

## The Breasts of Big Nurse: Satire Versus Narrative in Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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Difficulties and impasses in literary interpretation can often be traced back to erroneous generic classification. This would seem to apply in the case of the critical commonplace that fully realized, "three-dimensional" female characters in American fiction written by men are few and far between, while it abounds in women who are vicious, domineering, and emasculating. Archetypal critics such as Leslie Fiedler have long contended that this shortcoming is due to the nature of the basic American *mythos* underlying American fiction—"the old, old fable of the White outcast and the noble Red Man joined together against home and mother, against the female world of civilization" (177). According to Fiedler, the Castrating Female is an American archetype, hypostatized by Hannah Duston, the tomahawk-wielding "Great WASP Mother of Us All" (95), whose fable had supposedly spawned the unique host of fictive women, alternately henpecking and monstrous, nagging and castrating. In Fiedler's view, the archetype has truly come into its own in the "full" twentieth century, in the person of Big Nurse Ratched of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, because she turns the modern versions of Hannah's tomahawk—intimidation, coercion, electro-shock treatment, and the lobotomizing scalpel—not only against Indians but against white males as well (180-182).

Without a doubt, American fiction does include a long line of negative female characters, from Dame Van Winkle to Margot Macomber and beyond, and Big Nurse stands out even in this infamous company; but by making her into a reincarnation of Mrs. Duston archetypal criticism has self-servingly emphasized one trait at the expense of several other equally significant components. Critics who saw Big Nurse as a realistic character had the similarly straightforward task in "proving" that she is the vehicle of a calumnious attack on women by an openly misogynist author, expressing male fear turned aggression of the Eisenhower era.<sup>1</sup> Then there were those who, bent on "saving" Kesey, have variously proposed that the work is an Oedipal "family romance" (Bad Mother = Big Nurse; Good Father = Randle McMurphy; Sons = mental patients); romance proper (McMurphy as Quest Hero, Big Nurse as Dragon); comedy (Big Nurse a typical comic villain, a "boastful impostor"); and even tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Feminist critics have tended to downplay the menacing aspects of Miss Ratched; in Elizabeth McMahon's estimation, "The Big Nurse happens also to be the Big Victim when viewed with an awareness of the social and economic exploitation of women" (27).<sup>3</sup>

Big Nurse as victim? And not "just" victimizer? After he turned Kesey's novel into a film, director Milos Forman defended his portrayal of Miss Ratched as "more humanized," preferable to the "one-

dimensional monster of the novel” (McCreadie 130). Forman is wrong; Big Nurse is anything but “one-dimensional.” It is critics bent on forcing her to fit their chosen genre that reduce her complexities, as if they sensed an aporia at the root of her character. For there is an irreconcilable conflict between authorial attempts at constructing a solid verbal simulacrum of the Female as Monster and the unwitting narrative cracks through which a different female reality (e.g., victimizer become victim) may be perceived. I would argue that the usual either/or “solution” in decoding the complex assemblage of signs that make up the character of Big Nurse can be avoided only if *Cuckoo’s Nest* is read for what it is: an *allegorical satire*. Satire itself is a genre that contains/conceals an unresolvable paradox; even a solid definition that “satire consists of an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historic particulars” (Rosenheim 31) alludes to it only indirectly. An attack can only be launched from solid ground; thus, in their view of history satirists are substantialists: i.e., they conceive of the world as a constant, “true” substance, from which the present reality is a lamentable deviation. The “attack,” however, involves the translation of the concept into a “manifest fiction,” a verbal process with all its polysemy and indeterminacy. As Everett Zimmerman noted, “Satire aims to confine the apparent fluctuations of narrative within an evaluative framework” (18); thus, Kesey’s satirical intentions are constantly qualified if not undermined by his own fairly sophisticated narrative strategies.

The conflict of satire and narrative is best observed on the level of character, particularly the target figure: instead of a unified, almost literally “cardboard” character demanded by satire, narrative produces a heterogeneous, decentered personality. Big Nurse as satiric target becomes both victimizer and victim for narrative reasons, in part because the author has chosen to filter his vision of America’s technological-consumer society through the point of view of a schizophrenic half-breed Indian. Big Chief Bromden is no transparent eyeball; he is obsessed with the world as a mechanized pseudo-reality in the clutches of a nebulous entity he calls the “Combine.” Satire has traditionally blamed the departure from the “true path” on dehumanization, on humans losing their “degree” and becoming bestial, usually by abandoning reason for the appetites, passion, sexuality. Kesey, too, adopts this pattern, with the difference that first, his narrator sees modern society turning humans not into beasts but machines; and second, the cause of dehumanization is deemed to be not sexuality but precisely the lack or repression of it.

These dual concerns are centered on Big Nurse. Most critics have noted her name, Ratched, as recalling *ratchet* to connect her as obviously as possible to a machinic nature. Kesey himself makes another blatant pun, “Rat-shed” (87), in order to suggest that she personifies a giant cage in which the rat-like mental patients are imprisoned. (Another allusion might point to Orwell’s *1984* and the “rat-sheds” strapped on the face of dissidents, making the connection between Big Brother and Big Nurse.) From the start we are directed to see her as monstrous, as when she arrives on the ward and sees the black attendants loitering in the corridor. In Chief Bromden’s paranoid vision she becomes a mixture of

machine and beast: "She's swelling up, swells till her back's splitting out the white uniform . . . and she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside" (11). Only the appearance of the patients makes her "change back before she's caught in the shape of her hideous real self"—the self revealed only to, and by, the paranoid-schizophrenic Indian, for his second sight allows him to narrate "the truth, even if it didn't happen" (13). This narrative truth, however, is not unvarnished; and Kesey the novelist constantly muddles the efforts of Kesey the satirist.

This incongruity becomes apparent in the Chief's description of Big Nurse:

Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive baby-doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel, blend of white and cream and baby blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils—everything working together except the color on her lips and fingernails, and the size of her bosom. 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." (11)

The satirical intentions are clear: Big Nurse is inhuman, this time herself rat-like, and a piece of machinery; her breasts create a confusing, bionic effect, which she wants to conceal in her stiff, starched uniform. Archetypal and psychoanalytic criticism have variously interpreted Big Nurse's big breasts as signs of the Destructive Mother or the Bad Mother; for the former, she is a castrator, while for the latter, as Ruth Sullivan noted, the inmates "yearn" that Big Nurse's actions "should answer the promise of her anatomy, the promise of softness and abundant giving one can associate with a mother's breast" (39). Such "straight" readings still support the satirical male-centered concept of power-hungry women becoming the willing instruments of oppression at the cost of their womanhood, though it is only superficially correct to say that "Miss Ratched's breasts are ironic reminders of the sexuality she has renounced" (Leeds 27): satiric substantialism implies that what she has come to deny is her "substance" or "nature," which include "abundant giving" both as sex objects and mothers. This self-same male myth also implies that she is "bitter" about her breasts because they "prove" she is an inadequate, in fact phoney authority figure, and her undeniable womanhood means undeniable vulnerability, inferiority, and eventual defeat.

Satire is flat and conceptual, but novelistic story-telling aims at verisimilitude and fullness of characterization, with the result that Chief Bromden's narrative fills in some of the gaps left over by the satire with bits and pieces of Big Nurse's hidden biography. As a satirical sign, Miss Ratched's bosom is an undesirable supplement of her machinic "personality"; but as a narrative sign, it allows for the signification of her thwarted womanhood and humanity. As Harding, the resident intellectual tells McMurphy, Miss Ratched is an ex-Army nurse along with her old friend, the hospital supervisor, and together they rule the hospital, making "rabbits" out of both inmates and doctors. In Harding's narrative Big Nurse is no monster; on the contrary, he confides to McMurphy, "She

must have been a rather beautiful young woman,” for although she is around fifty, “her face is quite handsome and well preserved” and “in spite of her attempts to conceal them, you can still make out the evidence of some rather extraordinary breasts” (66).

Although Harding dwells on Big Nurse’s still intact attractions in order to entice McMurphy into seducing (and subduing) her (as he puts it, “man has but *one* truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy”), the image he gives further qualifies the Chief’s own paranoid descriptions, alluding to a subtext that is at odds with the aims of satire. Harding (whose neurosis is attributed to feelings of inadequacy regarding his own full-figured wife) gives voice to the American fixation on the large female breast as a sign of beauty and attractiveness. However, the narrative subtext prompts several discordant questions—questions that satire would have repressed: Are large breasts, even or especially in this culture that so overwhelmingly privileges them, uniformly a blessing? The satirist, along with *Playboy* and the myriad branches of the exploitative media that created and promoted the Jane Mansfield syndrome, would resoundingly say, Yes, if the girl in question, like the heroines of Hollywood, Madison Avenue, to say nothing of pornography, would agree to flaunt and display them for the benefit of male fantasy. But what if the “sweet young thing” refuses to be equated with her breasts as cultural supplements, as synecdochically reified objects of her “thingness”? What if, as a reaction to all the gawking and pawing she has had to endure, she chooses not to be proud of her breasts, or because she has been shamed so many times, she herself comes to be ashamed of them? What if sex with men, then *all* men, and even motherhood (see Addie in *As I Lay Dying*) become unbearable to her, and she will begin to prefer, *horribile dictu*, the company of women?! In all “true” males’ eyes, she becomes a “ball-cutter” because she frustrates male desire; as McMurphy revealingly admits to Harding, he would be impotent with Big Nurse “even if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe” (67). Big breasts in other words, cease to be erotic signifiers if they do not automatically have *submissiveness* as their signified. The woman, therefore, who refuses to follow this twisted semiotics will be regarded as “unnatural,” and consigned to serve as the proper target of satire. She will be made to wear the traditional scarlet letter, though in this instance the letter A will denote not Adultery, but Asexuality—a stigma far more damning than all the monstrosities of which Hannah Duston and her nefarious brood had been accused.

Appropriately, in the final confrontation the Chief’s (and all males’) fantasy comes true when McMurphy rips open Big Nurse’s uniform “all the way down the front,” so that “the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever even imagined, warm and pink in the light” (267). As a satirical gesture, the act is appropriate; Robert Forrey summarizes the critical consensus when he writes that “By exposing [Big Nurse’s] breasts, McMurphy destroys her authority” because he exposes her womanhood (228). But even if the Chief’s later remarks seem to confirm this—as when after a week’s absence Big Nurse returns to the ward, her even stiffer

uniform “could no longer conceal the fact that she was a woman” (268)—his narrative of the exposure implies a sense of exultation, shock, and wonder. Mixed in with the awe of the male at the sudden revelation of that mysterious other, the female body, there is a touch of prurience (“warm and pink”), as if at the sight of the forbidden—forbidden because the breasts belong to an Asexual—even the good narrator unwittingly turns pornographer. But the narrative subtext also suggests that only by becoming exposed and defenseless does Miss Ratched “prove” that she is not after all a machine, but a “warm and pink” human being. In addition, far more grievously than her womanhood, in her symbolic public rape it is her humanity that is violated and destroyed—the humanity that attempted to preserve itself by refusing the role her breasts, in accordance with society’s dominant male expectations, would automatically have condemned her to play.

What satire represses, narrative allows to return. In terms of the former, Big Nurse’s female counter-image in the novel is provided by Candy, the ideally willing and cheerful young prostitute who accompanies McMurphy and a group of inmates on a deep-sea fishing expedition. During the hectic activity on board the ship Candy enthusiastically starts fishing herself, inadvertently exposing her breasts in the process. But she is no good at this traditionally male sport. With “everybody gawking,” writes the Chief, “with the crank of that reel fluttering her breast at such a speed the nipple’s just a red blur” (211), Candy suffers a bruised breast. This time the satire rebounds on the satirist himself, for while the incident has no overt satirical value, in narrative terms it connects the supposedly free yet submissive female with the asexual ball-cutter at the precise anatomical point of male obsession, fear, and desire: the breast. And even if Candy does expose her breasts herself, she does not escape punishment; but if satire had attempted to dehumanize her, she comes back showing her humanity—a humanity wounded and violated. Unwittingly or not, satire as invaded by narrative cannot but reveal its own prejudices while also showing up the deficiencies of archetypal (and other) criticism’s image of the female character in American fiction. For if not at the “deepest” fabulistic level, then certainly at the heterogeneous textual surface the strict, even unpleasant ex-Army nurse and the young prostitute, however irreconcilable in several important concerns, are not daughters of antithetical archetypes, but sisters (bosom-friends, one may say) in their common lot of exploitation, oppression, and disenfranchisement. Needless to say, this kind of reading does not seek to supplant one stereotype with another; rather than blaming/exonerating either Big Nurse or her author, it points to the hybrid genre satire-narrative as opening up seams and fissures within its own texture.

## NOTES

1. See Forrey 223-228; Martin 44; Tanner 47.
2. See Sullivan (psychoanalytic criticism) *passim*; Tanner (romance) 25; Wallace (comedy) 91-95; Boardman (tragedy) 44.
3. Also Horst 14-15; Benert 22.

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