



# An Analysis of Mckormurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* from the Perspective of the Liberalism

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**Abstract:** *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was directed by Milos Forman, based on Ken Kesey's 1962 novel. The quality of a film comes from all aspects. Foreign studies on this novel mainly focus on the 1960s and 1970s, respectively focusing on the religious color, realism, symbolism, gender composition, humor color and so on. Domestic experts and researchers also studied the novel from the perspectives of thematic research, counter-culture movement, psychology, feminism and existentialism. However, the study of liberalism is rarely mentioned. This paper discusses the expression of liberalism, and the classification of liberty to find out what is the liberalism and analyze the image of liberalism in this movie.

**Key words:** liberalism; positive liberty; negative liberty; normative institutionalism

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## 1. Introduction

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* tells a story that in order to avoid labor, Murphy pretended to be insane and went to an asylum. However, the asylum was more like a prison. Murphy who enjoyed liberty, tried to escape from the constraint of the asylum, but failed in the end. In the movie, Murphy's deeds seemed to be a series of behaviors against the senior nurses and the hospital management hierarchy. In fact, they are the externalization and practice of his inner liberal thinking and his way of pursuing individuality and human liberty and resisting social oppression. This kind of liberalism is in line with Mill's liberal philosophy. The following will judge Murphy's liberalism in detail from the expression of liberalism and the classification of liberty.

## 2. Murphy's Expression of Liberalism

Liberalism is an ideology and philosophy, which is a collection of series of thought with freedom as the main political value. This paper mainly discusses the value of liberalism of Mckormurphy's behavior based on Mill's *On Liberty*. The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way. A lunatic asylum was a colony for the mentally ill patients. Before Mckormurphy entered the asylum, it was an orderly place, with regular entertainment and meeting activities occasionally. Melodious classical music played in the room, and Rachel was a not friendly but professional head nurse. On the surface, it was a shelter for the mentally ill patients. However, behind the outward warmth there was a grim foundation, where all patients must live in a hidebound way with the strict rules. If patients revolted the power of the staff, it would be "treated" with electric shocks or lobotomiesnot. The asylum here is the symbol of despotism. Despite being in a good order, the system depressed patients' personality. Where there was resistance, there was

punishment. The patients were forced to obey the regulations which deprived them of their right to freedom. As Mill said, "whatever name it may be called, and whatever it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men." Everything was broken with Murphy's arrival. Not only he was not bound by the rules of the autocratic system, but also he became the incarnation of the enlightened. He was charming and enthusiastic, with a nature instincts and a true love of life and people. Most importantly, he regarded the people around him as normal people like himself, rather than the man who were really mad, and took for granted that they should enjoy life as much as he did. As a result, his liberal ideas infected many people. This paper will analyze the performance of Murphy's liberalism in the film.

### 2.1 The inexistence of the liberalism

When Murphy attended his first patient meeting as a newcomer, the meeting was dominated by nurse Rachel as a dictator. While as listeners, the patients seldom spoke, and had no opinions and never expressed themselves. They just took Rachel's advice and the meeting proceeded well. At the second patient meeting, an idea was put forward by Murphy boldly to adjust the rest schedule of the insane asylum so that patients could watch football games in the evening. Nurse Rachel did not reject the idea directly, instead she adopted the method of majority rule through the democratic voting. Murphy was sure to win initially because he learned that most patients wanted to watch the baseball game. Actually there was few person voted for him. Although he encouraged his patients to raise their hands, none took the step. During this period, patients did not have the sense of liberalism. They were used to acting and doing things according to the system of insane asylum. That was their weakness, which led them not to know how to resist and defend their rights. Therefore, Murphy's influence on them during this period was minimal.

### 2.2 The bud of the liberalism

After losing the baseball vote, Murphy was furious and realized that the patients had no sense of consciousness. In order to prove that his efforts had paid off, he told the patients that he could lift the washing table with his hands. Although it took all his energy, he still failed. However, his behavior shocked all the patients present. At the third meeting, patients told the head nurse they wanted to see a baseball game actively and Murphy called for voting again. Most of the patients raised their hands at that time, but still missed by one vote. Murphy encouraged Chief, a deaf, to raise his hand. Finally, Chief did slowly, but the voting time had ended up, Murphy lost once again. On this occasion, Murphy was undaunted and chose to fight against the rejection of the asylum by using sound to form a visual imagination facing to the television, which had been turned off. During this period, patients' sense of liberty began to bud, and the asylum was gradually full of dynamic. They generated initiative and positivity to realize the distinction between need and accept, rather than being a machine manipulated by others anymore. Although they still didn't know how to fight for their rights and profit, Murphy's thoughts and behaviors were slowly imbuing into their minds. Therefore, during this period, Murphy's influence on them gradually emerged.

### 2.3 The weakness of the liberalism

The patients asked questions and expressed their demands to Rachel actively at the fourth patient meeting. When their suggestions couldn't be met, they began to resist the refusal in various forms, leading to a fierce "cigarette dispute". A party was held by Murphy with the patients all night when he was about to escape, but the escape failed because he couldn't abandon the patients in subconsciousness. Due to Murphy's serious violation of asylum rules, the hospital decided to perform lobotomy on Murphy. Chief could not bear to see Murphy who had lost his soul, so he had to kill Murphy and escaped by throwing the washing table that Murphy had been unable to lift against the window, disappearing into the wilderness. The patients did not act, however they cheered for Chief's departure. During this period, patients' sense of liberty was awakened completely. They emphasized "mine", which meant the natural legitimacy and the natural rights of

human beings. Chief was also influenced by Murphy as only normal people could choose to escape from the insane asylum ultimately. In the end, although Murphy died and the patients did not escape, the cheering state of the patients showed that their future was bright.

### **3. The Classification of Liberty**

British philosopher and political thinker Isaiah Berlin believed that liberty was the absence of coercion in human relations. He divided liberty into negative liberty and positive liberty. Negative liberty is liberty from interference or artificial constraints. Berlin points out that negative liberty means I am normally considered to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. Therefore, the essence of negative liberty lies in "non-interference", which means the individual is free from the arbitrary will of others or even the state. The "positive" sense of the word "liberty" derives from the individual's desire to become his own master. In terms of positive liberty, with the constant expansion of self, the power to realize self becomes more and more huge. Liberty is no longer a state or domain free from coercion, but becomes self-control and self-realization. Compared with negative liberty, relative liberty refers to the liberty which is under certain restrictions. Positive liberty is the unlimited liberty and more often abused than negative liberty.

Under the premise of two kinds of liberty, a hypothesis is put forward. If Murphy escaped from the insane asylum with Chief, could he get the real liberty? According to Berlin's theory, Murphy's pursuit and expression of liberty belongs to positive liberty, which means he was eager to live without human interference and restriction. However, in the whole social environment, liberty is limited by certain conditions, with certain "negative" attributes. Therefore, the noumenon of Murphy is positive liberty, but the positive liberty is included in the negative liberty under the constraint of conditions. Therefore, if Murphy escaped from the asylum, the liberty would probably become shackles for him and he would not get the real liberty he wanted in the society. Murphy was a hero that everyone admired in the asylum. Whereas in the real society, he would have been arrested "at least five times for rioting" with his restless temperament and the character of "mental patient" which let him resist and break the rules of the asylum, and he would not be considered a hero by our traditional standards. Whether in that time or in today's society, it emphasizes that everyone is equal and everyone is born with the right to liberty, but social liberty is restricted. Those behaviors that conflict with the institution and are not recognized by the mainstream social culture are called "madness", which is contrary to the "negative liberty" of society. Therefore, it is a sorrow that Murphy escaped from the asylum and attained liberty.

### **4. Conclusion**

In order to avoid punishment in a correctional facility, McMurphy pretended to be insane. He thought the asylum was a shelter where he could stay free for a few months before being released. However, it turned out that the asylum was like a prison and he died there. But Murphy's liberalism would be inherited by the Chief and fled with him. Because of his untrammled nature and enthusiasm, Murphy rebuilt the liberty consciousness in the patients. Liberty as a seed would take root, and eventually sprout on patients who contacted with him. In fact, the authority of the society cannot tolerate those who do not comply with the social institution. Thus, liberalism of Murphy is opposite with social reality, his behaviors to pursuit liberty remains controversial, so it is worthy of study.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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