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# Out of the Kitchen and Into Actuality: Postmodern Literary Women as Free Agents

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“Out of the Kitchen and Into Actuality: Postmodern Literary Women as Free Agents”

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This paper will discuss the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism in 1960s literature. Specifically, the paper will discuss the deconstruction of the subject and the introduction of subsequent “pluralities.” Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, and Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* are discussed as texts in unique areas of transition in which the female protagonists embody this sense of plurality and use it to become women freer from patriarchal constraints.

The famous 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Rene Descartes coined the term *cogito ergo sum*, which translates as “I think, therefore I am.” According to Modernists, this Cartesian subject posits people as wholesome, independent, existential, and, of course, rational. Much like God for the ancients stood as the center of meaning and being, man occupies this lofty position during the Modern period. In strong backlash to the Modern period, the 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodern movement focuses on a decentering of the subject. The most influential French thinkers upheld Michele Foucault’s argument for the death of man; Jacques Derrida focuses on the decentering of the subject; and Jacques Lacan brings up the subject in process. These prominent thinkers, as postmodern feminist critic Susan Hekman summarizes, all suggest that the constituting Cartesian subject does not encompass the multitude of elements which engender the creation of multifaceted conditions of the constituted self (47). She reports that many feminists of the 1960s embrace the Postmodern consequence that decenters the subject “as the origin of meaning and truth” and subsequently “emphasize the way in which subjects are constituted within discursive formations” (47). She also adds “the principle thrust of the feminist critique is that the subject has been conceptualized as inherently masculine” and thus preserves a classic patriarchal, lower status of women (47). Sylvia Plath’s semi-autobiographical text, *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Ken Kesey’s asylum novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), both demonstrate the progressive status of women in 1960s literature due to postmodern feminist tenets of the deconstructed, agency-retaining, pluralistic subject. As a result of the reconstruction of the subject, the female protagonists of these texts, Nurse Ratched and Esther Greenwood, demonstrate that women of 1960s literature reject the essential truths of oppressive patriarchal binaries; assert that women in the sixties are wholesome, complex creatures; and thus become freer than ever before.

In short, the shift from modernism to postmodernism attacks previously heralded conceptions of foundationalism, essentialism, and realism (Lehan). Simone de Beauvoir, in her infamous text *The Second Sex*, discusses the constituted subject of the female in opposition to the maleness of the constituting subject (Hekman). During Modernism, more room was made for women to break out of the domestic sphere in legal and employment matters, but they were not yet considered equals in terms of sexuality, mind, or spirit. Such Modernist texts as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) only blur the lines of gender equality. Faulkner himself calls Caddy Compson the true hero of the novel; her sexual promiscuity resists the genteel stereotypes of prominent southern women. Though progressive, bold, and courageous throughout the novel, she comes under much scrutiny, regularly heralded as the town whore. Her husband abandons her, she must give up her child to her parents, and social pressures force her to flee Yoknapatawpha County. Caddy may break conventions, but as a result becomes an outcast, an abnormal deviant who cannot escape shame (Faulkner). While many examples of the shifting roles of females in pre-postmodern literature exist, the examples are just that -- blurry.

Although not technically a Modern text, the strictly gender-coded female of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) demonstrates the troublesome status of a character who occupies the amorphous space between Modernism and Postmodernism. Discontent dominates April's life: she feels unfulfilled by a failed acting career, a boring housewife-life in the boring suburbs, two kids she never wanted, friends who fail to live up to her pretentious expectations, and a husband who becomes complacent with "the dullest job you can possibly imagine" (Yates 16). These conditions create the situation in which April Wheeler fully realizes Betty Friedan's feminine mystique. Strangely, despite April's sense of a "strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning" that she suffers "in the middle of the twentieth century in the United

States,” she cannot express “the problem that ha(s) no name” (Friedan 1). Like many women who experience the feminine mystique, throughout the text April only silently, passively internalizes the lack of fulfillment from her life as a wife and mother (Friedan 1).

Yates’ novel clearly demonstrates April’s comprehension of her own discontent. One scene recalls April and Frank’s buying of their newest home, using a picture window as a symbol of stifling suburbia. April hesitantly declares, “Yes, I think it’s sort of—nice, don’t you, darling? Of course it does have the picture window; I guess there’s no escaping that” (40). This symbol represents the conformity of their lifestyle while her reaction suggests her discontent with this situation. Even Frank describes their descent into suburbia regretfully, saying at one point, “I mean it’s bad enough we have to *live* among all these damn little suburban types (33).

Furthermore, April feels trapped by her children. She wanted to have an abortion, but because of his own inadequacies Frank talks her out the “infallible way to induce a miscarriage” that she suggests (66). Once caught in the suburban trap, the April becomes pregnant again in order to conform to the idyllic, multiple-children household. During the novel she becomes pregnant again with her third child attempts to convince Frank to let her get an abortion but becomes dissuaded when Frank appeals to her pathos, telling her she would be committing a “crime against your own substance. And mine” (297). Indeed, she even captures a strange sense of discontent with her marriage when she describes her husband as “the most interesting man I’ve ever met” and telling him “I love you when you’re nice,” instead of ever expressing an overarching, satisfied love towards him (63). Even in the earlier, reportedly happier, years of their marriage, April always “held herself poised for immediate flight; she had always been ready to take off the minute she happened to feel like it (Don’t *talk* to me that way, Frank, or I’m *leaving*. I mean it)” (32, 65). April expresses her overwhelming sense of entrapment during an

initial fight with Frank: “Oh, you’ve never fooled me, Frank, never once. All your previous moral maxims and your love. . . . Oh, I’ve always known I had to be your conscience and your guts-*and* your punching bag. Just because you’ve got me safely in a trap you think you-” (37).

Unlike most women of the 1950s, however, April Wheeler does not simply silently internalize her emotions. April embodies Friedan’s “is this all” question, whether the life of a housewife and mother can be the only purpose, or sense of fulfillment, for her (Friedan 1). Her fights with Frank, her position described as ready for immediate flight, and her verbal and physical backlash against tradition demonstrate April’s radical confrontation of patriarchal conformity. Instead of passively ignoring the question or refusing to acknowledge it, April insists that no, this life cannot be all. Seven years prior, when April became unexpectedly pregnant with their first child, she initially acquiesces to an idealistic house and family life in the suburbs. Throughout the novel, though, the seemingly fulfilling promises of the American Dream leave the Wheelers frustrated and discontent.

In an attempt to move away from the disparity, April suggests the family leave the suburbs and move to the enlightened, intellectual, stimulating city of Paris, France. She calls it “an elaborate new program for going to Europe ‘for good’ in the fall” (147). She explains to Frank that she will find secretarial work in a government agency so that he can take time to finally find himself, “reading and studying and taking long walk and thinking” (149). “Find out what it is you want to do,” April tells him, “and have the time and the freedom to start doing it” (149). Her plan was, “she insisted, such a marvelously simple plan that she was amazed at having never thought of it before” (148). Frank, though, immediately denounces her plan as unrealistic. April does not stand for his impatience, vocally summarizing precisely why the family needs to immediately abandon their hypocritical, complacent lifestyle:

“I don’t think I’ve ever been more bored and depressed and fed up in my life than I was last night. All that business about Helen Giving’s son on top of everything else, and the way we all grabbed at it like dogs after meat; I remember looking at you and thinking ‘God, if only he’d stop talking.’ Because everything you said was based on this great premise of ours that we’re somehow very special and superior to the whole thing, and I wanted to say ‘But we’re not! Look at us! We’re just like the people you’re talking about! *We are* the people you’re talking about!” (150)

We have become suburbia, April contends.

April suggests the two of them got sucked into “this enormous delusion . . . this idea that people have to resign from real life and ‘settle down’ when they have families. It’s the great sentimental lie of the suburbs” (153). Thus, April proposes a grand, delusive move to Europe that will theoretically lead them to happiness and contentment, as they will be free from the stifling suburbs. April tells Frank, “It’s your very *essence* that’s being stifled here. It’s what you *are* that’s being denied and denied and denied in this kind of life” (157). While it may seem that April praises Frank in this speech, in actuality April manipulates Frank’s weakest point, his failure to create an independent life for himself. At the same time, this diction expresses her inner emotions. Frank may be stifled by the atmosphere of suburbia as well, but April is, moreover, most concerned with liberating herself from her oppressive housewife-and-mother life.

April expresses other moments of strength and empowerment throughout the novel. These assertions suggest that she does not merely act as a complacent woman, and that her resistance manifests continuously throughout the novel. For instance, she shows emotional



independence when she distances herself from Frank during the initial scenes of the book: “She was out of the car and running away in the headlights, quick and graceful. . . . ‘Haven’t I made it clear,’ she said, ‘that I don’t particularly want to talk about it?’” Additionally, she conceives of having an abortion independently, fathering the necessary equipment without Frank. In one ironic speech she gives to Frank, her tone renounces him at the same time praising her status as a woman: “Don’t you know? You’re the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You’re a man” (157). One morning she decides to mow the lawn, an act of deviance meant to assert control over Frank’s status as the alpha male. These powerful attributes make April Wheeler seem to be an extremely progressive woman, one who breaks out of the traditional gender role of a 1950s woman.

However, despite April’s strong sense of self, her discontent, and her drive to change, she cannot break away from her performance of a traditional gender role. April occupies the amorphous space in which she internalizes dissatisfaction, recognizes a desire for change, but cannot emancipate herself from oppressive patriarchy. The clearest example of April’s confinement surrounds her proposal to move the family to Europe. She devises a plan to escape to Paris, where she will get a part time secretarial job, pay for a nanny to care for the children, and give Frank the time to do what he “should’ve been allowed to do seven years ago” (149). “You’ll be finding yourself. You’ll be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking. You’ll have *time*. For the first time in your life you’ll have time to find out what it is you want to do, and when you find it you’ll have the time and freedom to start doing it,” April explains to Frank (149). Frank laughs at her plan, calling it unrealistic, but April argues that their current life is unrealistic: “I think it’s unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working like a dog year after year at a job he can’t stand, coming home to a house he can’t stand in a place he can’t

stand either, to a wife who's equally unable to stand the same things, living among a bunch of frightened little-" (150). She describes herself as entirely bored, blaming herself for their situation when she pushed all responsibility on Frank seven years ago. While this example may also seem to indicate April's self-liberation, the plan remains fundamentally deceptive. The plan is to uproot their family life and move it to a new location, which does not fix the poor interpersonal relationships that exist within the family. April may have a greater sense of freedom because of her job status, but the relocation will not necessarily create radical change within the family. Once planning begins, an excited energy overcomes the household, and April and Frank seem to rekindle their marriage. Ironically, April wants to escape from the very things Frank represents: family, children, and suburbia, but nevertheless she plans to uproot that exact situation to another location, pretending the move will fix the unhappiness inherent in her family life. April does not fully comprehend the relationship of her discontent to her home life, a relationship that will not radically change in a new location. This example suggests that although April plans to break out of the sphere of domesticity, she misapprehends the fundamental constructions of her patriarchal life.

After plans become fully under way to make the move to Europe, April realizes she is pregnant with her third child. Like before, she contemplates a private, at-home abortion. Secretly, April gathers the necessary tools. For April, this baby represents a complete abdication to her plan for liberation. Pregnant and the mother of a newborn, she would not be able to work overseas: "There isn't another way [of going] . . . The whole point of going was to give you a chance to find yourself, and now it's ruined" (283). A new baby would keep her tied to her current life as a housewife, a mother in the suburbs. Despite her attempt to hide them, Frank finds the abortion materials, condemning them just as before. Although Frank convinces April at

first that aborting the baby would be genocide and steeps her in guilt by saying that a “girl who’d known nothing but parental rejection from the time of her birth might develop an abiding reluctance to bear children,” April makes the decision to abort the baby one evening when no one is home (307). Despite the consequences, she cannot allow another child to tie her down to enduring domesticity. At this point in time, however, April has passed the point of safety in which to perform an at-home abortion. Regardless, April feels so much despair within society’s constant suppression that she risks inducing the abortion. April’s actions allow for two actions: she will abort the child or she will die trying. Either way, April demands to retain agency and attempts to free herself from oppression. Bleeding too profusely from the injection, April dies on the floor of her suburban bathroom. While she can conceive freedom, she cannot actually liberate herself. Like April Wheeler, the women represented in pre-postmodernist literature can only struggle against patriarchy but not overcome it.

The literary women of Postmodernism become truly multidimensional individuals. As complexity becomes an emergent and feasible part of female identity in postmodern America, female characters begin to embody this spirit in order to break out of the singular sphere of domesticity. Pluralistic senses of self allow these women to enjoy a multifaceted nature. While this movement may seem unfocused and scattered, in actuality the women are able to become individualized, unique human beings who construct their selves of freely chosen characteristics. In this way, the female protagonists of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Nurse Ratched, and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, demonstrate that as 1960s literary women reject the essential truths of oppressive patriarchal binaries, they assert that women in the sixties are wholesome, complex, creatures and thus, more free than ever before.

While it might seem as though April Wheeler shares many qualities with Nurse Ratched and Esther Greenwood, the women possess distinct, key differences. Most importantly, these differences posit the Postmodern women as assemblages of unique personas. The Postmodern women do not internalize any feelings of needing to prescribe to a singular personality, nor can they be tied to singular depictions of their character. A reading of *Nurse Ratched* demonstrates this external freedom, as Kesey's construction of her inherently remains altogether elusive to the critic. Most readings typify Nurse Ratched as a mechanistic, emasculating, "ball cutting" woman, but her personality can also be understood quite differently if cultural and historical contexts are taken into consideration. As a result, the Big Nurse can be read in many ways. Indeed, *1960s* presents a woman no longer constrained by the traditional feminine domestic sphere.

Nurse Ratched represents the Postmodern woman because she cannot be constricted to any one particular reading. No finite category can define the personhood of the Big Nurse. Absent of a singular reading, the character of the Big Nurse embodies the multiplicitous dichotomies which comprise a complex, unrestrained person. First, Kesey's representation of Nurse Ratched remains quite limited throughout the whole novel. Chief Bromden, a chronic inmate of Nurse Ratched's ward for the past ten years, narrates the novel. He pretends to be deaf and dumb so as to not have to interact with the other inmates or staff. This bias point of view limits a holistic reading of Nurse Ratched. It is ironic, then, that Kesey's singular representation allows the Big Nurse to become a multifaceted, free woman. This seemingly contradictory character development works only because Kesey's representations of the Nurse are indeed so apparently limited. Because all portrayals of the Big Nurse are so obviously restricted, the alternative possibilities which surround the Nurse become more apparent. Kesey uses strong,

specific diction to describe the Nurse's ostensibly defining, distinctive, and overarching personality features. These limited representations belie the multiple possibilities of Nurse Ratched's character.

By characterizing the Nurse blatantly in one direction, while at the same time withholding key information, Kesey's representations challenge close readers to investigate the actual nature of Nurse Ratched. During investigation, readers will find the possibilities for the Big Nurse's character unlimited. The largest example lies in her name, Nurse Ratched, which seemingly signifies a mechanistic character who, reminiscent of the definition of a ratchet, aggressively controls the ward. A ratchet is a tool used to tighten or loosen bolts by means of force. In one of the narrator's first descriptions of the Nurse, Chief Bromden depicts the equipment Nurse Ratched brings to the ward each day in this manner:

She's carrying her woven wicker bag . . . a bag [in the] shape of a tool box. . . .

It's a loose weave and I can see inside it; there's no compact of lipstick or woman stuff, she's got that bag full of a thousand parts she aims to use in her duties today—wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter, tiny pills that gleam like porcelain, needles, forceps, watchmakers pliers, rolls of copper wire . . . (Kesey 10)

Throughout the novel, this emasculating, ball-cutting style seemingly defines Nurse Ratched.

However, under different scrutiny, the symbolism of Nurse Ratched's name can foster a positive analysis of her character. Her name can also signify her as the crucial tool which mobilizes the ward. A ratchet can symbolize an engaging tool, with prongs that intertwine with the pieces it works. While it is true that a ratchet does manipulate the larger machine, it also works to fix the device, to keep it running. Indeed, a ratchet makes the job of loosening or

tightening bolts much easier than if done by hand. In Chief Bromden's continued description of Nurse Ratched, he also acknowledges that the Nurse runs an orderly ward that aims to help the men and assist in their return to the world outside the ward, despite his negative tone:

The Big Nurse tends to get real put out if something keeps her outfit from running like a smooth, accurate, precision-made machine. . . . This is what I know. The ward . . . is for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new, *better* than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse's heart; something that came in all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold. (Kesey 40)

An investigation of just two connotations of Nurse Ratched's highly symbolic name demonstrates the multiple capacities of her character, a demonstration which disputes Chief's singular description of her.

Indeed, even critical receptions of the Nurse prove insufficient in restricting her to a singular persona. Some criticism of the past forty-nine years portrays Nurse Ratched sympathetically; as benevolent, misunderstood, well-intentioned, and historically appropriate. Other criticism highlights the Nurse's harsh personality, and focuses on her cold, mechanistic, manipulative, sterile qualities. For example, critic Leslie Fielder overviews the most obvious stereotype of Nurse Ratched, the mythos of the American archetype of the Castrating Woman, who "supposedly spawned the unique host of women, alternately henpecking and monstrous, nagging and castrating" (qtd. in Gefin, 96). In this view, Nurse Ratched represents a very

feminine dichotomous nature, performing two traditionally feminine gender roles. This criticism, like other limited readings, overemphasizes one trait while it ignores others.

Critic Laszlo K. Gefin, points out in his essay, “The Breasts of Big Nurse: Satire Versus Narrative in Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*” that satirical, archetypal, and psychoanalytic criticism largely interpret the Big Nurse, specifically her breasts, as either the Destructive Mother or the Bad Mother (98). In the former, the Nurse becomes an emasculator and a castrator, while in the latter she becomes a failure for matronly softness and tenderness often associated with the female figure (98). Gefin notes that such readings “support the satirical male-centered concept of power-hungry women becoming the willing instruments of oppression at the cost of their womanhood” (98). This reading suggests that the Big Nurse denies her “substance” or “nature” and “is ‘bitter’ about her breasts because they ‘prove’ that she is an inadequate, in fact phoney authority figure, and her undeniable womanhood means undeniable vulnerability, inferiority, and eventual defeat” (98).

Gefin suggests that many feminist reviews that read the narrative “as a real character,” as opposed to a metaphorical figure, attempt to prove that Nurse Ratched “is the vehicle of a calumnious attack on women by an openly misogynist author, expressing male fear turned aggression” (96). This article explores the possibility that, for narrative reasons, perhaps the Nurse’s breasts represent her undermined humanity and womanhood. Elizabeth McMahon theorizes the Big Nurse’s total victimization: “The Big Nurse happens also to be the Big Victim when viewed with an awareness of the social and economic exploitation of women” (27). In another feminist essay on value changes over time, “Bitches, Twitches, and Eunuchs: Sex Role Failure and Caricature” critic Leslie Horst argues that what once seemed to be more innocent,

sympathetic rhetoric characterizing McMurphy, now seems “a derogation of women . . . attractively packaged” (17).

Quite distinctly, other critics argue that Nurse Ratched’s oppression comes not from her sex at all, but in her representation of “a local manifestation of the pernicious desire to manipulate the lives of those too weak to resist” (Boardman, 177). McMurphy’s diction regarding the machine accuses not her sex, but her position as a “cog in the big grinding machine:”

“No, that nurse ain't some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter. I've seen a thousand of 'em, old and young, men and women. Seen 'em all over the country and in the homes - people who try to make you weak so that they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to . . . If you're up against a guy who wants to win by making you weaker instead of making himself stronger, then watch for his knee, he's gonna go for your vitals. And that's what that old buzzard is doing . . .” (58)

Indeed, some criticism portrays the Big Nurse as distinctly asexual. Critic Gefin suggests that the Big Nurse’s big breasts “cease to be erotic signifiers if they do not automatically have *submissiveness* as their signified” (99). By covering her breasts and concealing her womanhood, the Big Nurse becomes unnatural and asexual in the male gaze. She stifles any possible sexualization of her own body, which has a castrating affect in the ward (99).

Yet rhetorically, critic Boardman argues in his essay “*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*: Rhetoric and Vision,” that, “for the dramatic requirements of the story,” much like Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, “Nurse Ratched had to be very nearly an incarnation of evil, unthinking or otherwise” (176). He argues that Nurse Ratched must be understood as a character subordinated



to a plot, and the text is not at fault, as Milos Forman argues, for not providing a “humanized portrait of Big Nurse” (qtd. in McMahan, 27). Indeed, critic Huffman contends that the Nurse should not be read as literal or stereotypical figure, but as a metaphorical figure: “Keseey may have trouble pinpointing the enemy with the Big Nurse and the Chief’s metaphors of the combine, but the focusing problem is not the result of simple racism and sexism” (63). Huffman even ironically contends the novel parodies a psychiatric, Freudian evaluation of the Big Nurse. At one point in the novel, McMurphy dismisses the Nurse and Freudian analysis: “But if it was no more'n you say, just this old nurse and her sex worries, then the solution to all your problems would be to just throw her down and solve her worries, wouldn't it?”(181). This parody of a Freudian solution acts as a “metaphor of the deeper struggle” (64).

Even more abstractly, critic Huffman equates Nurse Ratched to “a living clock” (65). The Big Nurse moves with “precise, automatic gesture”; has a “smooth, calculated and precision-made face”; she sometimes sits in group meetings in silence, “quiet as an electric alarm about to go off”; exhibits a “calm whirl coming from her eyes, but down inside of her she’s tense as steel.” She’s “delicately balanced” with a certain “warp and flow,” or “ticking noise”; her black boys become her hands on the ward; and she represents “past history” with her logbook (5, 48, 114, 141, 48). Huffman contends that the Big Nurse represents “the asexual institutional clock face of the Combine” (65). Even McMurphy understands her representation of time, as he continually attempts to change or break time: “she may have the element of time, but I got a pretty long winning streak goin’ myself” (71). Her personification as time also intimates the Nurse’s complete control of time, which she demonstrates as she attempts to fix time on the broken “cuckoo” inmates of the ward.

In addition to these distinctive professional criticisms, even more evidence exists that contributes to Nurse Ratched's multidimensionality. For instance, during the 1960s, psychological therapy was in large part a field still in development. Many practices now deemed unsafe, dangerous, harmful, or irrelevant were then common. Nurse Ratched's harsh and shameful Group Sessions, for example, may seem to undermine the men's sense of self; however, these sessions may have been conducted according to a specific, historical psychiatric code of conduct. Another reading of the novel suggests that Nurse Ratched was conducting therapy exactly the way the men wanted to be treated, harsh and damaging nonetheless. Most of the men checked themselves into the ward and can, at any time, check themselves out of the ward. This freedom intimates that the men purposefully subject themselves to the harsh treatment that inspects their own character flaws. Accordingly, the men must take responsibility for being inmates at the ward and, likewise, choosing to undergo and remain in the harsh group therapy sessions. Furthermore, Nurse Ratched received the training of a U.S. Army Nurse. In the strict, rigid, and demanding army atmosphere, soft and tender treatment would most likely not have been deemed appropriate in her work on the battlefield. One critic neatly summarizes even more readings of the Big Nurse: "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" (qtd. in Gefin, 96). As a result of the many, well-supported views that attempt to explain and classify the Big Nurse, it becomes apparent that she cannot be confined to any singular reading.

Consequently, critic Gefin insightfully argues for Nurse Ratched's multidimensionality; he suggests that "critics bent on forcing her to fit their chosen genre . . . reduce her complexities,

as if they sensed an aporia at the root of her character” (97). Regardless of the emphasis, the existence of the many, well-evidenced facets of the Nurse prove her complexity. The absence of plentiful background information on her character, or even access to her internal monologue, presents her as not an ambiguous character, but as a versatile, adroit woman. Because she is a composite of many different causes and contexts, Nurse Ratched represents a complex, diverse woman whose feminine context cannot suppress her. Indeed, the absence of an absolute reading of Nurse Ratched contends that she does not neatly fit into any rigid binary positions of good/evil, male/female, or vengeful/helpful. Rather, Nurse Ratched acts as a free agent within the literary world. She represents the multifaceted woman who exists psychologically free from the traditional absolute, stationary role of the female in literature.

As Nurse Ratched gains freedom from not being confined to one particular critical reading, Esther’s freedom comes from her internalization of an autonomous power to create, from multifaceted, pluralistic conditions, a constituted self. Despite patriarchal oppression, Esther represents an evolutionary, constituted self who realizes her own great potential. Julia Kristeva writes on the decentered subject, and states, “we are subjects in process, ceaselessly losing our identity, destabilized by fluctuations in our relations with the other, to whom we nevertheless remain bound in a kind of homeostasis” (9). As a character, Esther demonstrates this composite woman of the 1960s literature. Ceaselessly doubting her own identity, Esther constantly refigures her identity based on her many experiences and her reactions to them. In fact, she even becomes symbolically reborn in the text when the psychiatric ward releases her. Esther explores her own postmodern crisis through her first-person narration: she has no idea who or what she wants to be. While Esther does eventually choose a path, throughout the text

Esther questions traditional, singular feminine roles and determines herself to be a multidimensional, complex, and capable woman.

While Esther defines all that she can be, she also clearly defines what she is not: a traditional feminine domestic. The novel opens with Esther in New York City for a summer, working as a guest editor for a fashion magazine. With “piles and piles” of free bonuses, the twelve girls live a comfortable lifestyle. Esther comments that while in New York, “I should be having the time of my life” (3). However, despite an all-expenses paid trip to work at a high-profile fashion magazine for the summer, Esther says she “felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo” (3). She reports that she “should have been excited the way most of the other girls were,” but found the lifestyle abhorrently dull (3). The other girls on the trip represent the singular, patriarchal women who act as foils to Esther’s diversified character. “Simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or another,” the girls on the trip “look awfully bored” to Esther: “I saw them on the sunroof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes ad bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil” (4). The role typical role society expects women to perform, this example suggests, does not bring Esther any sense of personal fulfillment.

Esther also reacts negatively towards the traditional role of women in her reflections on Dodo Conway, a young woman with whom Esther previously attended to public school. Dodo still lives in Esther’s home neighborhood with her many children and husband. One morning, Esther watches Dodo parade her large family around the neighborhood from her bedroom

window: “A woman not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach, was wheeling an old black baby carriage down the street. Two or three small children of various sizes, all pale, with smudgy faces and bare smudgy knees, wobbled along in the shadow of her skirts” (116).

Dodo’s parade of domesticity symbolizes the stifling lifestyle Esther loathes. Throughout the text, Esther insists that she will not fall into this domestic trap. When Buddy Willard proposes to her, she denies him and tells him, “I’m never going to get married” (93). Esther even contends that children make her sick (117). These thoughts demonstrate Esther’s unwillingness to conform to traditional, familial patriarchal confines. During her time at the psychiatric hospital, Esther tells Doctor Nolan, “What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb. . . . A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line” (221).

Esther also dismisses what she perceives to be her mother’s *passé*, assuaged nature. Her widowed mother teaches shorthand to provide for the family in the absence of a male head-of-the-household, which might seem to be a quality Esther would respect. However, Esther notices that her mother “secretly. . . hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money” (40). She remembers how her mother used to say, “Even the apostles were tentmakers. . . . They had to live, just the way we do” (40). Esther demeans this lifestyle because of the attitude her mother has towards life, an attitude of merely getting by throughout life. Teaching shorthand becomes, for Esther, equivalent to boring, complacent secretarial work. Like the girls in New York, Esther’s mother never reaches beyond a passive, submissive role. On Esther’s birthday, her mother visits the mental hospital and brings her roses. Esther dumps the roses into the wastebasket and tells Doctor Nolan “that was a silly thing for her to do. . . . I hate her” (203). Psychiatrist Doctor Nolan confirms Esther’s rejection of her mother’s defeated outlook on life.

Additionally, Esther refuses to be victimized. On her last night in New York, Esther finds herself “somewhere in the wealthy suburbs of New York” with a man named Marco (108). Marco leads Esther to a secluded spot and pushes her to the ground; he intends to rape her on this moonless night: “The ground soared and struck me with a soft shock. Mud squirmed through my fingers. Marco waited until I half rose. Then he put both hands on my shoulders and flung me back” (109). Esther realizes that in the next few moments, she might lose her virginity: “‘It’s happening,’ I thought, ‘It’s happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen’” (109). Despite her desire to become sexually active, she refuses to become victim to Marco’s violent advances: “The dust cleared, and I had a full view of the battle. I began to writhe and bite . . . . I gouged at his leg with the sharp heel of my shoe . . . . Then I fisted my fingers together and smashed them at his nose” (109). Physically and mentally, Esther actively rejects Marco’s attempt to dominate her body. Additionally, Esther rejects being under the control of a man in the work place. As she thinks about future employment in the editing industry, she abhors the idea of following a man’s rule: “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters” (76). These examples suggest that Esther rejects the traditional passive, submissive women’s role.

Esther knows exactly what she does not want: to become a typical, passive, submissive, conformist, empty woman. While in the bath one day, Esther contemplates committing suicide in a subconscious attempt to refuse this patriarchal lifestyle. However, Esther consciously realizes that it is not herself that she wants to destroy, but rather something else: “But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin of the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” (147). Indeed,

Esther attempts to kill this feeling inside of herself multiple times throughout the novel. She attempts to kill the “deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” societal oppression that forces her to conform to traditional femininity (147). “It [is] like being brainwashed,” Esther says about marriage and children: “after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems any more” (85).

Furthermore, Esther contends the last thing she wants is “infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from” (83). Rather, she wants “change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions . . . like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (85). This sentiment exemplifies Esther’s desire to become a multifaceted, complex woman. Even further, she says during a conversation about marriage with boyfriend Buddy that she will desire contradictory, incompatible things for the rest of her life: “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days” (94). Indeed, Esther embodies this very contradiction, as she desires the freedom to foster lifelong, personal fulfillment at the same time that society oppresses her. Patriarchal constructs make traditional demands upon her, but Esther wants the freedom to become a diverse woman.

The story of the fig tree best symbolizes how Esther does in fact want to shape her life. As she flips through a book in New York, she comes across the story about a Jewish man and a beautiful nun:

[They] kept meeting at the tree to pick the ripe figs, until one day they saw an egg hatching in a bird’s nest on a branch of the tree, and as they watched the little bird peck its way out of the egg, they touched the backs of their hands together, and the nun didn’t come out to pick figs with the Jewish man any more but a mean-

faced Catholic kitchen maid came to pick them instead and counted up the figs the man picked after they were both through to be sure he hadn't picked any more than she had, and the man was furious. (55)

The fig tree comes to represent all of the life choices that face Esther, the diverse paths that she can conceptualize for herself. Later in the novel, Esther envisions her "life branching out before . . . [her] like the green fig tree in the story" (77). Each branch tip represents a unique life path: one with a husband and children, one as a brilliant professor, one as a famous poet, one as famous editor Ee Gee, one as Europe, one as Africa, one as South America, one as Constantine, one as Socrates, one as Atilla, one as "a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions," one as an Olympic crew champion, and many more branching above her that Esther cannot quite discern (77). Esther wants to be everything all at once; she internalizes a plurality that understands life's many options.

The story of the fig tree also relates the pressure to choose a single fig, which demands Esther choose a definite life course. However, Esther cannot choose just one fig because she wants them all, and thus, indecision freezes Esther in time. She imagines all the figs rot and fall to the ground: "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet" (77). Instead of making a single choice, Esther refuses to conform to a single, predetermined mold.

Esther becomes a woman who can recognize the aggregate of all possible choices. She stubbornly resists the pressure to choose because she understands the basis of human nature lies in the conglomeration of experiences, emotions, and desires one has. This internalization



becomes a key aspect of the free-form, multifaceted, diverse 1960s woman. Esther does, of course, eventually choose a path for her life, but because she can internalize all possibilities, she can reject conformity and feel free. Although Esther thought that suicide might free her, throughout the novel she realizes other actions that will bring her to freedom. For instance, when Esther finds herself in a mental hospital after a near-suicide attempt, she begins a period of rebirth. During her time in the institution, she rejects all traditional expectations that pressure her to become a singular woman. When she receives a diaphragm from a doctor, allowing her to control reproduction and engage in premarital sex, she suggests that this action is a major step towards freedom from society:

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls who go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless. (223)

As she rides home on the bus, Esther thinks, “I had done well with my shopping privileges . . . I was my own woman” (223). With this freedom, Esther rejects patriarchal tradition. In doing so, she rejects traditional conceptions of marriage, femininity, sexuality, female dependence, feminine submission and homogeneity to embrace diverse, independent individualism. She listens “to the old brag of . . . [her] heart. I am, I am, I am,” a telltale sign of her desire for life.

With the rise of postmodernism and deconstructionism in the 1960s, plurality becomes the most influential factor that redetermines the status and role of women in literature. This plurality opposes the absolute, singular, restrictiveness of high modernism. During Modernism, women could, by and large, not break out of traditional patriarchal confines. April Wheeler

represents a Modern woman who internalizes her oppression but cannot become free of it. As time progresses, 1960s texts show that the representation of women in literature becomes heavily influenced by Postmodernism. Critic Hekman suggests that many, various factors influence and constitute subjects, who evolve over time: “subjects are constituted by multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses. Individual subjects resist, mutate, and revise these discourses from within them” (59). Esther Greenwood clearly represents a woman constituted by multiple and contradictory internal discourses as she attempts to decide a course for her life. Nurse Ratched, too, who cannot be confined by any one reading, represents a multifaceted woman who can indeed fulfill multiple roles at once. Plurality, a result of the decentered subject, shifts popular ideologies to accommodate the destabilization of absolute truths and reveal the complex, wholesome human nature of women. In this way, literature of the 1960s represents a conceptual shift in regards to the status of women, who become freer from traditional patriarchal expectations than ever before.

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