



The Capitalist Cuckoo's Nest

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A conflict many people, especially those in my age group, face is the struggle between conforming to society's standards or rebelling against them. There is a standard display of what a modern individual in America is. This display has been seen in films and literature over the past century. From the novel *Shane* written in the 1920's to *Fight Club*, written in the 1990's, the rebellious individual is well represented. Also, from Abraham Lincoln to John Lennon, individuals have been a significant part of American society. The sociological text *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1996) presents a clear perspective on the pros and cons of a modern individual. This text is aided by the events of September 11th.

Webster's dictionary defines a rebel as "a person who resists authority, control, or tradition." The opposite of rebelling is to conform, which is defined as "to act in accord with the prevailing standards, attitudes, etc., of a group." These definitions display two separate aspects of sociology. A problem faced by many people in society is whether to conform to the standards and traditions placed before them, or to defy such traditions, and rebel against standards. These standards and traditions can be a result of society or personal upbringing.

Before I delve into my life as a rebel, I feel I should define what my view of a rebel

in today's society is. In America today, immoral acts are normal occurrences, and it seems as if there is a lack of overall ethics in society. Simple implied rules, from human rights to not cheating on a significant other, are completely ignored. As a rebel in the twenty-first century, I pride myself on overcoming what most of society naturally gives into. While my life may become easier by doing these things, I feel a moral duty to reject such things. It is a constant battle in which I chose to fight.

As a college student who is preparing for the "real world," I find myself battling with this dilemma. In my lifetime, I formed a set of beliefs that I never questioned, although as I get older, I begin to question these beliefs. I always thought of myself as a "non-conformist" or a rebel. I took pride in being different from what is normal and conventional. However I now find myself asking the following questions: "should I change my belief structure to achieve a goal or to live comfortably?" and "is it worth the problems I face not to conform to conventional customs and values?" This is why I chose the topic of conformity versus rebellion for my paper.

It's been a long time since I realized that my opinions and views on certain things were different from others. I was born and lived all my life on Staten Island in New York City. In the sixth grade, my parents separated from each other, and primarily my mother raised me during my teenage years. I also lived with my brother, who is four-years older than I am. My relationships with both my father and my brother were terrible throughout the years. We rarely talked, and if we did, it usually escalated into a fight. The income status of my household was primarily lower-middle class. I spent all of my schooling before attending SUNY Oneonta in religious Catholic schools. I now believe that all these factors led to my rebellious personality.

Now that I look back on my younger years, I can see that I naturally formed into

a non-conformist. One example of my rebellious personality took place in seventh grade. My teacher in seventh grade was a nun named Sister Kathleen. Leading up to that year, I heard all of the horror stories of Sister Kathleen, and I honestly remember being afraid of her. I basically stayed quiet in my classes out of fear for the sister's reputation. She made many students in my class cry, even the "toughest" of the students. I can't remember the exact incident as it took place, but I do remember one day that Sister Kathleen tried to use me as an example in front of the class. Instead of crying like all the other students, I defended myself. From that point on, I refused to be afraid of Sister Kathleen. Suddenly, she wasn't as scary to the other students any more, as they began to stand up for themselves. Sister Kathleen now became a joke to the class, as she didn't intimidate everyone. While this may seem like an irrelevant experience, it is significant in tracing the history of rebellion in my life. Furthermore, it reminds me of the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1963) by Ken Kessey. In a way, I am like Randle P. McMurphy and Sister Kathleen is similar to Nurse Ratched.

As I became older, my rebellious nature grew into a distinct character trait. I attended an all-boys Catholic high school named Monsignor Farrell High School. I also attribute this school to my rebellious behavior. Such things as having shoes that don't hold a polish or a shirt that was not tucked into your pants would result in forty-five minutes minimum detention after school. Not only were the rules strict, but they were also selectively enforced. Some teachers abused their privilege of giving detention, while others were reasonable. A specific incident of a teacher abusing their privileges was a Catholic Brother who would charge students money to get out of detention. Instead of the money going to the charitable missions, it would go to his financing of a television studio that was being built inside the school. Oddly enough, my time spent in

this Catholic high school led to questioning the Catholic religion.

Another aspect of my high school that formed my rebellious personality was the general nature of students that attended the school. Many of the students came from wealthy families and the school was very sports-orientated. On the other hand, I come from a working/middle class family and have very little athletic ability. This initially made me different from the majority of the student body. My personal interests were things such as music, writing, and drawing. These weren't exactly the things the "cool" kids did. I managed to retain my interests and opinions even though they weren't popular. However, I know other people who went to the same high school with the same interests as I, yet changed all of their interests in favor of what was "cool." This example displays the basis of my paper.

One of the larger aspects of my rebellious ways that I have found is my love for rock and roll music. Rock and roll music goes hand in hand with rebellious personalities. In society today, rock music is not as popular as other genres such as hip hop or pop music. Rock music often deals with topics such as individualism and nonconformity. Many songs deal with a reoccurring topic of "us versus them." One example is in a song entitled "Supersonic" by the rock group Oasis. The opening line of the song states "I need to be myself, I can't be no one else." This song was written by the guitarist Noel Gallagher and sung by his brother Liam. Coincidentally, Noel and Liam were raised in a lower-middle class home, with a single mother. This is a trend that I have found with many rock and roll stars. Specifically, John Lennon of The Beatles and Jim Morrison of The Doors are two rock and roll musicians who share a similar background as myself. Jim Morrison had a father who was in the military and rarely ever home, while John Lennon's mother left his father while John was

young. Both lived in middle class homes and were also raised primarily by their mothers.

Another aspect of my rebellious ways, which also has gotten me into some trouble, is that I speak my mind without holding back. This has especially led to trouble in the jobs that I worked over the years. I worked as a cashier in a supermarket for eighteen months, a stock boy in a pharmacy for four months, and as maintenance at a personal swim club. In all three of these jobs I got myself into trouble when a situation arose where I would be expected to accept the verbal abuse of a customer or member. My natural tendency is to stand up for myself, and this is what I did. While most would accept the abuse in favor of saving their job, I would rather risk my job defending myself than go on working a job in which I was looked down on. This personality trait could be seen as rebellious, honorable, or stubborn. In writing this paper, I hope to analyze aspects of myself such as this and come to a conclusion about which is the right thing to do.

I plan on relating my experiences on rebellion and conformity to different works of literature, the readings assigned in class, and to the musician and artist John Lennon. *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kessey are two works of literature that deal with conformity and rebellion in relation to the individual as well as society. However, these novels are works of fiction as opposed to John Lennon. John Lennon is a real example for those who live their lives not conforming to society. I hope to use these examples, with the help of the readings in class, to examine both the positive and negative aspects of conforming or rebelling.

The novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk displays the effects of today's society on a white single male in his twenties. The plot of *Fight Club* revolves around this young man, and how he handles society. He is an

insomniac who works a meaningless job, and is just overall miserable. He begins to attend support groups for diseases, such as testicular cancer, in an attempt to make himself feel better. Although a woman named Marla begins to do the same thing, and this ruins them for him, he eventually meets a man named Tyler Durden. Durden is an anarchist and the epitome of someone who doesn't conform to society. He awakens the narrator to the fact that he doesn't have to be the way he is, and that it is possible to change. They eventually start an underground society called "fight club," in which middle-class men fight each other until they cannot continue. This shows the lengths the men will go to add something interesting to their lives. These "fight clubs" soon lead to what Durden calls "Project Mayhem." The goal of Project Mayhem, as Tyler puts it, is:

Imagine stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life, and you'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower... That was the goal of Project Mayhem, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization (Palahniuk 125).

This displays what is a viable alternative to society for some people, the complete destruction of civilization as we know it. Tyler plans to achieve this goal by destroying all the buildings that contain records of credit card accounts.

Tyler and the narrator eventually begin to disagree with each other, as the narrator realizes that Tyler's goal is insane—though it is revealed that Tyler and the narrator are the same person, as the narrator suffers from multiple-personality disorder. In a way, this displays today's society and the

effect it has on certain people. While going through the motions of school and then an office job may be suitable for some, it is not for everyone. If someone is not meant for that kind of life-style, it could have disastrous effects on their mind. At the end of the novel, the narrator and Tyler have their last fight, displaying the inner struggle of the narrator. The buildings don't explode because the explosives were mixed improperly, and the narrator shoots himself in the face in a last attempt to kill Tyler. The last chapter of the book contains the narrator in a mental institute, which he refers to as "heaven." This is a fitting end to the novel, as a life of confusion caused by society led to a mentally-ill man being institutionalized, as he is not fit for the society that made him what he is.

The novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey deals with a man named Randle P. McMurphy, who had himself committed to a mental hospital in order to escape work detail while in prison. While in the hospital, McMurphy struggles with Nurse Ratched, the head of the ward. He also forms a sort of bond with the inmates, especially the Chief, who is a paranoid schizophrenic Indian that is huge in physical stature and pretending to be a deaf/mute. The main conflict of the novel is McMurphy battling with the tyranny of the Nurse Ratched. She turns the patients against each other, and hires a staff that accommodates her view of how the ward should be. For example, she hires a morphine addict for a doctor and three violent hostile orderlies who maintain the patients through brute force. The turning point of the novel is when McMurphy finds out that he can only be released from the hospital when Nurse Ratched deems him fit to leave. This brings up a personal conflict in McMurphy. Should he conform to the evil nurse so he can be released, and in the process let down all of his fellow patients? Or should he continue his struggle with the nurse, and possibly risk death? In the end,

McMurphy decides that he should continue the struggle against Nurse Ratched, and he receives a lobotomy, turning him into a brainless zombie. By this time, most of the inmates checked out of the hospital, as they committed themselves. The Chief, who did not say a word until McMurphy bonded with him, is horrified at what was done to McMurphy. The Chief proceeds to "mercy-kill" McMurphy and then escape from the hospital.

Is the ending of the novel a victory for Ratched or McMurphy? On one hand, McMurphy is rendered brainless and eventually dies. This would appear to be a victory for Ratched. However, almost all of the inmates left the hospital, including the "incurable" Chief. McMurphy overpowered the reign of terror Ratched had over the ward. The Chief represents the victory in McMurphy's battle. McMurphy may have failed personally, but he did succeed in liberating the inmates.

Another example is a man who lived his life as someone who didn't conform to society: John Lennon. John is most famous for being a singer, songwriter, and guitar player for the legendary rock band The Beatles. His career spanned from 1962 to 1980, during which he consistently released albums, first as a Beatle, and then as a solo musician. However John Lennon did a lot more than make music. He also wrote poetry, as displayed in his book *In his Own Write*, and was a human rights and peace activist. A mentally ill man named Mark David Chapman murdered him on December 8, 1980.

Above John Lennon and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Fight Club* has had the biggest impact on my life. I discovered it at a time of my life when I was like the narrator. I was young and I was confused, much like the narrator. I felt that I had no place in this world and I never would. Then I discovered *Fight Club*, and like the narrator, Tyler Durden woke me up. The narrator even mentions the bad relationship he had with

his father: "I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything" (Palahniuk 50). Also, he mentions the type of men that show up at the fight clubs: "What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women" (Palahniuk 50). This follows the same example as my connection with rock and roll. While the novel is extreme, for example the brutality of the fight clubs and utter destruction of society, the overall message of not being afraid to rebel against society is a very useful advice. I realized I didn't need to be like everyone else, especially if it meant I would be unhappy.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a very emotional novel for me to read. Upon reading it, I immediately identified with McMurphy and the way he turned the asylum upside-down. The ending is very tragic and it caused an internal dilemma for myself. I looked at what McMurphy did for the other patients and saw myself doing the same. Instead of cooperating with Nurse Ratched, he chose to rebel against her instead of leaving all the patients to what could be called eternal damnation. When McMurphy received his lobotomy, I started to wonder what my actions in life would lead to. It seemed ridiculous to put others ahead of your own interests, especially if the result was death.

As for Lennon, I happened to come across a quote of his one-day in my freshman year of college. He once said: "I always was a rebel... but on the other hand, I wanted to be loved and accepted... and not just be a loudmouth, lunatic, poet, musician. But I cannot be what I am not." I immediately related to the words of John Lennon. Another quote I read was:

I'm not going to change the way I look or the way I feel to conform to anything. I've always been a freak. So I've been a freak all my life and I have to live with that, you know. I'm one of those people.

After reading these and other quotes, I became amazed at how I never read or listened to any of Lennon's work before. I then listened to "Imagine," which is one of John Lennon's most famous songs. It is basically a call for everyone to live in peace together, as Lennon states his personal beliefs of what is causing problems in society.

Imagine there's no heaven,
It's easy if you try,
No hell below us,
Above us only sky,
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do,
Nothing to kill or die for,
No religion too,
Imagine all the people
living life in peace...

Imagine no possessions,
I wonder if you can,
No need for greed or hunger,
A brotherhood of man,
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer,
but I'm not the only one.
I hope some day you'll join us,
And the world will live as one.

This song felt like a gateway to my brain when I first heard it. Never have I felt so strongly about the lyrics of a song. Since then, I have read books and large amounts of information on John Lennon. His views on the world are obviously those of someone who lived his life not conforming to what society said. In the end, he died leaving a loving wife and son, financial success, and a legacy, in which his art is still being discovered today.

Within the three examples I used, there are many similarities. The most distinct similarity is the end of the rebels. McMurphy and Lennon both die, while the narra-

tor ends up in a mental institution. On the positive side, the lasting effect of the rebels lives on past their demises. John Lennon is a legend in music and will never be forgotten. In *Fight Club*, while the narrator is in the mental hospital, employees of the hospital come to him and say things like “We miss you Mr. Durden” (Palahniuk 208). As for McMurphy, he changed the lives of men who would’ve never changed if not for McMurphy.

These three examples display rebellion against society in one form or another. They all aided my decision to rebel against what is considered normal because I felt I needed to. By not conforming to society, I always felt I was like a chosen one who knew things that others did not—almost like rebelling was a duty as opposed to a choice that I made. It was as if I needed to carry out the legacy of John Lennon, or to bring the characters of Randle McMurphy or Tyler Durden to life. Society oppresses people like me, and therefore it is my job to rebel and be different. The text *Habits of the Heart* puts it best in stating that “compromise is ethically fatal” (Bellah et al. 150).

On the other hand, why should I rebel? Just because I have different interests as others doesn’t mean that I have to be completely different. I can conform to what is accepted in society, and still maintain the things that make me an individual. Why must I be the one who defends the inmates as McMurphy did, only to suffer in the end? These questions all lead to one bigger question: is it possible to conform to society, yet still remain an individual? The text *Habits of the Heart* puts it best: “...we find the fear that society may overwhelm the individual and destroy any chance of autonomy unless he stands against it, but also recognition that it is only in relation to society that the individual can fulfill himself and that if the break with society is too radical, life has no meaning at all” (Bellah et al. 144).

Habits of the Heart delves into the ques-

tions I have about individualism. It uses the examples of the cowboy and “hard-nosed detective” seen in fiction as modern day rebels. They all incorporate what is the modern view of a rebel, in which the rebel displays a kind of heroic selfishness. In this selfishness, “one accepts the necessity of remaining alone in order to serve the values of the group. And this obligation to aloneness is an important key to the American moral imagination” (Bellah et al. 146). It goes on to say that “the quest for moral excellence ends in absolute nihilism” (Bellah et al. 146). While I used fictional works and then John Lennon, *Habits of the Heart* also uses Abraham Lincoln as an example of modern individualism. His assassination, much like John Lennon’s, came as a result of the larger whole for which they lived. Similarly, they both died in the end for the simple fact that they believed “all men are created equal.”

The text also brings up the contradictions in modern individualism. The writers of *Habits of the Heart* put it best by stating:

For those oriented primarily to upward mobility, to “success,” major features of American society appear to be “the normal outcome of the operation of individual achievement.” In this conception, individuals unfettered by family or other group affiliation, are given the chance to make the best of themselves, and, though equality of opportunity is essential, inequality of result is natural (Bellah et al. 148-149).

They discuss how modern American “achievement” is based upon financial success and the consumption of goods that result. This leaves modern individuals with no basis to judge their success as an individual. Therefore this creates a further conflict between the conformists and the rebels of society. This leads to what is known as a

bureaucratic individual. This is described “as [when] freedom to make private decisions is bought at the cost of turning over most public decisions to bureaucratic managers and experts” (Bellah et al. 150). Furthermore, the text sums up individualism as a need for compromise. In displaying the bureaucratic individual and the goals of a “modern individual” or rebel, it puts being a nonconformist into a separate context.

In *Historical Capitalism, with Capitalist Civilization* by Immanuel Wallerstein (1999), the historical emergence of capitalist society is described. Wallerstein characterizes the capitalist society as “a system that has pitted all accumulators of capital against one another” (Wallerstein 62). Wallerstein explains that there is a constant battle between social classes, as well as within social classes. The capitalist system is contradictory. This contradictions lead to what Wallerstein calls “antisystemic movements” (Wallerstein 65), which often partake in uprisings or rebellions against the status quo. The basis for some antisystemic movements is “liberty, equality, and fraternity... with the ideology of enlightenment” (Wallerstein 67). Enlightenment is defined as “to [become] free from ignorance and prejudice.” Philosopher Immanuel Kant defines enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.” In his essay “What is Enlightenment?” Kant describes enlightenment as freedom, and makes such claims as people are not enlightened for there is no reason to use their brain. Kant states, “...laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of men, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance, nevertheless gladly remain immature for life.”

While Kant and Wallerstein seem to reinforce my views on rebellion, *Habits of the Heart* does add a new outlook. I feel as if capitalism has caused me to rebel, and I am enlightened, but I also agree with *Habits of the Heart* in that I must find a medium. As I

examine my life up until the present, I realize while I may have succeeded in the areas of rebelling, I have failed in other areas of life. Although I am young, these failures are not irrevocable. For example, my personal life has not been very successful. While a conformist may focus on getting a girlfriend or a steady job, a rebel sees fit to focus on personal achievement in an effort for the common good. The vision of a nihilistic end seems frightening to me. I knew there had to be some sort of medium that could prevent my end as being the same as McMurphy’s or the narrator’s, and now I am coming to a realization. While I am sure I would not regret my life as a rebel, I am feeling unfulfilled as I type this paper. My view of John Lennon as a role model has also been reaffirmed. He displays a rebel who succeeded in finding the medium between rebel and conformist. He lived his life as a rebel, yet he had a happy family and success in the end. Even his death, while tragic, is a romantic view of a rebel’s life. In the end, if you asked John Lennon if he was happy with his life, I think it is a safe assumption that he would say he was.

I feel the need to include the events of September 11 in this paper, as I’m sure that a large amount of Americans had their whole life perspectives changed that day. While I did not lose anyone in the tragedy, both my father and brother were near the incident. My father was on the top floor of the next tallest building in the downtown area, which is three blocks away from the World Trade Center. My brother normally works in the World Financial Building, which is across the street from the Trade Center. As I stated above, my relationships with my father and brother have not always been a loving relationship. Also, my uncle is a New York City Fire-fighter, and I later found out his engine company was in the Trade Center when it collapsed. He survived, but most of his men were lost. I spent most of the morning in shock, not being able to call anyone due to the downed

phone lines on Staten Island. I talked to my father around 5 p.m., and for the first time in my life I heard him speak with a shaken voice. He witnessed the second plane hit and the mayhem that ensued in Manhattan afterwards.

I came to the realization that I had my father built up as a machine, who was almost an enemy of mine. That day I realized that he was human, as were my brother, and myself. I felt as if I focused my whole life on rebelling, and on that day I learned that whether I conform to society or not, I owe something to the society which I live in. In *Habits of the Heart*, it is stated that “we need one another as much as we need to stand alone” (Bellah et al. 151). This statement has a profound relevance to what it means to be a rebel. While being an individual is important, a certain duty is owed to society as a whole. Tyler Durden, in the film version of *Fight Club* says, “Our generation has had no Great Depression, no Great War. Our war is a spiritual war. Our depression is our lives.” Well this was true until September 11th, and now I think everyone, whether rebel or conformist, needs to see the world in new light.

I have lived my whole life not conforming to society and rebelling against the norm. From my battles against Sister Kathleen, to my years as a college student, I took pride in being different. As literary characters such as Randal McMurphy and Tyler Durden display, rebelling may be fulfilling for one, but it does not come without payment. The same could be said for John Lennon and Abraham Lincoln. All are representative of the modern individual, the cowboy or the detective—that while they seem like a failure to most, they are successful in attaining their goals. But a dilemma also arises through their success. The end of their lives leaves something unfulfilling while providing examples of moral decency; they die without succeeding in what a conformist aims for. John Lennon did, however. He succeeded in what both

rebels and conformists see as success.

While I feel I am currently succeeding in rebelling, I now see the negative aspects of rebellion. McMurphy and the narrator are examples of the negative aspects of non-conformity, although the circumstances they faced left little room for success in a conformist’s view. Luckily, I am not in either of their positions as I am young with many more opportunities. I am not in a mental institution, nor do I plan on being committed to one. I may have failed in relationships with my family, significant others, and occupations up until this point, but I can still make the most of any opportunity that comes my way. One example is that during the writing of this paper, I was promoted to Program Director within the school radio station, which is the second highest position. I will make the most of this opportunity, and also any other opportunity that comes my way.

This paper has aided my outlook on life, and has helped me answer questions that confused me. They may say I’m a dreamer, and I am positive that I am not the only one.

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