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KESEY'S ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

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ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

NOTES

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Life and Background
Introduction
Critical Commentaries
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by
Thomas R. Holland, Ph.D.

editor
Gary Carey, M.A.
University of Colorado

consulting editor
James L. Roberts, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Nebraska

INCORPORATED
LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 68501

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LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Ken Kesey was born in La Junta, Colorado, in 1935. During his childhood, his family migrated to Oregon, which is the setting of both of his published novels. He was married in 1956, while a student at the University of Oregon, and he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1957. His interest in writing led him to the creative writing program at Stanford University. During the period at Stanford, he volunteered for an experimental program at a local Veterans' Administration Hospital to test the effects of newly discovered drugs. Here he discovered LSD and its mind-altering properties. He believed that LSD might be a new tool for going beyond rational consciousness to an entirely new mode of perception, and his interest in states of altered consciousness led him to take a night job in a mental hospital. Here he began to write the first draft of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; several of the characters in the novel are based upon patients in the hospital. He held long conversations with patients, frequently when he was under the influence of drugs himself, in order to gain insight into their particular view of the world. And in the interest of accuracy in the novel, he even persuaded a friend to give him a shock treatment so that he could describe its effects. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is largely a product of Kesey's interest in drugs and insanity, and its effectiveness is, in large part, due to the success with which he has communicated the state of consciousness which he describes as being totally "without preconceptions," particularly in the character of Chief Bromden, the narrator of the book. His second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, is much more conventional, but largely unsuccessful; even its author considers it a disappointment.

With the success of his first novel, Kesey bought a farm outside La Honda, California, where he and his friends began increasingly public experimentations with LSD. He found

himself the center of the growing drug cult of the sixties, and he seriously considered drugs a means of altering the world for the better. But with the growing public outcry against drugs, and especially against LSD, Kesey's notoriety led him to trouble, and he fled to Mexico to avoid prosecution. (For a detailed "insider's" account of Kesey's involvement with drugs, the reader is referred to Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.*) After his return to the United States and a short stint of public notoriety, he was sent to jail. He has since been released and now lives quietly with his wife and four children on his family's farm in Oregon. He has recently published a collection of shorter writings, *Ken Kesey's Garage Sale*, and is currently working on another novel.

INTRODUCTION

The setting of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a mental hospital in Oregon, and the characters, with a few minor exceptions, are all either inmates or employees of this institution. Kesey, following satiric convention, uses the madhouse as a microcosm of American society, a small model of society in which the internal policies reflect the order of the external world.

Kesey gives the reader an insider's view of the hospital by choosing as his narrator one of the patients. The world which this narrator describes is one in which the borders of sanity and insanity are unclear; in fact, he frequently makes it seem that the patients, for all their eccentricities, are really more sane than the authorities who control their lives.

The central figure of the novel is Randle P. McMurphy, a con man who has had himself committed to the hospital in order to escape work at the prison farm, where he was serving a six-month sentence. The story begins with McMurphy's admission to the hospital and ends with his "mercy killing" at the hands of the narrator, Chief Bromden.

In some respects, Bromden is the protagonist of the novel. He begins as a paranoid-schizophrenic, posing as a deaf-mute. He has been on the ward for some fifteen years and knows the workings of the hospital better than any of the other patients. He is drawn to McMurphy, as are all the inmates, and during the course of the novel, the Chief learns from McMurphy who he is, and how to be himself. In effect, he has been "dead" for years and is being brought back to life. His escape at the end of the book is his final resurrection and symbolizes McMurphy's final victory over Nurse Ratched, the "Big Nurse" who is in charge of the ward.

The central conflict of the novel, McMurphy's struggle against the Big Nurse, rapidly takes on overtones of a symbolic battle between the forces of Good and Evil—freedom and individualism, represented by McMurphy, against social authority, conformity and repression, represented by Nurse Ratched. The polarization of these extremes is complete: there are no grey areas, no compromises. Nor does all the action take place at a purely literal level: the Chief's dreams, visions, memories, and fantasies serve to give a heavily symbolic overtone to the story, investing it with elements of myth. To him, the Big Nurse and McMurphy are giants, engaged in a powerful struggle for control over the minds of the patients (though, ironically, he is physically much larger than either McMurphy or the Big Nurse). In effect, the Chief is not so much telling a story as he is creating a myth. And Kesey occasionally plays ironic games with this process of mythmaking. For example, he uses a complex of associations with Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*, another highly symbolic novel which pits good against evil, structure against nature. The only overt reference to the novel is when McMurphy appears on the ward wearing black underwear with pictures of white whales on it. The underwear was a gift from a female literature major at Berkeley: "She said I was a symbol." McMurphy's joke is mildly obscene and intended lightly. But it emphasizes the serious associations with *Moby-Dick*, which Kesey is trying to underscore. With her white uniform and immense size, the Big Nurse resembles Moby Dick, the white whale; like him, she is a terrifying force beyond human control, and she also shares the maniacal sense of guilt which inflicts the whale's opponent, Captain Ahab. But Kesey's myth is much simpler than Melville's multi-layered allegory; here, the lines of good and evil are clearly drawn. (Another token of Kesey's debt to Melville is the character Billy Bibbit, the stuttering innocent whose name and general character were taken from Melville's story "Billy Budd.")

At the beginning of the novel, McMurphy is clearly a self-centered, if attractive, figure. He has had himself diagnosed as psychotic in order to escape the work farm, and once on the

ward, he sets out to organize things the way he wants them. He draws the inmates into gambling games, which he inevitably wins, and he tries to make things as comfortable and profitable for himself as possible. But he meets immediate resistance from Nurse Ratched. She runs a tightly organized ward, and troublemakers are strictly dealt with. (The Chief recalls the example of the last such troublemaker, Max Taber, as an example. His attempts to reorganize the ward resulted in his receiving Electro-Shock Treatments. He was ultimately "cured," with a machine installed in his brain, and released from the hospital.)

By the end of the first chapter, McMurphy is clearly challenging the authority of the Big Nurse. He wins a major confrontation over the privilege of watching the World Series on television when he persuades a majority of the patients on the ward to agree with him. The Nurse attempts to demonstrate her authority by cutting off the power to the television set, but the other inmates gather around McMurphy in front of the blank screen in a state of open rebellion.

But before McMurphy's troublemaking becomes serious, he makes an important discovery. Because he was involuntarily committed, he cannot leave the hospital until the staff —primarily the Big Nurse—consider him cured. He has entered into a power struggle in which he holds no real power. Upon learning this, McMurphy begins to conform, but he finds that he has become responsible for the rights of the other patients on the ward. They have become dependent upon him for leadership, and he is no longer able to act only for himself. This becomes clear to him when Cheswick, who had been his main ally among the inmates, drowns himself in despair, and when he learns that the other Acute patients have committed themselves, because *they* consider themselves unfit to live outside the institution. From this point on, McMurphy begins to act in their behalf, trying to give them the freedom he has, to teach them to be themselves.

McMurphy begins by smashing his hand through the glass window of the nurses' station, pretending to be after a

pack of cigarettes. Soon the other inmates are joining him in overt acts of rebellion. The Big Nurse finds herself at a disadvantage, but she simply bides her time, waiting for McMurphy to make a mistake.

McMurphy takes advantage of the Big Nurse's passiveness to organize a fishing trip for the inmates, in the company of a prostitute from Portland. The trip is the high point of McMurphy's influence. Outside the hospital and on their own on the open sea, the inmates learn to act for themselves and regain their self-respect. The "rabbits," as Harding described the patients early in the book, are rapidly becoming men.

The Big Nurse realizes that her authority is in serious danger, and after the fishing trip she tries to drive a wedge between McMurphy and his followers. The stratagem she chooses is to emphasize McMurphy's larcenous nature. He has made a profit on the fishing trip by charging each man more than his share, and he has been continually winning from the men in his gambling games since he came on the ward. There is no denying these charges, but Harding defends McMurphy, pointing out that he is, after all, only human and interested in his own welfare. Unfortunately, McMurphy chooses that moment to make a serious mistake. He has undertaken a program of "blowing up" the Chief to his full size—reassuring him of his strength and individuality. The Chief has responded and is now able to lift the bulky control panel on the ward. McMurphy has previously tried to lift the panel on a bet and failed, but now he bets the other patients that the Chief can lift it. The patients, thinking they know the Chief, bet against him and lose. This seems to confirm what the Nurse has been charging against McMurphy, and even Chief Bromden feels that he has been used to con the other patients.

McMurphy is now cornered. The strain of keeping the men on his side, of restoring their self-esteem, has already worn him down. Now he is forced to act again to regain their confidence. The occasion comes later that same day, when one of the orderlies tries to force a reluctant patient, who is

terrified of dirt, to have an enema. McMurphy defends George, and the Chief, realizing what McMurphy must do, sides with him. The two win the fight, but are sent to the Disturbed ward to await judgment. There, the Big Nurse confronts them and tries to force an apology. McMurphy refuses and the two are sent to Electro-Shock Therapy.

The Chief is returned to the ward before McMurphy and finds that he has become a legend. He has not spoken to anyone except McMurphy in years, but now he tells the men about McMurphy. No one is surprised to hear him speak. He is accepted and understood. His cure is nearing completion.

When McMurphy returns to the ward, he puts on a good show of being his old self, but the others can see that he is not. The Chief sees a tired resignation in his face, almost desperate. He is waiting to die. And Harding, talking with McMurphy about the pressures of society which have driven the others crazy, tells him that he, too, is now crazy. The strain of his responsibility has been too much for him, and as the patients in his charge grew well, McMurphy became insane in their place. He is mentally unable to go on. When the other inmates arrange his escape, he does not go; he is no longer able to face the outside world.

The escape is arranged for the night of the "party" thrown for Billy Bibbit, who is to lose his virginity to the prostitute Candy Starr, with whom he has fallen in love on the fishing trip. She and another whore sneak onto the ward with bottles of wine and vodka; narcotic cough syrup is stolen from the nurses' station, and the old black watchman, Mr. Turkle, provides a supply of marijuana. Harding realizes the significance of the party; it is the inmates' last fling. There will be no forgiveness for them after this. It is as if McMurphy had chosen to push them to the point of decision. Yet he is unable to escape at the end of the party and is caught in the morning, along with the other inmates.

The Big Nurse places the blame for the disorder on her ward upon McMurphy. At first, the inmates patiently united

front against her, but she knows their weaknesses. She confronts Billy Bibbit with what his mother will think about what he has done, and he breaks down. While he is left alone in the office, he takes a razor and cuts his throat. The Nurse has aroused all his deep, sensitive shame, and he is unable to live with it.

In one last desperate act, McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched, tearing open her uniform and attempting to strangle her. He does not kill her, but the exposure of her enormous breasts has exposed her sexuality and effectively destroyed her power over the inmates. They are now free and most of them leave the ward before McMurphy is returned.

When McMurphy is brought back to the ward, he has been lobotomized and is now merely a vegetable. The Chief recognizes that the Nurse wants to use him as a symbol of her continuing authority and he cannot permit this. That night, when he thinks no one is watching, he smothers McMurphy. It is the only way that his victory can be preserved.

Scanlon, who has witnessed the murder, helps Chief Bromden escape from the ward and promises to testify to having seen McMurphy alive after the Chief escaped. The hospital has no policy of attempting to recapture runaways, so it is assumed that the Chief will have no difficulty escaping. He lifts the control panel, as McMurphy taught him, and throws it through the barred window. Then he crawls out into the night and sets off southward, following the path of the flock of wild geese he saw through the window, earlier in the novel.

The Chief's freedom is an emblem of McMurphy's victory. He has "been away a long time," both literally and symbolically. For he is an Indian, the "noble savage," the "vanishing American" who is about to reappear. McMurphy's rejection of the forms of "civilized" behavior has given Bromden a new life. And though McMurphy has failed personally (and, symbolically, his hat is too small for the Chief when he

tries it on at the end of the novel), he has succeeded in "resurrecting" the Chief and the other inmates.

Yet there are hints in the novel that the conclusion cannot be termed a total victory for McMurphy's followers. One such hint is the discrepancy in the narration at the beginning of the first part, which may be read to imply that the Chief has been recaptured and brought back to the ward, where his paranoia has returned. Consider, too, the fact that the Chief sets off "in the direction I remembered seeing the dog go, toward the highway"; this links his fate with that of the dog, which was headed toward certain destruction. Yet such inconsistencies and ambiguities must be considered as undercurrents, for the novel closes in an optimistic tone, and the reader is left with the clear impression that, despite the dangers, the Chief will escape and will succeed in his new life.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Randle P. McMurphy

A manual laborer, gambler and con man, who is admitted to the ward from Pendleton Prison Farm, diagnosed as a psychotic. Really not insane, he transforms the ward by teaching the other inmates how to be free. Finally lobotomized after attacking Nurse Ratched, he is killed in his sleep by Chief Bromden.

Nurse Ratched

The "Big Nurse," a representative of the "Combine," the Chief's name for the forces of repressive organization in society. She is a former Army nurse, in her fifties—an absolute tyrant. She maintains order by pitting the inmates against one another; McMurphy compares her techniques with the "brainwashing" used by the Communists during the Korean conflict.

Chief Bromden

A huge paranoid-schizophrenic Indian, the narrator of the novel. He is a Chronic, diagnosed as incurable, and has been on the ward since the end of World War II. He imagines himself to be small and weak and pretends to be a deaf-mute in order to protect himself. The Chief is gradually rehabilitated by McMurphy and emerges as the real protagonist of the book at the end. He kills McMurphy after the Big Nurse has had him lobotomized, and escapes from the hospital.

Dale Harding

An effeminate man, psychologically "castrated" by his wife, who has committed himself to the hospital.

Billy Bibbit

A frightened thirty-one-year-old man with the mind of an adolescent. He is dominated by his mother, who is a friend of Nurse Ratched.

Max Taber

A former patient who caused Nurse Ratched trouble. He was dismissed after being made docile by Electro-Shock Therapy.

Scanlon

A patient with destructive fantasies. The last of McMurphy's followers left on the ward, he assists in the Chief's escape after McMurphy's death.

Cheswick

McMurphy's most overt follower in his early days on the ward. After McMurphy begins to yield to authority, Cheswick drowns himself.

Martini

Exists in a world of delusions; his visions are more real to him than reality.

Seefeld and Frederickson

Epileptics. Seefeld refuses to take his medicine; Frederickson takes double dosages.

Big George (Rub-A-Dub)

A former seaman with a morbid fear of dirt. He is captain of the boat on the fishing trip, and his fear of an enema ignites the fight between McMurphy and the Chief and the black boys.

The Lifeguard

A former football player who has been committed to the hospital. He explains to McMurphy that commitment means that McMurphy can be released only when the Big Nurse agrees.

Tadem and Gregory

Two Acutes who join the fishing excursion.

Pete Bancini

A patient who, like McMurphy, was "missed" by the Combine, but suffered permanent brain damage at birth. He tells the other patients that he was "born dead."

Colonel Matterson

A "wheeler," confined permanently to a wheelchair. He raves continually in disconnected metaphors.

Ellis

Entered the hospital as an Acute, but was mistakenly given too much Electro-Shock Therapy. Stands permanently "crucified" against the wall.

Ruckly

Another mistake, an Acute made Chronic by over-use of EST.

Old Rawler

A noisy patient in Disturbed; castrates himself and bleeds to death.