Gandhi or even Jesus Christ. Thus, it is exactly because of the confrontation of the social forces that McMurphy should appropriately be first seen as a hero, as Jerome Klinkowitz observes:

Against these social forces, which by the 1960's had come to be perceived as threats, McMurphy places himself as a revolutionary hero. He is first of all an authority in general, and especially against the type of authority that inhibits self-expression and places limits on the individual (1980, p. 23).

As can be seen, Klinkowitz acknowledges McMurphy's role of hero and even politician, as well as he does the same in relation to Yossarian, the protagonist in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. This is so due to the fact that McMurphy brings a series of new possibilities which cause a real impact on the patients' ward (or "world", if the ward is interpreted as a metaphor). Among them, Chief Bromdem is certainly the most responsive follower of McMurphy, being also responsible for the mythologization of McMurphy's resistance and rebellion. It is worth remembering that Chief Bromdem compares McMurphy with his own father, starting by his way of speaking: "He talks a little the way Papa used to, voice loud and full of hell, but he doesn't look like Papa; (...)" (p.11), which reinforces the issue of idealization of a hero, since one keeps in mind what Chief Bromdem's Papa represented to Bromdem himself, as a representative of a minority group being oppressed, and to his people, which rather than simply humiliated have been decimated by the white Americans, mainly after the western expansionism of the second half of the 19th century.

In this regard, Klinkowitz still points out McMurphy is the kind of hero that is elevated to such a status by the acknowledgement of Chief Bromdem himself, and the reader by implication, when he states that: "A hero such as Mac needs first of all to be perceived as a hero; and as our eyes and ears in the novel, the conventionally mute Chief Bromdem becomes the expression of McMurphy's greatness"(KLINKOWITZ, 1980, p. 22).

In light of that, one can within reason argue that, - putting aside Chief Bromdem's evident idealization of McMurphy's - , Mac can also be seen as a sort of Circumstantial Hero, who hadn't had the least intention of becoming a hero, before being committed to that ward. Nevertheless, when he enters the ward, he automatically "occupies" the then vacant position of leader of that community, without suspecting that at all at that exact

moment.

McMurphy defines himself as a “gambling fool”, as well as a man charged with rape, which would be enough to discredit him as much fond of sex, as Leeds points out: “In the wasteland of the ward, his sexual vitality makes him loom as a figure of mythic proportions” (LEEDS, 1981, p. 43). However, if Harding's and Billy Bibbit's serious sexual problems (increased by Big Nurse) are taken into consideration, McMurphy's sexual vitality represents life and energy in opposition to the sterility of the universes of those repressed men (as well as the others on the ward). In addition, if sexual activity is viewed as a sign of humanization, in opposition to the mechanistic view of people as machines, then McMurphy is to be considered the perfect leader or hero to fit the requirements of that community on the ward.

In this regard, Klinkowitz also observes that McMurphy is the first fictional hero to practice the key-strategy of sixties leadership: “raising the consciousness of people” (KLINKOWITZ, 1980, p. 23), laughter being one of the most effective weapons he uses to change the patients' lives on the ward. But, at the same time he makes these changes come true, his responsibilities start to grow over and over again, so that the inmates begin to drive McMurphy to play out the role of heroic rebel, according to what Tony Tanner states:

We must read McMurphy, then, in two ways. In a sense he is an authentic rebel who steps to the music that he hears; yet there is a sense in which he is marching to the music of the fantasies projected on to him and, as such, in his own way a kind of “zombie” too, a servitor of the versions imposed on him. Perhaps Kesey intends us to understand that McMurphy's heroism is in realizing this second truth, and nevertheless continuing with the imposed role (TANNER, 1971, p. 375).

Such an attitude on the part of the inmates must be understood as coming out of a compulsion to fantasize situations which Mac is compelled to materialize. Consequently, when McMurphy neglects self-interest and desires to continue fighting the Combine, after Cheswick's death, some more meaningful events are going to take place and foreshadow that McMurphy's fate is probably going to lead him to the position of sacrificial victim. From this moment on, episodes like that of the fishing trip are going to establish a parallel between McMurphy's functions and “teachings”, and those attributed to Jesus Christ, according to Leeds.

Even though not going into the details of such comparison, they do not seem to make much sense at first sight, because Jesus Christ belongs to that class of traditional heroes for which McMurphy does not fit, since he lacks a series of prerequisites. Anyway, if Christ's attacking of outmoded morality and his sweeping away of hypocrisies are taken into consideration, one aspect of McMurphy's role can be, within reason, compared with Christ's in accordance with Leeds' ideas: “Thus, although McMurphy espouses an apparently amoral sexuality, he infuses his followers with a brotherly love which is distinctively Christian and which a mechanistic society has forgotten” (LEEDS, 1981, p. 38).

The establishment of so many parallels between McMurphy himself and many events involving his actions and his “disciples” with Jesus Christ and his apostles, for example, brings up some aspects of high concern as to the question of the characterization of the hero. The first striking problem, as I have just suggested, is that together with other traditional or mythological figures, such as Sidhartha Gautama Buddha and Theseus, for instance, Jesus Christ belongs to the class of heroes who have undergone a series of phases which are sometimes indispensable steps to their full classification as heroes.

The problem with McMurphy is that he does not fit the majority of the characteristics and phases which those traditionally mythological or religious heroes generally undergo. That is why McMurphy's heroism is to be viewed as a circumstantial product, a response to the very peculiar situation on the ward. Thus, it is possible to find justification to the fact that Mac immediately occupies the vacant position of leader in that community, and starts to be driven by the inmates' fantasies, which they were not able to make come true.

In addition, according to Joseph Campbell (1997), a great deal of supernatural power, or even interference of Gods, frequently exert a great influence on the life or journey of such mythological or religious heroes, not to speak of the wide range of examples coming from very diverse cultures throughout history, such as the Ancient Greece, the Ancient African tribes, the Aboriginal communities of Australia, and even from the Jewish-Christian tradition. Campbell makes use of all this religious, sociological, mythic, and cultural background both to show the complex characterization of the hero, as a whole, and that regardless of such a complexity and diversity surrounding the question it is possible to identify a common archetypical ground underlying all those myths and stories. In the following quotation, he offers a glimpse of the adventures of the hero, which ultimately illustrates the majority of the characteristics and phases undergone by the hero:

O herói mitológico saindo de sua cabana ou castelo cotidianos, é atraído, levado ou se dirige voluntariamente para o limiar da aventura. Ali, encontra uma presença sombria que guarda a passagem. O herói pode derrotar essa força, assim como pode fazer um acordo com ela, e penetrar com vida no reino das trevas (batalha com o irmão, batalha com o dragão; oferenda, encantamento); pode, da mesma maneira, ser morto pelo oponente e descer morto (desmembramento, crucificação). Além do limiar, então, o herói inicia sua jornada por um mundo de forças desconhecidas e, não obstante, estranhamente íntimas, algumas das quais o ameaçam fortemente (provas), ao passo que outras lhe oferecem uma ajuda mágica (auxiliares). Quando chega ao nadir da jornada mitológica, o herói passa pela suprema provação e obtém sua recompensa. Seu triunfo pode ser representado pela união sexual com a deusa-mãe (casamento sagrado), pelo reconhecimento pelo pai-criador (sintonia com o pai), pela sua divinização (apoteose) ou, mais uma vez - se as forças se tiverem mantido hostis a ele -, pelo roubo, por parte do herói, da benção que ele foi buscar (rapto da noiva, roubo do fogo); intrinsecamente, trata-se de uma expansão da consciência e, por conseguinte, do ser (iluminação, transfiguração, libertação). O trabalho final é o do retorno. Se as forças abençoarem o herói, ele agora retorna sob sua proteção (emissário); se não for esse o caso, ele empreende uma fuga e é perseguido (fuga de transformação, fuga de

obstáculos). No limiar do retorno, as forças transcendentais devem ficar para trás; o herói reemerge do reino do terror (retorno, ressurreição). A bênção que ele traz consigo restaura o mundo (elixir) (CAMPBELL, 1997, p. 38).

As can be seen, the majority of mythological heroes, such as Prometheus and Theseus fit the majority of the steps described in such a quotation. Some other religious heroes such as Buddha (and even Jesus Christ) may also somehow fit them. This fact explains why Campbell makes use of such an encompassing approach, including myths from several different peoples and cultures, as well as fairy tales and many elements of folklore, to trace some points in common among all of them so as to build the archetypal image of the hero, ultimately the product of all human myths. Thus, even the title of Campbell's book in question suggests this multifaceted characterization of the hero: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (*O Herói de Mil Faces* , the title in Portuguese of the edition used here).

As far as McMurphy is concerned, if those traditional heroic characteristics are taken into consideration, he is likely not to be considered a hero. Thus, while figures such as Jesus Christ and Buddha are believed to be sons of virgin mothers, no information about McMurphy's origin is given in the novel. Similarly, while many of the mythological heroes are no doubt legendary, and present a great deal of fantastic/supernatural phenomena permeating their lives (and even in the case of real historical heroes such as Buddha and Christ this condition also applies), McMurphy's life is of a very ordinary sort. Besides, there is no record of any supernatural power backing his actions, and the only resembling mythology in the novel is Bromdem's making his hero McMurphy larger than life, and the inmates' fantasies imposed on him.

Nevertheless, exactly because McMurphy represents the absolute negation of the “mechanistic perfection” of Miss Ratched's world, he has to be very human and use his laughter and wit against the System. His sexual vitality and gambling infuse life and fun in the sterile lives of the inmates, and especially in Chief Bromdem's life, which allows us to envision a possible messianic mission of McMurphy towards his companions. By bestowing life, light, hope, happiness and laughter on the once “irrevocably” wasted existences of the inmates, McMurphy also questions what insanity is, so that concepts that would be in vogue much later in the 1960's like “black is beautiful” can be seen as an echo of Ken Kesey's sense that “insanity is beautiful” in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. In a word, the series of disruptions caused by McMurphy and his “followers” produce positive results, since after McMurphy's death things start to change on the ward. So, it is possible to speak of a ward *before* and a ward *after* McMurphy, which endorses the sense of the hero's completion of his mission. Furthermore, the hero's death was not in vain, for the changes brought about by his passage, staying and teachings to his community granted its members better conditions of life.

Nevertheless, if McMurphy's lack of a certain mythological support to characterize him as a full hero is still argued, it is proper to keep in mind that, while tracing some considerations on the functions of the myths in the life and journey of modern heroes, Campbell points out that mythology can be interpreted nowadays as a primitive set of efforts to explain the phenomena of nature; as a mere product of poetic fantasies of

prehistoric eras; as a repository of allegorical instructions whose main goal is to adapt individuals to their groups; or as a group dream, symptomatic of the archetypal impulses that exist in the most profound layers of human psyche (according to Jung). As a consequence, the importance of mythology is to a great extent diminished in the cycle of the modern hero, due to the fact that the myth has been deprived of its old dreamlike web, as long as the modern man has fully emerged from the former ignorance by which the ancient societies were surrounded in the past. In addition, the social unity prevailing in most modern societies is not pervaded by religion as much as it had been in the past, but by a social-economic orientation.

Therefore, the modern hero's function must concentrate, among other strategies, on restoring the communications between the individuals' consciousness and the unconscious layers of their souls, as he points out:

A tarefa do herói, a ser empreendida hoje, não é a mesma do século de Galileu. Onde então havia trevas, hoje há luz; mas é igualmente verdadeiro que, onde havia luz, hoje há trevas. A moderna tarefa do herói deve configurar-se como uma busca destinada a trazer outra vez à luz a Atlântida perdida da alma condenada (CAMPBELL, 1997, p. 241).

Thus, even not neglecting the relevant fact Campbell's *O Herói de Mil Faces* was first published in 1949, and that the society portrayed in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (published in 1962) is that of the beginning of the sixties, and soon gotten out of the conformism of the 1950's, it is still possible to find room for McMurphy as a modern hero, according to the definition espoused by Campbell. Moreover, if the fact that the patients on the ward did not even enjoy the status of half-individuals but that of machines is taken into consideration, McMurphy's portrayal as a modern hero may be ultimately and irrevocably endorsed.

Similarly, it is also plausible to state that McMurphy's death does not represent that he was defeated. Even though lobotomized, his ideas flourished, after being killed (and then released from that vegetating life) by the friendly hands of Chief Bromdem, as the following passage illustrates:

Everything was changing. Sefelt and Fredrickson signed out together Against Medical Advice, and two days later another three Acutes left, and six more transferred to another ward. (...) The Big Nurse was over in Medical for a week, (...); that gave the guys a chance to change a lot of the ward policy (KESEY, 1992, p 305-306).

Still as one of the most meaningful outcomes of McMurphy's performance as savior and hero, even Bromdem himself, one of his most perfect "disciples", is driven out of his fog forever, becoming then one of the heirs of McMurphy's legacy.

As a consequence, if the ward is seen as a metaphor for the world, McMurphy's disruptionist strategies against the authoritarian inflexibility of the Combine proves the feasibility of the changes (even at the cost of human lives) in an extremely hostile and

anti-democratic *status quo* .

However, if one still says that McMurphy's anti-heroic characteristics may constitute an irrevocable obstacle to his thorough classification as a hero, he is likely to change his mind if some other vital aspects are taken into account, such as the fact that being an anti-hero has been beyond doubt the most efficient way for McMurphy to fight fiercely against the Combine. Furthermore, it is still plausible to argue that at the same time that McMurphy's playing the anti-hero becomes an efficient weapon against the Combine, this same circumstance produces a great number of benefits to the other inmates. Thus, such circumstances must be viewed as part of McMurphy's heroic role, and Kesey's strategy of producing new meanings out of dealing with oppositions. The same stream of thoughts applies to Bromdem's killing of McMurphy, an action which bears no plausibility within the scope of common sense, for a friend is not supposed to kill his most beloved fellow-man, but that assumes a function of great relevance since it releases McMurphy's from a death-in-life situation and constitutes an indispensable step towards McMurphy's mythologization.

Finally, some other aspects must not be neglected either, such as the fact that, starting from the condition of ordinary man, McMurphy was successively promoted to father, leader, sacrificial victim, and hero. In a word, he starts his journey as an ordinary man and closes it as a myth, for his death is not in vain, as has just been approached. As much as Chief Bromdem's killing of Mac must not be viewed as an ordinary homicide (much on the contrary, it is an act of piety), the majority of the events that take place in the novel must not either, for almost nothing in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* is simply "ordinary": not the title itself; not the protagonist (a true hero in the shape of an anti-hero, regardless of the traditional classifications of hero); and, ultimately, not even the roaring 1960's. Thus, working sharply through a series of deconstructive oppositions and inversions of values, Ken Kesey has offered us the most perfect hero, under the most appropriate, efficient, and disruptionist guise possible, to fit the requirements of the turbulent 1960's. In doing so, Kesey problematizes McMurphy's identity(ies) and acknowledges Stuart Hall's attack on the old enlightenment/Carthesian concept of monolithic identity of the individual when he states that:

The subject assumes different identities in different moments, identities which are not unified around a coherent "I". Within ourselves there are contradictory identities, pushing into different directions, so that our identities are continuously dislocated. If we feel we have a unified identity within ourselves from birth till our death it is because we have constructed a comfortable story about ourselves(...). The thoroughly unified, complete, stable, and coherent identity is a fantasy (HALL, 2001, p.13).

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