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Straight-Jackets: Gay Characters and Mental Asylums Across Times and Cultures, as Portrayed
in Film and Literature

A historical crime novel written in 2002, an erotic Korean psychological thriller film, and a classic of American literature written by Ken Kesey feature some fascinating shared elements, despite the differences in medium and genre between the three. All take place, in part or whole, inside a mental institute, with characters committed to the institute who are homosexual. Scattered as they are between genres, time periods, context, and settings, they share several obvious connections, namely secrets and deception, unreliable narration, and most, notably, gay characters committed to mental institutions. Although these stories are spread out across times and cultures, each share commonalities of physical and occasionally sexual abuse at the hands of heterosexual medical professionals, and also prominently feature escapes from abusive situations in ways that return the dignity that was taken from each character during their imprisonment. This exchange of abuse for freedom with each character's sexuality intact shows that authors across cultures understand the vulnerability of homosexual people under the oppressive care of heterosexual medical professionals. Furthermore, the authors, two of whom are straight men and one of whom is a lesbian woman, sympathize with their gay characters and, while allowing them to suffer, also give them an escape that restores their dignity and offers them a happy ending.

Fingersmith, a Victorian crime novel written by Sarah Waters in 2002, follows two young women with their own strains of madness. Susan "Sue" Trinder attempts to swindle a rich, naïve English heiress out of her fortune, with the guidance of a conman known as Gentleman, by

posing as the young lady's handmaiden and encouraging her to marry Gentleman. Sue ends up being the one swindled herself when the heiress, Maud Lily, tricks Sue into taking her place at the mental asylum and running off with the money. Along the way, Sue and Maud fall in love and consummate their relationship shortly before Maud's betrayal of Sue that lands her in a Victorian mental institute. Though Sue eventually escapes, it is not without trial for her. *The Handmaiden*, a 2016 Korean adaptation of *Fingersmith* set in Japan-occupied 1930s Korea, follows the outline of the same story, with Sook-Hee (Korean version of Sue Trinder) tricking a Japanese heiress, Lady Hideko, (Japanese version of Maud Lilly) out of her fortune with conman Count Fujiwara (Korean version of Gentleman), again while Sook-Hee poses as a servant meant to win Hideko's trust and encourage her to marry Count Fujiwara. Sook-Hee and Hideko's love, like Sue and Maud's, is consummated before Sook-Hee's forced committal to the Korean mental institution separates them. The two plan to con the conman and eventually leave the country together with the entire sum of money. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a classic novel written by Ken Kesey in 1962, takes place almost entirely within an American mental institute, featuring a varied cast of patients, including a closeted gay man, Dale Harding, committed for reasons related to his sexuality. Harding escapes his imprisonment in much less dramatic fashion than Sue's complex jailbreak or Sook-Hee's fire-aided escape by checking himself out of the institution and walking out the doors (Kesey, 321).

Considering *Fingersmith*'s position as a novel written less than two decades ago, in the niche genre of erotic lesbian historical fiction, there are a few quality pieces written about it and its author, Sarah Waters. *Fingersmith* is her third of five published novels, written in 2002, and the third to be set in the 19th century. When asked in an interview with Daunta Kean for *The Independent* in 2014, Waters says, "I pay attention to women's history, to their secret history and lives, acknowledging meaning in their domestic lives." (Waters, Sarah. Interview by Danuta

Kean). *Fingersmith*, whose two narrators are young women with more secrets than they could possibly count, holds true with this pattern. By Waters' own admittance, *Fingersmith* is a decadent indulgence of sexuality, secrets, and insane situations. *Fingersmith* is "excessive" "with its roots in [...] murder and madness and mayhem", as she says in an interview with Claire Armitstead for *The Guardian*. In another interview, she says, "My 19th-century novels have got increasingly extravagant, really, as they took on Victorian models like melodrama and the novel of temptation and things like that" (Waters, Sarah. Interview by Claire Armitstead). Though excessive, *Fingersmith* is based on the detailed research that is Waters' specialty. Having received her degree in English literature with her dissertation covering LGBT literature, she found her natural career in writing historical fiction. She estimates that research for each novel takes three to four months (Waters, Sarah. Interview by Claire Armitstead). In addition to sharing themes of feminism, lesbian experiences, and historical settings, many of her works feature prisons, or prison-like situations, heavily. When asked about this by Armitstead, Waters says,

I think I find the idea of confinement peculiarly horrible...as do lots of people, really. [...] I think there's a tension [...] between being in control of your own space and being out of control of your own space—the idea of being able to lock yourself in the bathroom or the idea of somebody locking you into a cell...with in between all these disrupted spaces of the city of London. Thematically the prison seemed to make sense, I suppose, but I think ultimately there's some other psychological pull for it for me that I can't quite account for. I was probably locked in a cupboard when I was three or something.

(Waters, Sarah. Interview by Claire Armitstead)

Despite these myriad interviews with Waters, not much has been said about the madness and fear that is central to her *Fingersmith* characters. The few academic articles written on the piece focus

on the feminist perspective, lesbian romance, and historical quality of the novel, rather than the treatment of Sue Trinder as a young woman wrongfully assumed insane and trapped in a Victorian asylum. The implications of a young lesbian woman surviving abuse at the hands of an institution and emerging with dignity have yet to be explored academically.

The Handmaiden, a 2002 drama/thriller by noted director Park Chan-Wook, sets *Fingersmith* in Japan-occupied Korea of the 1930s. Sook-Hee, portrayed by Kim Tae-ri and Lady Hideko, portrayed by Kim Min-Hee, stars in a sensual, lush film that brings lesbian affection to the forefront. About the adaptation of her novel, Waters says, “The first thing that struck me was how faithful it manages to be to *Fingersmith* even though it’s in Korean and Japanese and set in a different period” (Waters, Sarah. Interview by Claire Armitstead). She goes on to say that the power dynamics of Victorian life transferred extremely well to Korean culture of the time period. *The Handmaiden* is notable in that it manages to adapt a novel about class and impersonation and make it into a story about colonialism— in *The Handmaiden*, one of the deciding factors for Sook-Hee’s admittance into the madhouse is that she thinks she is a Korean servant instead of a Japanese lady. In truth, Sook-Hee is a Korean servant, but the doctors are told that Sook-Hee is Lady Hideko, a Japanese lady, and her insistence to the contrary is proof that she is insane (Waters, Sarah. Interview by Claire Armitstead).

Research on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, both for the novel and film adaptation, tends to heavily favor the characters of Nurse Ratched, McMurphy, and Chief Bromden, as well as the subjects of masculinity and point of view. Very little has been said about sexuality, especially Harding’s sexuality as a closeted gay man. Caroline Leach and Stuart Murray explore Harding’s stay in the mental hospital through the lens of emasculation, not sexuality, claiming that his non-existent problem is due to his feelings of inferiority in comparison to his wife (Leach). In doing so, these critics miss an important aspect of his characterization, one driven by

societal shame of his sexuality fighting against his desire not to be ashamed. Still, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a mostly-sympathetic portrayal of what much of society considers unsympathetic, Harding included.

The film adaptation dropped some of this sympathy in its portrayal of Harding. Instead of a man struggling against shame as he is in the novel, Harding is an angry man who dislikes his wife due to her level of intelligence and who scoffs at the idea of homosexuality. When speaking about this problem to the ward, the others laugh at him for using the word “peculiar”. Harding instantly becomes defensive and angry. “You’ve never heard the word ‘peculiar’? Say, what are you trying to say?” he demands. When he gets a raspberry blown at him in return, he snaps, “Are you trying to say I’m queer? Is that it? Ooh? Little Mary Anne? Little Marjorie Jane, on the street?” As he speaks, he places his hands under his chin in a girlish way, affecting a high, dainty voice. The fake smile drops off his face instantly and, visibly angry, he barks, “Is that it? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” (Forman). This is the only reference to Harding’s sexuality in the film, and it serves to dissuade the audience from interpreting his character in this way. In contrast, the novel version of Harding does not even mention the word queer, and he does his best to avoid the subject, electing to stay quiet in group therapy than speak up on his marital problems. Nurse Ratched brings up his concerns that Harding’s wife believed his actions to be of “weak dandyism” and his feelings of inferiority because of his wife’s “ample bosom” (Kesey, 44). The narration continues, “Harding shuts his eyes, and nobody else says anything” (Kesey, 44). The use of the word “dandy”, which historically meant overdressed, delicate, or excessively showy, reveals Harding’s insecurities about how his masculinity—or lack of it—is perceived by others. His total avoidance of the conversation, to the point of shutting his eyes, shows that he is unable to speak about his problems and fears what will happen if he does.

It is important to note that while all three pieces feature historical insane asylums, none of

the three are entirely historically accurate. Each one draws on historical representations of mental institutions but takes their own liberties with the treatment patients face. Insane asylums, also called mental hospitals, mental institutions, or colloquially called “madhouses”, have existed around the world in a variety of conditions. Most infamous of mental institutions were Victorian asylums. They often carried a reputation for being abusive, cruel testing grounds for human experimentation. In fact, while many institutions did act cruelly towards patients, the average occupant of a Victorian mental asylum was treated fairly humanely, per a standard set by the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum (“A Victorian Mental Asylum”). In the 1700s, chains and straitjackets were common in pauper asylums, but by the 1830s, coincidentally when *Fingersmith* takes place, legislation was being passed to ensure the safety of asylum occupants. That is not to say straitjackets and chains vanished, but by this time, they were used in well furnished and comfortable rooms, instead of straw-filled padded cells seen in earlier years (“A Victorian Mental Asylum”). *Fingersmith*’s Sue spends several nights in the outdated straw padded room, though the rest of the asylum is set in a grand house converted into a hospital, as it would be historically. The 1853 Lunatic Asylums Act made it so that those admitted to the asylum needed to be assessed by two doctors, in hopes that this would reduce the number of false imprisonments. However, once admitted, a patient could not check themselves out and would only be released into the care of a relative, spouse, or friend (McBeath). This bit of information is used effectively in *Fingersmith*. When Sue learns of this rule, she despairs that she will never be let go, as the man who committed her to the asylum, Gentleman, is assumed by the staff to be her husband.

The facet of having homosexual characters committed to mental institutes complicates the matter of accurate historical representation further. Dr. Jack Drescher, a professional in the modern mental health field and a gay man himself, writes in *Disorienting Sexuality*:

Psychoanalytic Reappraisals of Sexual Identities that not much research is available concerning gay patients of mental asylums because those particular minorities were among the ones forcibly erased by the institution, or who forced themselves into the closet to avoid further persecution inside mental institutions. He also states, “My personal experiences of anti-homosexual bias are the result of my willingness to adopt an openly gay voice in a professional community that has been either unwilling or reluctant to hear them” (Drescher, 227). In this context, he is speaking of the modern mental health field, which is still hostile to gay patients and professionals, meaning that historical ill-treatment of gay mentally ill patients was likely to be much more profound.

Research in English for Korean institutions is sparse, but a condensed overview of Korean mental health care, compiled by Ho Young Lee, a Korean medical professional, lends the ability to compare *The Handmaiden*'s portrayal of Sook-Hee's time as a patient to that of actual patients. Korean mental institutions first appeared in the country as part of Japan's occupation of Korea and were based on a western model, such as the Victorian style. For this reason, much is the same between Victorian and Korean mental institutions. The first official mental institution, the Chosun Chongdokoo Hospital, was established in 1911 (Lee). Prior to the establishment of Chosun Chongdokoo Hospital, mentally ill citizens would be abandoned by their communities and were now receiving treatment for the first time. However, the hospital was really established in order to treat Japanese citizens residing in Korea, not Korean citizens. Lee states that in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Dr. Charles I McLaren redefined mental health care in Korea to be more humane and focused on rehabilitation, which was “a contrast to colonial psychiatry imported from Japan” (Lee). The focus on rehabilitation did not last long, as Japan interfered again during the Second World War. Sook-Hee's brief stay in the mental hospital showed unfit conditions, such as unwashed women wearing grimy shifts, their bare feet shackled to the tables

with rusty chains, and bug-infested rice to eat. It is not clear from the research available if this is an accurate representation of a Korean mental institute at the time.

American institutions in the time period that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was written had transitioned to a “moral treatment” of patients, thanks to an advocate of the mentally ill, Dorothea Dix’s, campaigning, though the practice was not always the same as theory (D’Antonio). Until a shortage of money coupled with too many patients in the early 1900s caused disruption, many mental institutions were tolerable, even pleasant, places to be. However, advancing technology such as Electric Shock Therapy and lobotomies brought back suffering for many patients. By the 1950s, underfunded and overstaffed asylums were dying out, replaced by other institutions, including nursing homes (D’Antonio). *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* shows an institution that seems humanely equipped, unlike the filthy conditions of Sue and Sook-Hee’s confinement, but it is run by cruel and vindictive people who too easily order painful and invasive treatments. This is historically mirrored by the journals of a young schizophrenic man, David, who spent a large portion of his life inside mental institutes, including the 1960s, when *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* takes place: acute wards, according to David, were always “crowded and never entirely free from the threat of violence” (Hallam). While David was European and not American, his journals are some of the few intact first-hand accounts of life in an asylum at the time. Since American and European institutions in the 1960s operated in similar ways and were modeled on the same framework, his experiences were likely shared by American patients as well.

Each of the three narratives discussed here, *Fingersmith*, *The Handmaid*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, features an establishment of inhumane treatment, a loss of dignity, and an escape that restores the dignity that has been lost. All three threads, while not entirely identical or appearing in the same order in each, can be traced throughout the narratives.

In *Fingersmith*, Sue Trinder's imprisonment lasts an entire summer and takes up a significant amount of her narration, which is split between herself and Maud Lily throughout the novel. Committed in place of Maud, Sue is unaware what the nurses and doctors know about her. She believes they are imprisoning her because they think that the strain of married life has driven her insane, but information fed to one of the doctors who committed her, Dr. Christie, by Maud Lily and Gentleman, indicates the doctor is aware of her sexual and romantic attraction to Maud. Dr. Christie mistakenly believes that Sue's sexuality is the reason for her insanity. The staff is also aware of this from the first moment Sue is in their care: "She [the nurse] dropped her voice. 'She's the one—you know?' The new nurse looked more interested. 'This one?' she said. 'Looks too slight for that.' 'Well, they come in all sizes...' I didn't know what they meant. But being held up for strangers to study, and talk and smile over, made me ashamed, and I kept silent" (Waters, 429-430). The comment about Sue's "slight" frame is because it is believed that she raped Maud, overcome with immoral lust for another woman. This is confirmed when Dr. Christie tells Sue that Maud wept in front of them and begged for them to take Sue away. "He lowered his voice. 'What had you done to her, hmm, to make her do that?' 'Oh!' I said, twisting my hands together. ('See her colour change now, Dr. Graves,' he said softly)" (Waters, 439-440).

After her initial first night in the asylum in a padded cell, Sue is relocated to the ward "where we puts [sic] our questionable ladies" (Waters, 433). In this context, Sue assumes that 'questionable' means violent, due to her outburst during her committal, but, paired with the observations of the nurses, 'questionable' likely meant 'sexually deranged', a historically accurate reason for committal to a mental institution (McBeath).

Though every woman in Sue's "questionable" ward experiences verbal abuse, teasing, unpaid labor, and physical abuse at the hands of the nurses, Sue's experiences are far worse than

that of her wardmates. In fact, the nurses' knowledge of Sue's sexuality makes her vulnerable to pointed psychological and sexual abuse from Nurse Bacon. All the nurses take turns sitting on the patient's chest to make them choke and gasp as a way to control them, but Nurse Bacon takes it a step further with Sue's discipline:

Nurse Bacon laughed. I felt the shudder of it, like rolling-pins; and that made me screw up my eyes and cry out louder. Then she shuddered again, on purpose. The nurses cheered. Then she did this. She pushed herself up on her hands, so that her face was above me but her bosom and stomach and legs still hard on my own; and she moved her hips. She moved them in a certain way. My eyes flew open. She gave me a leer. 'Like it, do you?' she said, still moving. 'No? We heard you did.' And at that, the nurses roared. They roared, and I saw on their faces as they gazed at me that nasty look I had seen before but never understood. I understood it now, of course; and all at once I guessed what Maud must have said to Dr. Christie, that time at Mrs. Cream's [where Sue was interviewed by Dr. Christie]. The thought that she had said it—that she said it, before Gentleman, as a way of making me out to be mad—struck me like a blow to the heart. I had had many such blows since I left Briar [Estate]; but this, just then, seemed the worst. It was as if I were filled with gun-powder, and had just been touched with a match. I began to struggle, and to shriek. (Waters 469)

Caught out by Sue's extreme emotional reaction, Nurse Bacon and the other nurses push the blame to Sue, further incriminating her by targeting her sexuality: "'A dream,' [Nurse Bacon] answered. Then she looked at [the doctor], and started into life. 'Oh, Dr. Christie,' she said, 'she was saying a lady's name and moving, as she slept!' That made me shriek all over again." (Waters, 470).

As a punishment for her behavior, Sue is subjected to a thirty-minute cold-water plunge,

an actual punishment for psychotic and unrestrainable patients in Victorian mental institutes. For fifteen to twenty minutes, hysterical patients would be submerged for a minute at a time into freezing cold water by tying the patient to a chair and dropping the chair into a deep basin (McBeath). Though for Sue, it was given as a way to calm her, in real life, it was also often used as corrective therapy to condition patients to act in a certain way (McBeath). After Sue's dunking, her spirit is totally broken, and she retreats into a quiet, obedient, depressive state and acts the way the doctors want her to by pretending she is Maud Lily. She says, "They might have killed me, after all. I lay in darkness. I did not dream. I did not think. You could not say I was myself, for I was no-one. Perhaps I never was to be quite myself, again" (Waters, 471). It is only due to a chance encounter with a young servant boy who worked on Briar Estate with her that she was able to eventually escape, after an entire season spent in the asylum (Waters, 473).

This escape is almost entirely orchestrated by Sue herself. The servant boy, Charles, was persuaded by Sue to bring her a blank key and a file and to wait for her outside the asylum at night, but it was Sue who created a copy of the ward key by tricking the very same Nurse Bacon who abused her earlier. Upon escape, Sue's narration says,

It had been months and months since I had stood on any kind of path and had to choose the way to take. I looked about me, and the land and lightening sky seemed suddenly vast and fearful. Then I saw Charles looking, and waiting. I thought of London. 'This way,' I said, beginning to walk; and the fear passed from me. (Waters 490)

Sue's dignity and sense of self had been returned to her by her ability to get herself out of the mental institute, relying on the pickpocketing and fraud skills she had spent her whole life perfecting. Her happy ending is several hundred pages and four major plot twists away, but she does eventually find it, living at Briar Estate with Maud.

The Handmaid's account of Nam Sook-Hee's asylum stay is far different from that of

Sue Tridner, despite being based on the same novel. As opposed to taking up more than seventy pages of narration, Sook-Hee's stay lasts only minutes on-screen. This is due in part to a truncated plot, done to ensure the story could be told in the length of a film, but also because Sook-Hee's situation differs from Sue's enough that repeating her imprisonment would have detracted from Sook-Hee's character arc. While Sue is taken off-guard by Maud's betrayal, Sook-Hee is not. An added scene in the film shows Sook-Hee and Hideko accidentally revealing their double- and triple-crossing plans to each other. Sook-Hee, playing at being the encouraging handmaiden, insists that Hideko will grow to love the Count and that she should marry him. Hideko reacts with anger, as she is fully in love with Sook-Hee. She flees the house with a rope and prepares to hang herself from the tree where her aunt had hung herself years before. Hideko, in a calm voiceover, states, "I wish I had never been born. I wish I'd never been born." She hangs by her arms from the largest branch of the tree. There is a fall, a gasp, and then an extended shot where it is clear Hideko is not choking to death, but the viewer is unable to see why, as the shot cuts off at her waist. "Let go," she says, calmly, and the camera pans down to Sook-Hee, clutching her legs in one arm, Hideko's feet supported in her other hand, holding the rope slack enough to stop Hideko from suffocating. Tearfully, Sook-Hee apologizes and admits she is worried about Hideko. Sook-Hee confesses, "I tried to trick you into marrying that bastard. I was going to put you in a madhouse and run off. Don't die. Don't get married, Miss!". A few lines of dialogue pass between the two, and then Hideko says, "You think you're tricking me? You're the one being tricked. You're the one bound for the madhouse. I was going to lock you up in there under my name, then I'd become you and run far away, with him. [Pause]. I won't say sorry, since you tried to trick me too" (Chan-Wook).

Though the audience is not shown any more of this conversation, it is clear the women continued to talk and make plans, as the camera shows several covert looks and nods between

the two as a flashback of Sook-Hee's committal to the mental institution from a different point of view shows Sook-Hee is fully involved in the plan. The asylum itself, while unpleasant, is only briefly shown in two scenes. The first is Sook-Hee's committal, shown from two different points of view at two different points in the film. In the first of the committal scenes, the audience is not aware of Sook-Hee's involvement in the plan. In a wide shot, she occupies the right third of the frame against the dark stone wall of the asylum. She reaches out and hugs Hideko close to her. As she embraces her, an angled circular shot pans over the asylum, accompanied by a woman laughing and screaming. Sook-Hee is visibly nervous. After she 'realizes' that she is the one being committed, instead of Hideko, she screams. The nurses restrain her with force enough to crack her shoulder. "Let go of me, you filthy bitches!" Sook-Hee yells. Several minutes later, she is dragged into the building, interspersed by shots of a young Hideko, also crying and being restrained by a nanny, screaming that she is not "a rotten bitch" (Park Chan-Wook). The second version of the committal scene is much the same, with the addition of knowing glances between Sook-Hee and Hideko, and an extra shot of Hideko forcing herself to not cry after Sook-Hee is taken away. The other notable scene, in which Sook-Hee is actually inside the asylum, she is sitting alone and chained to a table in a large stone-and-brick-walled room, eating slowly and methodically. Then she throws her head back and laughs hysterically at a half-eaten cockroach in her rice ball. Her escape comes minutes after that, done with the help of a purposefully-set kitchen fire and a fire-proof apron. The only implication that Sook-Hee's sexuality affected her short stay at the asylum is that she is sitting alone in a room of other females, ignored by patients and nurses alike, despite her hysterical laughter. The social isolation might have been due to her sexuality, as "sexual deviancy" was a reason for institutionalization in nearly every culture (McBeath). As Sook-Hee was not particularly violent or otherwise ostracizable, there was no other reason to isolate her from the other women. This is the extent of the scenes that take place

in *The Handmaiden*, a far cry from the pages and pages of disheartening description present in *Fingersmith*. Sue's lengthy account of her time in the asylum was a reflection of her anguish at the betrayal of her lover, Maud. In *The Handmaiden*, the inclusion of the suicide tree scene cuts short the need for any major scenes in the asylum. Sook-Hee's escape from the asylum is done with help from her mother-figure and fellow thief, Bok-Soon (Lee Yong-Nyeo), and planned in its entirety by Sook-Hee herself and her now partner-in-crime and would-be-betrayer, Hideko. Hideko writes a letter to Bok-Soon for the illiterate Sook-Hee, who then copies it over in her own hand. The two include a solid gold bracelet belonging to Hideko as payment for Bok-Soon and receive a reply far in advance of Sook-Hee's committal. Unlike Sue, Sook-Hee went into her imprisonment knowing it would be short and that she would be rescued by two women she loved and trusted. Her dignity was never fully taken from her, but, as shown by her panicked and disgusted laughter at the half-eaten cockroach, she was more than ready to escape the asylum when the time came. Also unlike Sue, who regained her dignity after the events in the asylum, Sook-Hee regains hers as soon as she realizes her friend, Count Fujiwara, is planning on betraying her, and when she decides to swindle the swindler in return.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest's Dale Harding's position as a gay man in the 1960s, roughly when the civil rights movement began to include gay rights, makes him different from 19th century lesbian Sue and Sook-Hee, a lesbian in 1930s Korea. While Sue and Sook-Hee would have known that there was very little chance for societal acceptance of their lesbianism, Harding was gay in an in-between time when the hope of acceptance might be in the foreseeable future. Despite this, he commits himself, voluntarily, to the tyrannical rule of Nurse Ratched, due nearly entirely to reasons of shame of his sexuality. In his final speech to his fellow patient and friend, McMurphy, Harding says:

For myself? Guilt. Shame. Fear. Self-belittlement. I discovered at an early age that I

was—shall we be kind and say different? It's a better, more general word than the other one. I indulged in certain practices that our society regards as shameful. And I got sick. It wasn't the practices, I don't think, it was the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me—and the great voice of millions chanting, 'Shame. Shame. Shame.' It's society's way of dealing with someone different. (Kesey 307-308)

He admits that he does not believe his sexuality (here referred to as his “differences” and “certain practices”) were the reason for his insanity, but the weight of society's judgment and hatred that drove him to “sickness” that he believed could only be fixed in a mental institution. Harding suffers the same amount of abuse as other members of the ward with no particular focus on himself as a gay man. All patients, according to the narrator, Bromden, are regularly sexually assaulted by the male aids on the ward. Bromden says in the first few pages of the novel that, “I see two, maybe all three of them in there, in that shower room with the Admission, running that thermometer around in the grease till it's coated the size of your finger [...] and then shut the door and turn all the shower up to where you can't hear anything but the vicious hiss of water on the green tile” (Kesey, 10). This, paired with Bromden's observation of the aids committing “sex crimes” in the hallways, daily, makes clear that the aids' sexual abuse is constant and regular, and undoubtedly, Harding has experienced it as well.

The other notable instance of sexual abuse takes place in the second half of the novel, after the men return from a day-long fishing trip. Harding is present, as he was on the fishing trip, but Bromden does not make special note of him during the scene as the aids squirt cleaner either onto or into the patients' anuses – the narration, already graphic enough, does not clarify which it is, only that the aids wielded “soft, squeezy nightmare gunbarrels [plastic tube containing the cleaner]” (Kesey, 270). As the case with the anal thermometer, Harding is not

specifically shown or observed to be suffering the assault, but as a member of the group, he surely did endure it.

Interestingly, Bromden himself has a moment wherein he questions his own sexuality and is scared of the possibility he might not be straight, although the narrative does not expand on why it scares him. While watching McMurphy sleep one night, Bromden narrates,

I want to touch him because he's a man. That's a lie too. There's other men around. I could touch them. I want to touch him because I'm one of those queers! But that's a lie too. That's one fear hiding behind another. If I was one of these queers I'd want to do other things with him. I just want to touch him because he's who he is. (Kesey 222)

Bromden quickly rationalizes away his possible attraction to McMurphy with the justification that McMurphy is somehow special or different from everyone else. This ties to the concept Harding brings up in his speech about shame that, “[shame] is society’s way of dealing with someone different” (Kesey, 308). Bromden’s narration, “I want to touch him because I’m one of those queers!”, shows surprise and revulsion, two aspects of shame. Bromden may not actually be queer, as he fears he is, but he feels the same shame at the very thought of it that Harding does. That Bromden also understands the inherent danger of being queer in a mental asylum, or even in the society in which they live, justifies Harding’s neuroticism about avoiding the subject displayed earlier in the novel.

As for his escape, Harding’s takes less than a sentence to tell: “After Harding signed out and was picked up by his wife...” (Kesey, 321). Instead of examining the sentence itself, it would be more beneficial to look at the reasons for his decision to finally sign himself out. The admittance that he was voluntarily on the ward was a major point of disagreement between Harding and the ward’s hero, McMurphy, early in Part II:

Harding’s grinning again, looking with that skittish sideways look of a jumpy mare [...]

‘You have more to lose than I do,’ Harding says again. ‘I’m voluntary. I’m not committed.’ McMurphy doesn’t say a word. He’s got that same puzzled look on his face like there’s something isn’t right, something he can’t put his finger on. He just sits there looking at Harding, and Harding’s rearing smile fades and he goes to fidgeting around from McMurphy staring at him so funny. (Kesey 194)

McMurphy goes from man to man, demanding to know why they hadn’t left the ward and Nurse Ratched behind. It remains a point of tension between the Voluntaries and McMurphy, who is committed, for the rest of the novel. Right before Harding signs himself out of the ward, McMurphy is caught with a woman in his bed after a night of partying on the ward. One of the patients, Billy, then commits suicide from the shame instilled in him by Nurse Ratched for having sex. McMurphy is whisked away to the Disturbed ward. Harding checks himself out before McMurphy returns, lobotomized, and it is unclear if Harding is aware of McMurphy’s fate. Still, it is significant that of all the times in the novel when Harding might have signed himself into freedom, the removal of McMurphy’s freedom becomes the catalyst for that decision. Harding’s escape restores his dignity by reminding him that he should be the one in control of his life, and that he should exert that control before Nurse Ratched or the institution takes it away from him.

Despite all this struggle and pain, all three characters escape into some sort of happy ending. Sue Trinder ends her story with Maud, profiting off the work Maud’s uncle forced her into, reworking it to fit her needs and experiences. Sook-Hee and Hideko flee the country in disguise and end the film giggling and making love in a luxurious cruise ship suite. Harding voluntarily leaves with his wife, and assumedly, a better life than the one he had in the ward. Mental institutions, both in fiction and real life, are a place ripe with fear and secrecy, so one may argue it is the ideal place for gay characters to grapple with themselves and their sexuality,

as being gay has historically been a lifestyle of secrecy and fear. Milanda Lo, interviewing Sarah Waters for *After Ellen*, commented that the reason prisons and asylums feature so heavily in Waters' works may be related to the metaphorical closet that her characters may fear or long to escape from, just as they fear or long to escape from imprisonment. Waters casually agrees but does not elaborate or confirm (Sarah Waters, interview by Milanda Lo). Lo's comment brings up an interesting perspective about gay characters in fiction—whether imprisoned by asylum walls or society's shame, they endure suffering until escape is possible. Sue, Sook-Hee, and Harding all endure assault and abuse, but the fact that they are able to emerge, dignified and intact, with happy endings implied or achieved, shows that authors across cultures and times know that suffering of vulnerable parties, such as gay men and lesbian women, are to be rewarded with gain.

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