

*Cape Fear* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: Cultural Discourse on Dangerous Men  
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The idea for this paper originated when I took notice of the fact that the film *Cape Fear* and the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* both debuted in 1962. Initially the only significance this had for me is that I am a fan of both works: Robert Mitchum as Max Cady has to be considered one of the best bad guys in American film, and I never tire of teaching *Cuckoo's Nest* in my Literature and Medicine course. Then I discovered that the film was adapted from John D. MacDonald's 1957 pulp fiction, *The Executioners*. I had seen curious similarities between Cady's character and that of Randle P. McMurphy in *Cuckoo's Nest*, along with the obvious difference that one was a villain and the other a hero, but after reading *The Executioners* and researching MacDonald, I thought I had the makings of a paper on contrasting depictions of "dangerous men" for the NEPCA meeting at St. John Fisher College. This seemed fitting not least because MacDonald had served two years during World War II in the Rochester Ordnance Division, had spent many of his working summers at Lake Pisco not too far from Rochester, and, in 1978, had received an Award of Merit from the Popular Culture Association for his crime and detective fiction – by 1985 more than 80 million copies of his books had been sold in 19 languages (Hirshberg, 1-11). More to the point, *The Executioners* seemed grounded in the cold war mentality of the 50s while *Cuckoo's Nest* heralded social change and became emblematic of the 1960s counter-culture by the time it achieved film fame in 1975. Here was

an opportunity to explore cultural discourse regarding masculinity, the cold war, social change and genre.

Max Cady and McMurphy are both dangerous men. Each is physically imposing. Cady is only 5'9" tall but he has "forearms" as big as "thighs" and he is "quick as a weasel" (Executioners, 59). McMurphy is similarly broad, powerful and athletic. Both are described as psychopathic personalities and each is suspected of being "insane." Both are exceedingly shrewd and manipulative. Both are ex-servicemen and ex-convicts who, upon release from prison, intrude upon stable societies. Both are rapists, convicted of having sex with underage girls, who use threats of sexual violence against law and authority. And, both are killed in climactic scenes. Then there is this difference: Cady is evil and McMurphy is a savior. Cady is a libidinous monster whose amoral sexual violence against women and girls is the antithesis of civilization, while McMurphy's overflowing libido is a life force that rescues psychiatric patients from a desiccated wasteland. Cady must be destroyed to preserve family and society. McMurphy must be sacrificed to inspire male liberation from authoritarian patriarchy and false democracy. Because *Cape Fear* is pulp fiction melodrama and *Cuckoo's Nest* is a dense, literary American romance, it is tempting to conclude that any textual discourse between these characterizations and plot designs simply pits the conservative conventions of crime melodrama against the convention-breaking esthetics of high art. This polarity has validity, but juxtaposing these two representations of dangerous men and their fates also reveals late 50s/early 60s cultural ambivalence toward male sexuality and negotiation of perceived threats to "healthy" sexuality from below and above, from id and superego.

This ambivalence and negotiation is inseparable from the political discourse of the cold war. James Gilbert in *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s*, James Penner in *Pinks, Pansies and Punks: The Rhetoric of Masculinity in American Literary Culture*, and K.A. Courdileone in *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (among others) have all demonstrated that masculinity was both a “subtext and central concern” of literary and political debates throughout the 40s, 50s and 60s. *The Executioners* in 1957, (the book was re-published in 1962 with the movie title, *Cape Fear*) features many cold war preoccupations. The novel opens with an idyllic scene of the nuclear family at leisure: lawyer Sam Bowden, his wife, Carol, their 14 year-old daughter Nancy, and her two younger brothers are enjoying a beach picnic on a small lake island. “Everything was under control. The marriage was of the very best variety. Everybody was healthy” (9).

But there is a worry that Sam reveals to his wife. He was recently confronted by a man from his past. During the war, in Australia, he had encountered a violent rape in progress. He grabbed the soldier, knocked him out with a lucky punch, and testified at his court-martial. The man was given a life sentence but he was recently released after 13 years at hard labor. This ex-serviceman, Max Cady, is out for revenge and he is going to get even with lieutenant Bowden through his family. Cady is variously described as “like an animal” (12), a “rogue beast” (15), not “human” (115), and a “psychopathic personality” (92); his eyes have “simian sockets” (13), he comes from a line of violent moonshiners, and he beats women. The girl he raped was only 14 but in his words, “if they’re big enough, they’re old enough” (15). His wife left him after the conviction; for revenge he raped and brutalized her for three days prior to coming after Sam. He took up with a prostitute in Sam’s town, but she wouldn’t help the police because he had

viciously beaten her and promised worse if she talked. And now he is after Carol and young Nancy, who he describes in conversation with Sam as “almost as juicy as your wife” (56). MacDonald does not hide his representation of Cady as pure evil. Nancy remembers from English class that in “good fiction” “nobody is completely good” or “completely evil,” but she recognizes that Cady “is all bad” (57). More abstractly, Sam muses: “the night was dark...the world was a very large place. And a man was almost excessively small, puny and vulnerable ... Cady lived somewhere in this night, breathing the darkness” (32).

MacDonald had invoked the communist evil in a 1951 novel but now the evil empire is subtext. In the early 50s, the detective fiction hero Mike Hammer destroyed commies and villains with unrestrained violence and without qualms (Weibel, 113-15; Courdileone, xii-xiv; Kelley). But Sam is a lawyer, he believes in the law, due process, and “the inviolability of the freedom of every citizen” (18). He even at times rationalizes Cady’s criminality: perhaps it is due to a combination of combat fatigue, bad breeding, and class antagonism. But, when Sam’s efforts to enlist law enforcement in defense of his family all fail, he is persuaded by his wife and colleague that he must become a realist – like Arthur Schlesinger and Reinhold Niebuhr in the early 50s, he accepts that there are evils in the world that preclude the viability of soft idealism (Schaub; Courdileone, 2-36). But Sam remains soft: he is disheartened and confesses on multiple occasions that against Cady’s cunning and physical strength he feels “ineffectual,” (e.g., 31, 59) and a failed family protector. He regrets abandoning ethics for the “jungle” (76-7) when he hires professional thugs, but even this surrogate muscle can’t stop Cady. Finally, Sam gives in to Carol’s insistence that they have to, in her word, “execute” (135) Cady. First he plots murder, but then he persuades the police to assist with a trap. Carol is the bait. When it comes

time for action, Sam falls off a ladder, sprains his foot, and arrives after Cady has broken into the bedroom and slugged Carol. She is saved only because her police ally tried to intervene. Cady kills the policeman and flees; Sam, shooting in the dark, clips Cady in the arm, severing an artery. Cady bleeds to death while running off. (The movie has significant differences - there is no mention of military affiliations, Sam defeats Cady in an extended fight scene, and he forgoes the opportunity to kill Cady so that justice can be done.) That Cady served in the war is important. Penner argues that masculinity in the wartime 40s was understood as “capacity for aggression” (42), but in the postwar period, “hypermasculin[ity]” appeared in “numerous Hollywood films ... as a social problem” and was often associated with both “battle-scarred” soldiers and racism. (77) In *The Executioners* hypermasculinity is represented as dangerous to a democratic and lawful order and is, like communism, a source of anxiety.

The novel ends where it began, back on the island, with their pleasure boat and normal family life. Nancy is with a new boyfriend and Sam and Carol are flirting, play acting a sexual tryst. Not only has the nuclear family been preserved but this is a scene of domestic “togetherness” with a curious focus on both budding and mature sexuality. As Elaine Tyler May argues in *Homeward Bound*, domestic ideology in the 50s centered on non-repressive, sexual containment within a nuclear family where a husband and wife partnership protected the social order from dangerous men and women and from fears of nuclear annihilation. The Bowden’s immediate nightmare might be over but anxiety remains. Sam’s trouble began with a lucky punch, and it ended with a lucky gunshot. In the book anyway, Sam’s masculinity is defined by his domesticity and not by his courage or capacity for physically righting wrongs. As

Cuordileone, Penner and others argue, for many social observers in the 50s this kind of comfort in “togetherness,” conformity and materialism was symptomatic of a “crisis in masculinity.”

The contours of this putative crisis are, however, much more evident in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. When John Schlesinger described the “The Crisis in American Masculinity” in a 1958 *Esquire* magazine article with that title, he lamented a “decline in masculine identity and self-confidence” (Cuordileone, 9) which he attributed to the “psychosexual deficiencies of mass man” and a retreat from freedom and self-reliance. Thomas Schaub, in *American Fiction in the Cold War*, identified a literary counter narrative to the crisis motif. In the masculinist narrative of “strong, democratic individualism and sexual freedom ... society (totalitarianism, conformity) was associated with an emasculating femininity, and the rebel was always a man. Sexual potency and nonconformity were never far apart in this rhetoric” (154) Themes of “emasculating femininity” can be found in American literature ever since Rip Van Winkle sought escape from “petticoat government,” but they took a nasty turn in the 40s in the literature of “Momism,” from the psychiatry of David Levy’s *Maternal Overprotection* and Edward Strecker’s *Their Mother’s Sons* to, most notoriously, Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* which relentlessly cast the contemporary mother as (in Cuordileone’s words) “the perfect blend of a ball-busting female castrator and a mind-controlling totalitarian tyrant whose use of propagandistic techniques to elicit adulation of herself could rival that of Hitler or Stalin” (127).

This is an apt description of the Big Nurse in *Cuckoo’s Nest* where R.P. McMurphy is the sexually potent rebel who disrupts matriarchal, totalitarian control. McMurphy arrives in the

psychiatric hospital after being referred by a prison for mental evaluation. It is quickly apparent that the hospital is a metaphor for a repressive, matriarchal society. Big Nurse rules the ward and her supervisor, an erstwhile Army nurse, holds absolute power, not the ward doctor who “is just as helpless against” matriarchy as are the male patients (61) all of whom have been demoralized and diminished by women. The narrator, Chief Bromden, has withdrawn from society into silent patienthood because marriage to a white woman destroyed the tribal authority of his father; Billy Bibbit’s mother is responsible for his neurotic immaturity; and Harding’s wife is the reason for his hospital dependency. Big Nurse maintains power through humiliating group therapy sessions and psychological manipulation. While there are several lines of tension that drive the narrative, the key conflict is a battle between Big Nurse and McMurphy for control of the ward that is marked by escalating threats of sexual violence. McMurphy describes his first group therapy session as a “pecking party” with the big Nurse pecking at their “ever-lovin’ balls” (57). When Harding fails to raise his hand to vote in favor of watching the world series, McMurphy asks if he is afraid “the old buzzard’ll cut it off” (117). When lobotomy enters the discussion, Harding is explicit: “Frontal-lobe castration. I guess if she can’t cut below the belt she’ll do it above the eyes” (180). And, Billy Bibbit’s suicide—he cuts his own throat—is a symbolic castration. From the moment of his admission, McMurphy rebels against the repressive hospital regime in words and acts that reveal an unconstrained and aggressive sexuality. His prison record includes a conviction for statutory rape (he claims she was more than willing) and suspicion of psychopathic personality because “he fights and fucks too much” (13). To claim leadership of the men, he challenges Harding to a duel, “libido’s ablazin’,” for status as “bull goose looney” (20). As McMurphy succeeds in undermining Nurse Ratched’s

authority, he restores the patients' masculinity, evident symbolically in their raised hands and the enormous white halibut brought back from the fishing trip, and literally when he talks Chief into an erection (212) and arranges Billy's first sexual experience. When McMurphy disrobes at night, Chief makes note of his underwear: "The shorts under his work pants are coal black satin covered with white whales with red eyes." McMurphy explains the shorts were a gift: "'From a co-ed at Oregon State ... a Literary Major' ... 'She gave them to me because she said I was a symbol'" (81).<sup>11</sup> Here the reference to *Moby Dick* is simultaneous literary allusion -- McMurphy's doomed Ahabian confrontation with the all-powerful whiteness of the Combine -- and lowbrow humor -- McMurphy's prodigious libido is presumably matched by his anatomy. When McMurphy later revealed his *Moby Dick* shorts in front of the Nurse, his sexual threat was in jest, but following Billy's suicide, he physically attacks Big Nurse, rips open her uniform, and exposes her breasts. The penalty for this symbolic rape is another symbolic castration, lobotomy.

[In addition to lobotomy, shock treatments and sexual abuse are also presented as mechanisms of patient control. Early in the novel Chief recalls how the disruptive Mr. Taber was sexually abused by the orderlies (or at least that is how the Chief saw it). Toward the conclusion, the fight that lands McMurphy on the disturbed ward is in defense of another patient who was resisting an unnecessary de-lousing treatment that insinuated sodomy: "We lined up nude against the tile, and here one black boy came, a black plastic tube in his hand, squirting a stinking salve thick and sticky as egg white" and ordering "bend over and spread your cheeks!" (258).

The mix of misogyny, castration anxiety and homophobia in *Cuckoo's Nest* is consistent with 50s sexual and domestic ideology. The "momism" of psychiatric and popular literature

had blamed ineffectual fathers and “frustrated women who smothered their children with overprotection and overaffection” (May, 74) for the problems of the nation’s youth. Strecker’s *Their Mother’s Sons* blamed mothers for the high incidence of psychological disabilities and combat neuroses during World War II. A familiar example in film is James Dean’s mother in *Rebel Without a Cause*: one remembers Jim Backus in an apron and Dean’s comment, “if just once he would knock mom cold.” In *Cuckoo’s Nest*, McMurphy fights mom. At a key point in the novel when it appears Big Nurse has reduced McMurphy into an “ordinary man,” he refuses to give in. As Chief describes it: “The iron in his boot heels cracked lightening out of the tile. He was the logger again, the swaggering gambler, the big redheaded brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare.” (189)

McMurphy’s masculinity invokes a range of male fantasies and mythic heroes. He is alternately Wild Bill Hickock, the Lone Ranger, Ahab, Christ, and “a Giant come out of the Sky.” He is also a surrogate father to Chief whose rebirth in the Cuckoo’s Nest begins with McMurphy’s hospital admission and ends when he is set free by his father-hero’s sacrificial death.

The conclusion to *The Executioners* conformed to the conventions of melodrama: vice is defeated and virtue is intact; there is a return to settled society, and a restoration of middle class family norms (perhaps heteronormativity). Evil (and in the subtext, brutish, amoral communism) is outside this social order, an alien force at least temporarily kept at bay. By contrast, the conclusion to *Cuckoo’s Nest* is in the romance tradition of the American novel as defined by Richard Chase. McMurphy dies, transfusing his blood, spirit and life force into the Chief, empowering him to escape from corrupt society by fleeing into the redeeming wilderness. The threat of communism comes not from the outside but, through the irony of the cold war, from within society. Individual freedom, and in the scheme of the

novel, masculinity require flight from all society (from the conformist therapeutic community as much as from the communist prison camp), a resolution that is mythic idealism.

For my conclusion, I want to return to MacDonald's work, specifically his Travis McGee novels. I also want to move forward a bit in time. MacDonald's 1950s novels did not have a recurring protagonist, but in 1964 he introduced private investigator Travis McGee in *The Deep Blue Good-By*, and he found a formula that he sustained through a series of over 20 novels (e.g., Nightmare, Purple Place, Dress Her). The McGee persona corresponds with the argument of the last chapter in Cuordileone's study of manhood in American political culture titled "Reinventing the Liberal as Superman" (167-236). Two words connect the masculinity of McGee and the Liberal Superman: vigor and confidence. Cuordileone links these words with the style and bravado of JFK, his administration and the rejuvenated Democratic Party after the failed politics of Adlai the ineffectual egghead. They also connect masculinity with the *Playboy* ethos and the changing sexual mores of the 1960s. McGee, perhaps MacDonald's alter ego, is tall, muscular, and athletic. He is not intimidated by Max Cady types and defeats the worst among them through guile and martial skills. He lives on the margins of society in a houseboat of sorts that he won in a poker game and works only when he needs income. When he does work, he motives are self-interested, but he invariably aids those who have been unfairly wronged. Neither a naïve idealist nor a complete cynic, he accepts the existence of evil and goes about his business guided by an internal moral code which gives him license to break the law when necessary. In some key respects, he is the autonomous man that David Riesman, Erich Fromm and others idealized in their critiques of mass man. He knows philosophy and art and books but these do not engender superiority; he reads personalities with psychoanalytic skill but only manipulates his foes. All of these traits add to his sexual allure and, of course, he finds sexual mates in each novel. But here, too, he has his code: no means no, every relationship must be embraced with equal vigor by both parties, and there are no long term commitments. Travis McGee is a dangerous man, but only insofar as his good intentions produce

collateral damage; and he is, of course, fantastic, but as a fantasy wish-fulfillment his character is a compromise formation attuned to masculine tropes of the 1960s. Neither a monster from the id that must be repressed in the service of domestic togetherness, nor a bull goose libido seeking freedom from domesticating totalitarianism, McGee is an autonomous man whose powers, charms and principles allow him to live and love simultaneously in and outside of society.

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