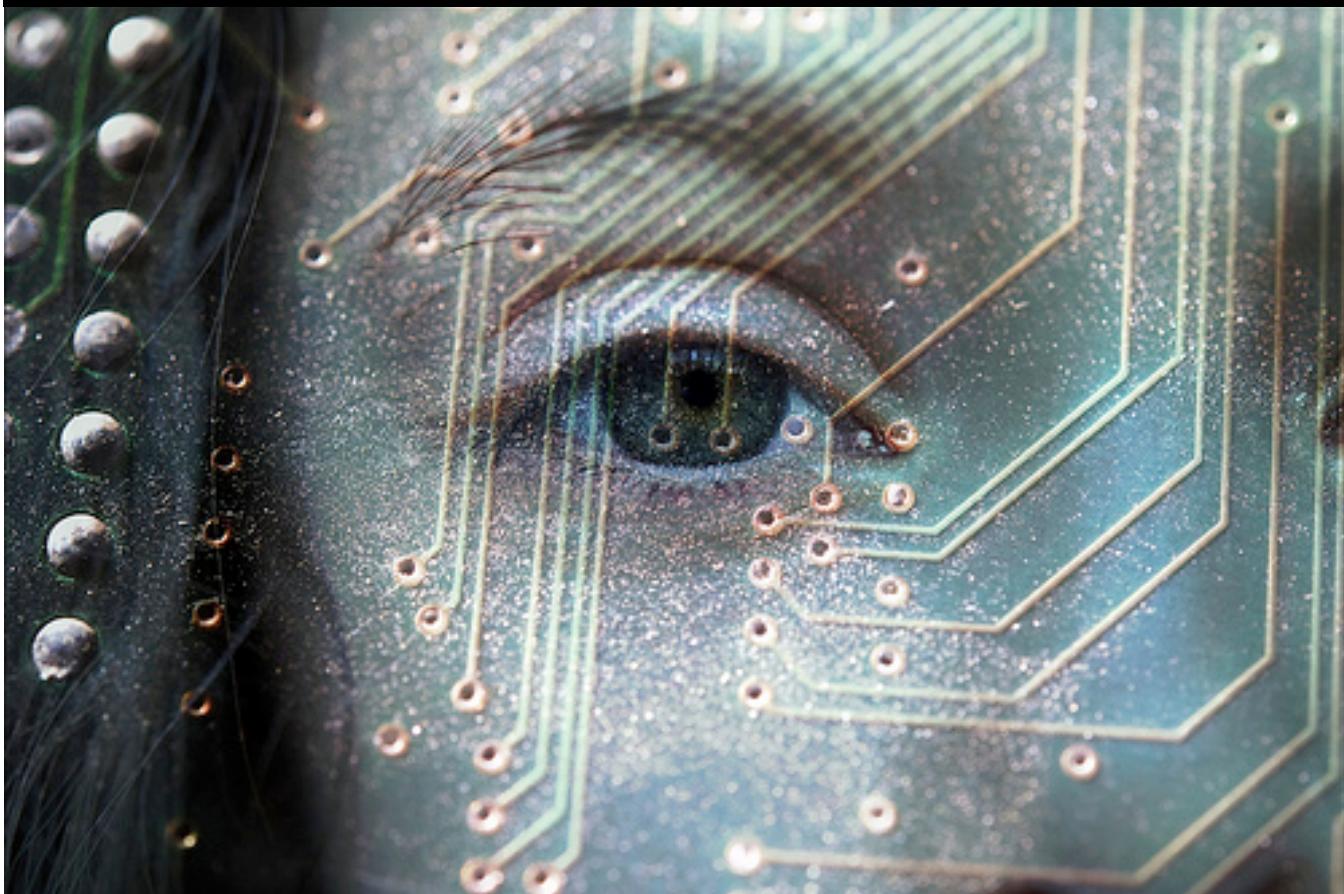


THE INSTITUTION



Advanced English Area of Study

In the Area of Study, students explore and examine relationships between language and text, and interrelationships among texts. They examine closely the individual qualities of texts while considering the texts' relationships to the wider context of the Area of Study. They synthesize ideas to clarify meaning and develop new meanings. They take into account whether aspects such as context, purpose and register, text structures, stylistic features, grammatical features and vocabulary are appropriate to the particular text.

THE
INSTITUTION



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Area of Study Introduction

This Area of Study requires students to explore the ways in which relationships between the individual and various manifestations of institutional thinking are considered and expressed in and through texts.

In their responses and compositions students examine, question and reflect on:

- their observation and understanding of the portrayed events, people, ideas and societies that they encounter in and through the prescribed texts and texts of their own choosing related to the Area of Study ('The Institution')
- the assumptions underlying representations of institutional thinking
- the ways in which they perceive the world through texts and speculate about those perceptions
- the ways they consider and express their own experiences of institutions.

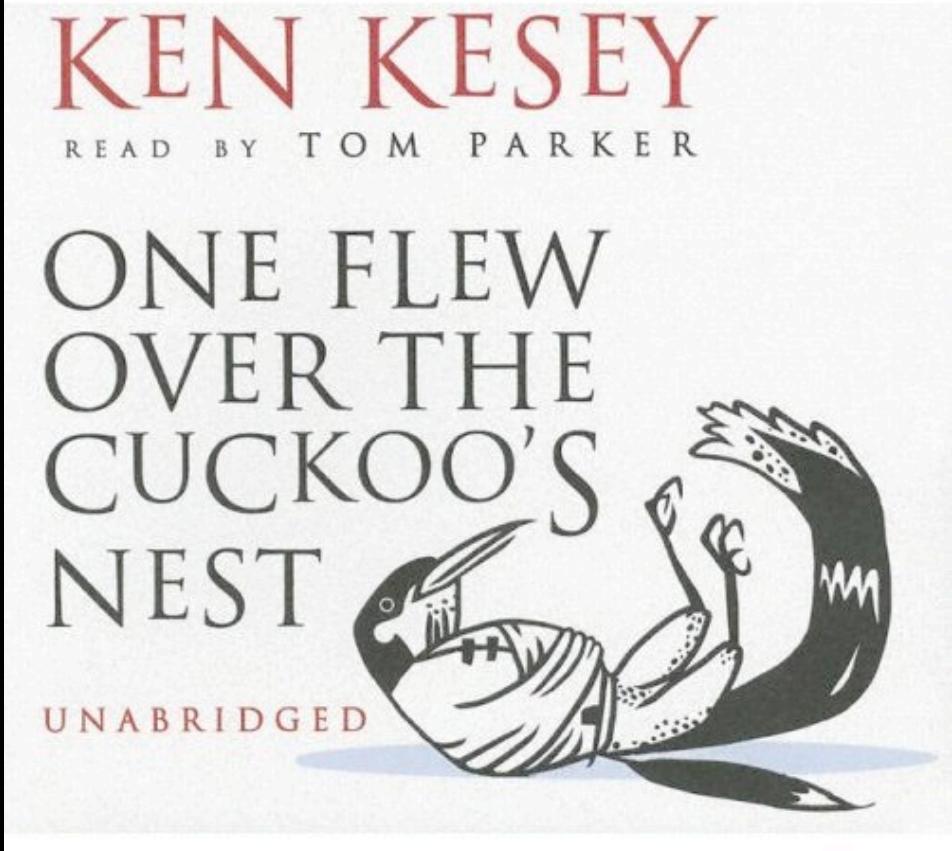
“The Institution” Underlying Assumptions

Students examine, question, reflect and speculate on the assumptions underlying various representations of the concept of the institution.

- That institutions are designed to regulate and, in some cases, control the natural impulses of human beings
- That institutions regulate and control according to a mandate, be it democratic or autocratic
- That individuals are obliged through the prevailing “social contract” to recognize and respect this mandate
- That individuals consider how to reconcile their own impulse with social convention.



Ken Kesey 1962



Core Text Introduction

Kesey's novel depicts a mental asylum in which repeated attempts to diagnose the patients as insane are conceived as part of a larger scheme to produce pliant, docile subjects across the United States. A key text for the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s, it addresses the relationship between sanity and madness, conformity and rebellion. The novel remains finely balanced throughout. It is never clear, for example, whether the so-called 'Combine' is, in actuality, a boundless authority designed to ensure social control across the whole population, or a projection of the narrator Chief Bromden's paranoid imagination. Also, the question of whether insanity, to quote R. D. Laing, "might very well be a state of health in a mad world", or at least an appropriate form of social rebellion, is raised but never quite answered.

Into the sterile, hermetically sealed world of the asylum wanders Randall P. McMurphy, a modern day "cowboy" with a "sideshow swagger" who disrupts the ward's smooth running and challenges the near-total authority of the steely Nurse Ratched. Insofar as McMurphy's acts of rebellion assume mostly self-interested forms, the novel's efforts at political mobilisation fall short, and there



remains something uneasy about its racial and gender politics. It takes McMurphy to save the 'Indian' Bromden and, in the era of civil rights and feminism, the white male patients are painted as 'victims of a matriarchy', ably supported by a cabal of black orderlies. But Kesey's impressive attempts to come to grips with the amorphous nature of modern power – a power not necessarily tied to leaders or even institutions – make this a prescient, foreboding work. If McMurphy's fate is what awaits those who push too hard against the system, then Bromden's sanity depends upon not turning a blind eye to injustice and exploitation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our study of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and other related texts will revolve around the following ideas:

- institutional hierarchy
- surveillance and the suppression of the human impulse
- activity and passivity
- rebellion as an expression of self-interest or altruism
- paranoia and loss of self
- demystification and the reclaiming of identity

The above framework will provide the basis of our study, allowing opportunities to examine closely various portrayals of institutions and personal responses to them in a range of contexts. Specifically, students must remain conscious of the context of the studied texts, their conceptual approach and, of course, the technical features of these texts.

Further, students will need to investigate other (related) texts that explore institutional thinking and responses to it. These texts will be required for upcoming extended responses.



THE AUTHOR

Ken Kesey



[Wikipedia Link: Biography](#)

Study Guide Questions

1. Who is the narrator of this novel? What do we learn about him from the first three pages of the novel?
2. How does the Chief describe the character, 'Big Nurse'?
3. What is the Combine?
4. After reading until the break on page 8, analyse the introduction. What is the picture that Kesey has painted of the characters and setting?
5. Explain what the Chief means on Page 8, when he says, "But it's the truth even if it didn't happen.?"
6. The character McMurphy is introduced on pages 10 – 11. What is Chief's opinion of McMurphy.
7. Read pages 19 –24. How does the issue of 'the individual and authority' emerge in this section?
8. What is the 'high voltage wavelength of hate'? Page 28.
9. Read pages 29 to 30. How does the Chief describe the morning's activities on the ward? What is the tone of this passage?
10. What is the qualification made by the work-farm doctor of McMurphy on page 44?
11. What is worrying McMurphy in the last paragraph of page 45?
12. Explain the theory of 'Therapeutic Community' and how is it misused by the Big Nurse. Pages 46 - 47
13. Read pages 55 – 71. The passage contains a conflict between the individual and authority. Discuss the arguments from both sides and explain how it is resolved. In your response refer to the arguments that both Harding and McMurphy use to justify their opinions. I
14. Give your opinion of the rabbit metaphor used by Kesey on page 62. Is it effective in describing the ward inmates? Why?
15. Read pages 80 – 85. What does Chief see in his fog? How are his hallucinations symbolic of ward life?
16. Read the dialogue between McMurphy and the Big Nurse from the bottom of page 91 to page 92. Analyse the dialogue. What type of language does each character use within this short piece and how does the issue of 'the individual and authority' emerge.
17. Read page 99. How has gambling become important as an activity within the ward?
18. "But I tried, though,' he says. 'Goddammit, I sure as hell did that much, now, didn't I?' What is McMurphy's point to the other inmates with these comments on page 119?

19. Read pages 134 to 136. explain how McMurphy wins his bet with the other inmates?
20. Read pages 139 – 141. The Chief has taken his first risk in many years. What are the consequences of his actions? Why do you think he has taken this risk?
21. Read pages 142 – 148. Write a diary entry in your learning log by the Big Nurse about the incident of rebellion that has just occurred on the ward. What are Nurse Ratched's thoughts on the incident and her solution to the problem.
22. Read the short chapter on page 168 starting with 'Whatever it was...'. How is this related to McMurphy's discovery that he is a committed patient?
23. Read pages 179 – 182. What is it about this episode that changes McMurphy's attitude to accepting the authority of the Combine and causes him to restart his rebellion on page 186?
24. On page 255 McMurphy says to the Chief, 'Didn't I do what I said I would? Make you man sized again?' How did McMurphy make the Chief 'man sized again'?
25. After the party, why do you think McMurphy doesn't try to escape?
26. At the end of the novel, who wins? Is it McMurphy or the Big Nurse?
27. Explain why McMurphy's overt sexuality is an important part of his rebellion throughout the novel?

Reflection

28. Do you think the character Nurse Ratchet has been treated fairly by the Kesey in being portrayed as the villain in this novel? In your response keep in mind that Nurse Ratchet has been viewed through the first person narrative of the Chief
29. Is McMurphy a 'Christ Figure'? Find evidence from the novel to support our opinion.
30. One of society's standards provides the most pervasive theme in the book: What is sane—and what is insane? Is it right that an institution can determine who is sane and who is insane within a society?



Discussion Questions

PART ONE - pp3-126

1. "I been silent so long now it's gonna roar out of me like floodwaters and you think the guy telling this is ranting and raving my God; you think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But, please. It's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen."

Discuss the effectiveness of Kesey's introduction of his narrator (3-8).

2. "Still, even though I can't see him, I know he's no ordinary Admission. I don't hear him slide scared along the wall, and when they tell him about the shower he don't just submit with a weak little yes, he tells them right back in a loud, brassy voice that he's already plenty damn clean, thank you."

How does Kesey's introduction of the novel's protagonist McMurphy establish a key dynamic in the ward? (10-13)

3. "The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to peckin' at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers. But usually a couple of the flock gets spotted in the fracas, then it's their turn. And a few more gets spots and gets pecked to death, and more and more. Oh, a peckin' party can wipe out the whole flock in a matter of a few hours, buddy, I seen it."

Discuss this metaphor as an illustration of Nurse Ratched's control of the ward (50-57). Further, how does Harding's assertion that "man has but one truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy" (64) offer more specific insight into the nature of Nurse Ratched's authority?



4. How does McMurphy's penchant for gambling inadvertently offer inspiration to the other patients when Nurse Ratched denies him the opportunity to watch the World Series (108-110)?
5. Discuss Kesey's portrayal of the Nurse as McMurphy wins his bet with the other patients at the conclusion of Part I (124-126).

PART TWO - pp.129-172

6. How are Bromden's changing perceptions illustrated by Kesey (141-143)? What might be the cause of this?
7. How is McMurphy's perception of the ward and its inhabitants undermined by Nurse Ratched (146-149; 166-168)? How can McMurphy's

discoveries be linked to his first act of violence at the conclusion of Part II (171-172)?

PART THREE - pp.175-221

8. "Except the sun, on these three strangers, is all of a sudden way the hell brighter than usual and I can see the...seams where they're put together. And, almost, see the apparatus inside them take the words I just said and try to fit the words in here and there, this place and that, and when they find the words don't have any place ready-made where they'll fit, the machinery disposes of the words like they weren't even spoken."

Explain the significance of the Chief's memory of the government agents coming to his family's property when he was a boy (179-184). How is it an important memory at this stage of the novel?

9. "While McMurphy laughs. Rocking farther and farther backward against the cabin top, spreading his laugh out across the water – laughing at the girl, the guys, at George, at me sucking my bleeding thumb, at the captain back at the pier and the bicycle rider and the service-station guys and the five thousand houses and the Big Nurse and all of it. Because he knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy."

How is the fishing trip an important phase of McMurphy's relationship with the other patients (206-215)?

PART FOUR - pp.225-281

10. "The loud talk and laughter swirled around the nurse. She looked from Billy and the girl to the bunch of us behind her. The enamel-and-plastic face was caving in. She shut her eyes and strained to calm her trembling, concentrating. She knew this was it, her back to the wall. When her eyes opened again, they were very small and still."

How does Nurse Ratched's highly



calculated sense of authority reach a stunning climax in her confrontation with Billy Bibbit (267-275)?

11. Explain the significance of McMurphy ripping Nurse Ratched's uniform "all the way down the front" (275) in this sequence.

12. "I watched and tried to figure out what he would have done. I was only sure of one thing: he wouldn't have left something like that sit there in the day room with his name tacked on it for twenty or thirty years so the Big Nurse could use it as an example of what can happen if you buck the system. I was sure of that."

How does Kesey portray his narrator's emergence from "the fog" at the conclusion of the narrative (275-281)?





'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest' Core Ideas and Themes

Anti-Psychiatry

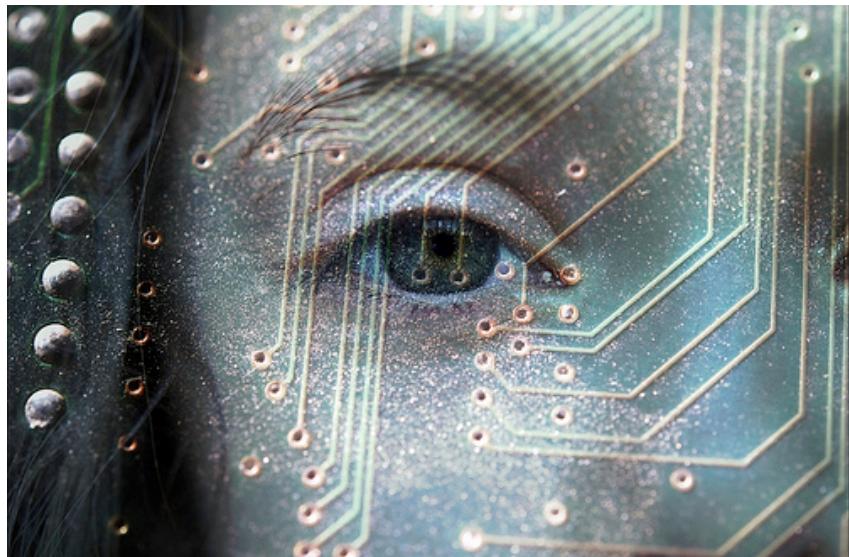
An intellectual movement of the late 1950s and the 1960s which was critical of the theories and therapeutic treatments of conventional psychiatry. It made various criticisms.

- (i) The involuntary incarceration of persons regarded as insane is an infringement of basic human rights.
- (ii) Psychiatry is a form of social control by which social deviance is labelled as a form of mental illness.
- (iii) It is not insanity which creates the need for asylums, but rather asylums that create the need for mad people.
- (iv) Diagnostic categories express not a neutral science but a set of dominant values, and the use of such diagnostic labels stigmatises the mentally ill.
- (v) The therapeutic treatment available to psychiatry, such as electro-shock therapy, is degrading and of uncertain value.

The anti-psychiatry movement proposed a range of alternative forms of approach and treatment; the basic proposal was the closure of existing asylums and psychiatric units in favour of community medicine. This movement was associated with T. Szasz (1971) in the USA, Foucault (1961) in France, and R.D. Laing (1959) in Britain. E. Goffman's criticism of asylums as total institutions had an influence in sociology. Criticism of psychiatry is now less prominent, because there has been an exodus of patients from mental hospitals since the 1960s and there is a greater use of out-patient treatment. This process of de-institutionalisation or decarceration has, in part, been made possible by the improvement in antipsychotic drugs. However, critics of psychiatry would maintain that this change in policy has been produced more by the escalating costs of hospital care.

Machines

The central metaphor of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is that of the machine. The metaphor is introduced early in the novel, through the character of Bromden, and it recurs at regular points throughout. Bromden sees society as a giant machine, which he calls



the Combine, and he sees the same machine at work in the hospital. He describes the Big Nurse in machine-like terms. In the first chapter, as he sees her approaching the black boys, "she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside the way you smell a motor pulling too big a load". When he describes her physical appearance, it is in terms that apply to machines: her gestures are "precise, automatic" and "Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made." But he also comments on her large breasts

and regards them as a "mistake . . . made in manufacturing," which she resents because they are a mark of femininity.

The machine-like Combine tries to make machines out of everything, including humans. Bromden dreams that the hospital workers are killing Blastic, one of the patients referred to as a Vegetable. When they cut him up,

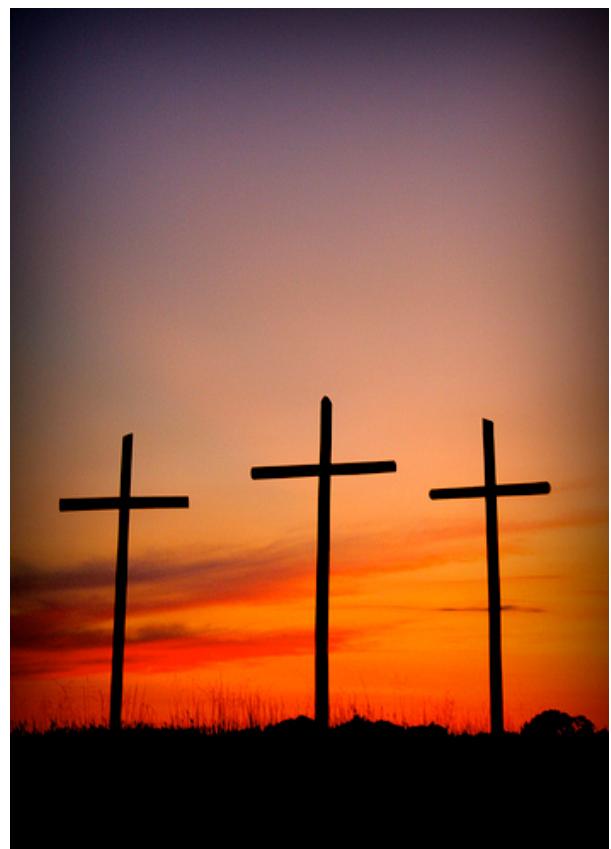
there is nothing human inside him. Instead, Bromden sees "a shower of rust and ashes, and now and again a piece of wire and glass". The Combine has done its work on him. (Significantly, Blastic dies the very night that Bromden dreams of him.)

The turning of people into machines reaches to the level of language and ideas as well. People who have been "processed" by society no longer have any ability to understand anything that doesn't fit what they have been programmed to hear. When Bromden recalls the incident in which the three government agents wanted to buy his father's land, he remembers they were incapable of hearing any of the things he said to them. He describes their thought processes in terms of machines.

Christian Symbolism

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that McMurphy is to be regarded as a Christ-figure. There are foreshadowings of this early in the novel in the patient Ellis, who received EST and is now nailed to the wall with his arms stretched out, as if he were being crucified (this is how Bromden sees him). It is Ellis who says to Billy Bibbit, as the men are about to set out for the fishing trip, to be a "fisher of men", which is what Christ said to the fisherman Peter

when he called Peter to be his disciple. The table which is used for the EST treatments is shaped like a cross, which suggests the crucifixion of Christ. McMurphy takes twelve people with him on the trip, just as Christ had twelve disciples, and he chooses to see out his mission to free the patients from their slavery to the hospital, even at the expense of his own safety.



Rebellion Against Authority and Conformism

The psychiatric ward where the novel takes place can be seen as a microcosm of society. Society is presented as a ruthlessly efficient machine (the Combine) that makes everyone conform to its narrow rules. All individuality is squeezed out of people, and the natural, joyful expressions of life are suppressed. In the hospital ward, the



representative of society is the Big Nurse. She embodies order, efficiency, repression (including sexual repression), slavery and tyranny. She fulfils the need of society to somehow "repair" those who do not fit into its model so they can be sent back to take their places as cogs in the great machine. If they refuse or resist, they are destroyed by invasive, abusive treatments such as electro-shock therapy and brain surgery.

Against the Big Nurse, who serves the will of the collective, is set McMurphy, who embodies spontaneity, instinct, sexuality, individuality, and freedom. This is the central conflict of the novel. McMurphy, who has moved around a lot during his life, taking many jobs, never marrying, and living by his wits, has managed to escape the corroding influence of the Combine. He is ideally suited to get the men in the ward to see what they have lost, and to help them recover it.

McMurphy's efforts to encourage freedom and spontaneity in the men and to defeat the Big Nurse and all she stands for, reaches two grand climaxes in the novel. The first of these is the fishing trip, in which the men rediscover their own power in a natural environment. The second is the Bacchanalian revel at night in the ward, when all the repressive rules of the Combine are flouted in a drunken orgy.

Chief Bromden plays an important role in this theme of repression and freedom. His life story is told in more detail than the others. He was born into an Indian tribe that lived in close touch with nature. He recalls hunting in the

woods and fishing for salmon as a boy. But the Indians' independent way of life was destroyed by the greed of white society, that took their land and used it to install a hydroelectric dam where the best fishing grounds had been. After a technological work force had been trained to manage the new facilities, the men lost all their individuality. They all had to conform to the same standardized model and became in Bromden's view only half alive. The fact that in the hospital the Chief pretends to be deaf and dumb indicates the total suppression of a more natural, individualized way of life. It is fitting therefore that at the end of the novel Bromden escapes, and there are hints that perhaps some of the way of life that he remembers from his boyhood can be recaptured.

Importance of Sexual Freedom

The world portrayed in the hospital ward is one of sexual repression and inhibition. This is exemplified in the Big Nurse as well as in Nurse Pilbow, who is frightened of the patients' sexuality. It is frequently emphasized that the Big Nurse has large breasts, the mark of her femininity, but she tries to conceal them. Everything about her and the ward is sterile, cold, and lifeless, from the Big Nurse's manner down to the white starched uniforms of the staff. The first thing that McMurphy notices about the ward is that the Big Nurse emasculates and weakens the men. He calls her a "ball-cutter" (p. 58), and Harding agrees. In other words, the ward is like a matriarchal society which castrates men. This is graphically symbolized by the death of Rawler, who commits suicide by castrating himself and bleeding to death. In a less literal manner, this is what is happening to all the patients.



In contrast, McMurphy is totally open about sex and enjoys his masculine sexual power. He frequently makes sexual remarks to the Big Nurse. He tells the doctor about the statutory rape charge against him without any shame, claiming that the girl lied about her age and was as much the instigator of the act as he was. When he and the men return from the fishing trip he tells a fond story of how he first had sex when he was less than ten years old, with a 9-year-old girl named Judy. Her dress is still caught up high in the branches of a tree, and all the men see it as they drive past the house. For McMurphy, this is almost a badge of honor. When he tells the Chief that he can restore him to his original size, he tries to encourage the Indian by visualizing women clamoring for his sexual attentions. McMurphy thinks that Billy Bibbit, instead of being cooped up in a psychiatric ward, should really be out pursuing girls, and he clearly believes that Billy can conquer his stutter by having sex with Candy. Finally, when McMurphy attacks the Big Nurse, rips her clothes and exposes her breasts, he defuses her power by showing her sexual identity as a woman. This is part of the reason that her power over the men is broken. The visible sight of her femininity frees them to be more like men.





Randall Patrick McMurphy

An imposing, red-headed Irishman, R.P. McMurphy enters the institution after he is convicted of statutory rape, yet immediately it is suspected that he is a sane man who chose the institution as preferable when compared to the work farm where he would have been sentenced. McMurphy is a boisterous man and a "gambling fool" who looks out primarily for his own self-interest. For Kesey, McMurphy represents ideas of sexuality, freedom and self-determination against Nurse Ratched's oppression.



Nurse Ratched

A middle-aged nurse who controls the institution where McMurphy is sentenced. A stern, controlling woman who behaves with a serene confidence. She is a mechanical and attempts to suppress all human, and in particular all feminine characteristics, but she cannot hide her large breasts. She is manipulative and dictatorial, using any methods to assert her power over the patients. Nurse Ratched represents ideas of sexual repression, authoritarianism and conservatism.



Chief Bromden

A tall, half-Indian patient in the ward, he is the patient who has been in the institution the longest. Although others think that he is deaf and mute, Chief Bromden instead chooses not to speak, originally because others ignored him and then out of fear of Nurse Ratched. Chief Bromden is the narrator of the novel. With the help of McMurphy, he begins to speak once more and reassert himself against Nurse Ratched and her workers.



Billy Bibbit

A thirty-one year old patient in the institution, he nevertheless appears very young, in part because of his persistent stutter. Billy Bibbit is dominated by his mother, who has intimidated him into behaving younger than his years and instilled in him a strong sense of guilt. It is this guilt that causes him to commit suicide when Nurse Ratched finds him with a prostitute and threatens to tell his mother.



Dale Harding

The president of the patients' council and a college graduate, Harding is likely the most educated patient in the institution and serves to explain many of the workings of the ward to McMurphy. Kesey indicates that Harding may be a closeted homosexual; he is certainly dominated by his boisterous wife, who intimidates him with her sexuality and his sexual inadequacy.



Charles Cheswick

One of the patients on the ward, he is one of the first patients to support McMurphy, but is taken to the Disturbed Ward, presumably for shock treatment, when he starts to protest the ward policies. Cheswick later dies in the swimming pool when he gets his fingers caught in the grate, an action that is possibly suicidal.

Literary Devices

As we attempt to discern the overall purpose of Ken Kesey's One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest, we need to recognise the key literary devices used to enhance its impact.

Narrative Voice Central to Kesey's depiction of the novel's psychiatric ward is the ambiguous voice of his narrator. As a narrator, Chief Bromden's perspective is distorted by the heavily medicated fog that feeds his paranoia. Aware of an overriding system of mechanical control, the Chief is stripped of his sense of self. This makes for a rather dubious set of observations that, in turn, cloud the reader's perspective on the various actualities and possibilities of Nurse Ratched's regime.

Of particular interest, however, is the increasing resolution of such ambiguities, as Chief comes to embrace the inspirational figure of McMurphy and his reinvigorating model of rebellious behaviour. As McMurphy creates opportunities for personal expression, a heightened clarity begins to characterise Chief's narrative voice – his perceptions of his current disposition, his turbulent past and the more immediate details of his physical environment sharpening.



Further Imagery and Symbolism

Chief's perceptions of the imposing Nurse Ratched are emphasised through Kesey's imagery of a mechanised psychiatric ward, led by a castrating matriarchal figure. Doll-like in her appearance, the Nurse is described in machine-like terms – the engineer of the hidden machinery that Chief perceives as central to the operation of the ward. The concealment of her large breasts, furthermore, within a heavily starched uniform hints at a repressed sexuality.

Posing a direct threat to the Nurse's systematised world is the swaggering figure of McMurphy, who draws out of the men a heightened sense of their own emotional and sexual impulses. Portrayed as something of a messianic

figure, McMurphy draws ongoing parallels with the journey of Christ. His visits to the cross-shaped shock therapy table and bleeding hands are obvious examples of Christ symbolism, foreshadowing the eventual sacrifice that will ultimately emancipate Chief Bromden.



McMurphy's entry onto the ward is marked by his own self-interest, but this self interest slowly develops into leadership of the emasculated group of 'rabbits' as he calls them. Kesey, through McMurphy, repeatedly uses animal metaphors to describe the acutes because they have ceased to be men. They have allowed themselves to be cowed by the 'wolf', the 'Big Nurse'. McMurphy refers to himself as the "Bull Goose Looney", the dominant goose in the flock of looneys. We also remember that the title of the novel refers to a Cuckoo bird, another animal metaphor for mental illness, and a reference to the children's song chanted by Chief's grandmother"

Three geese in a flock

One flew East

One flew West

And one flew over the cuckoo's nest

Chief Bromden's grandmother sang this song to him when he was young, and they had a game about it. A playful name for a mental asylum is a "cuckoo's nest", since a mentally unstable person can be referred to as "cuckoo". To "fly over a cuckoo's nest" is to go too far, to get yourself in

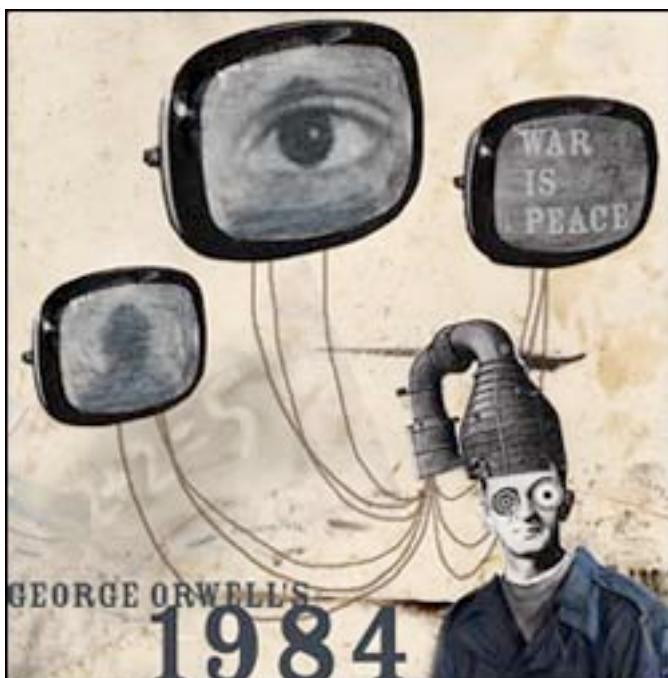
trouble. Though this can refer to the character of McMurphy being too much of a free spirit and eventually angering Nurse Ratched so much that he receives a lobotomy as result; it can also refer to the ending, where two characters died, and Chief Bromden escaped the Asylum or "Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest". It is also known that cuckoos lay their eggs in other birds' nests, and do not have nests of their own. The cuckoo, upon hatching, throws the other birds out of the nest out of instinct.

Language

In contrast to the simplicity of language symptomatic of Chief's mental and physical incarceration, other principal characters are invested with a command of language that reflects their assertiveness. The Nurse's measured, at times contrived dialogue clearly reflects her self-awareness as a figure of authority. Both cool in her observations and suitably fierce in her attempts to effect discipline, the former army nurse exploits the power of language to subjugate. Protagonist McMurphy's unrefined vernacular similarly reveals a heightened sense of self. Revealing him through a series of crude, yet well informed observations and powerfully instinctive outbursts, Kesey's language carefully defines and positions his flawed hero. The conflicting dialects of Kesey's protagonist and antagonist, in their various manifestations, may symbolically represent the inevitable choice that faces Bromden.



Related Text 1

“1984”

1984 is one of Orwell's most powerfully politically charged novels, a beautifully crafted warning against the dangers of a totalitarian society, and one of the most famous novels in the dystopian genre. Winston Smith is a low-ranking member of the ruling party in London whose every move is monitored by telescreens. Everywhere Winston goes, the party's omniscient leader, Big Brother, watches him. The party is trying to eradicate the possibility of political rebellion by eliminating all

words related to it from the language, creating sanitised 'Newspeak'. 'Thoughtcrime' (thinking rebellious thoughts) is illegal. Winston, who works at the Ministry of Truth altering historical records for the party's benefit, is frustrated and oppressed by the prohibitions on free thought, sex and individuality. He illegally purchases a diary to record his thoughts and spends his evenings wandering the poor areas where the 'proles' live, relatively free from monitoring. Winston starts an illicit affair with Julia, a fellow party employee, but they are caught by a party spy, and in Room 101, Winston is forced to confront his worst fear. Giving up his love for Julia in terror, Winston is released, his spirit broken and his acceptance of the party complete.

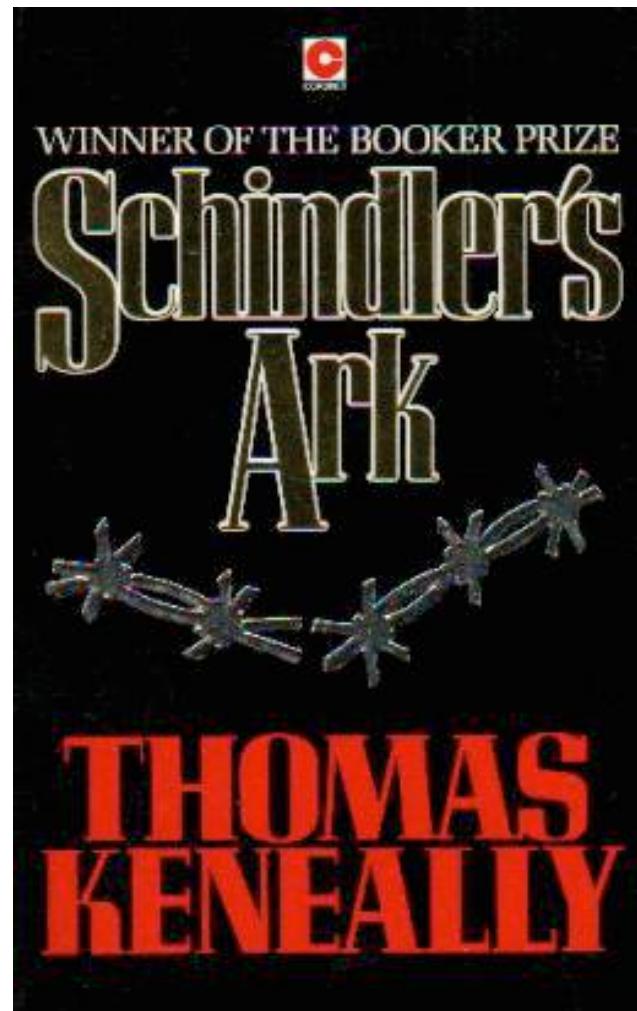
In 1949, at the beginning of the nuclear age and before television was mainstream, Orwell's creation of a telescreen-monitored world just a single generation into the future was terrifying. This is an important novel not only for its stark warning against abusive authority (and its somewhat ironic contribution to modern television content), but also for its insights into the power of manipulating language, history, and the psychology of fear and control. These issues are perhaps even more pertinent today than when Orwell penned his novel.

Related Text 2

“Schindler’s Ark”

Schindler’s Ark begins with a ‘note’ from Thomas Keneally describing the chance encounter with Leopold Pfefferberg, a ‘Schindler survivor’, that prompted him to write the story of Oskar Schindler, ‘bon vivant, speculator, charmer.’ An industrialist and member of the Nazi party, Schindler risked his life to protect Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland.

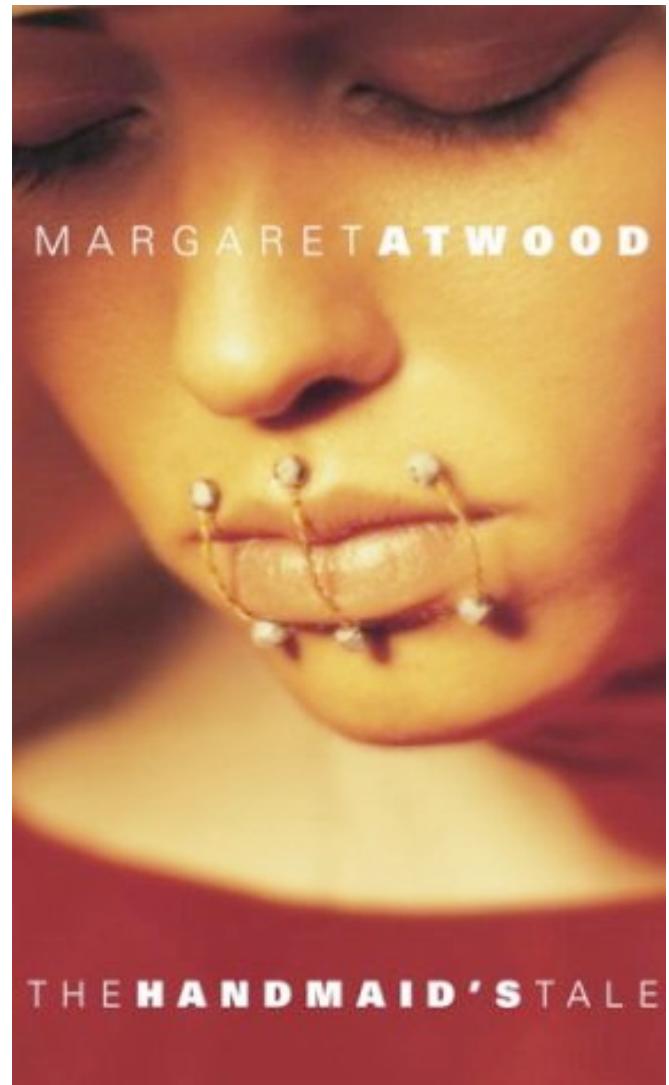
Winning the Booker Prize on its publication in 1982, Schindler’s Ark is a ‘novel’ deeply embedded in the trauma of modern European history, a story that, Keneally insists, attempts to avoid all fiction. Driven to understand Schindler’s ‘impulse towards rescue’, to explore the enigma that, on this telling, still haunts ‘Schindler’s Jews’, the book combines historical research with imaginative reconstruction to portray the complex and provocative character of Oskar Schindler. In the process, Keneally draws his readers into the world of those condemned by the Nazis as a form of ‘life unworthy of life.’ He examines the volatile mix of political violence and sexual sadism that prompts one of the most unsettling questions in the book: ‘What could embarrass the SS?’ At the same time, in taking the decision to represent the Holocaust, Keneally writes his way into the controversy that surrounds that project: not only how ‘true’ is this portrayal of Schindler, but who is licensed to bear witness to the Holocaust? What literary form can memorialise the reality of those events? In 1993, the release of Steven Spielberg’s award-winning Schindler’s List (the US title of Keneally’s book) reinforced that controversy. In particular, as part of the so-called ‘Holocaust boom’, Spielberg’s film refracts what remains, in one critical view, the untroubled, but profoundly troubling, sentimentality of Keneally’s narrative: its novelistic depiction of history through the life of one man.



Related Text 3

“The Handmaid’s Tale”

Margaret Atwood creates a dystopic future in which the population has become threateningly infertile and women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities. Patriarchy takes on a new, extreme aspect; one that oppresses in the name of preservation and protection, one in which violence is perpetrated by the language of ownership and physical delineation. In this nightmare society women are unable to have jobs or money, and are assigned to various classes: the chaste, the childless Wives; the housekeeping Marthas; and the reproductive Handmaids, who turn their offspring over to the Wives. The tale’s protagonist, Offred – so named to denote the master to whom she belongs – recounts her present situation with a clinical attention to her body, now only an instrument of reproduction. A counterpoint is provided through moving glimpses into her past life: memories of a sensual love for her lost family.



Set in a future Cambridge, Massachusetts and partly inspired by New England’s puritan American society, Atwood transforms the institutions and buildings of a familiar landscape into a republic called Gilead. Atwood’s prose is chillingly graphic, achieving the sense that all of life’s past physical pleasures have been reduced to mechanical actions, throwing the value of desire into sharp relief. Through her imagined world she shows sexual oppression not so much taken to its extreme conclusion, as sexuality obliterated from the desiring body; an act every bit as violent as sexual violation. Atwood expertly handles the different forms that power manages to take within the handmaids’ emotional dilemmas, as she describes the timeless tensions evoked by the body’s immediate needs and our ability to look beyond desire to greater political ends.

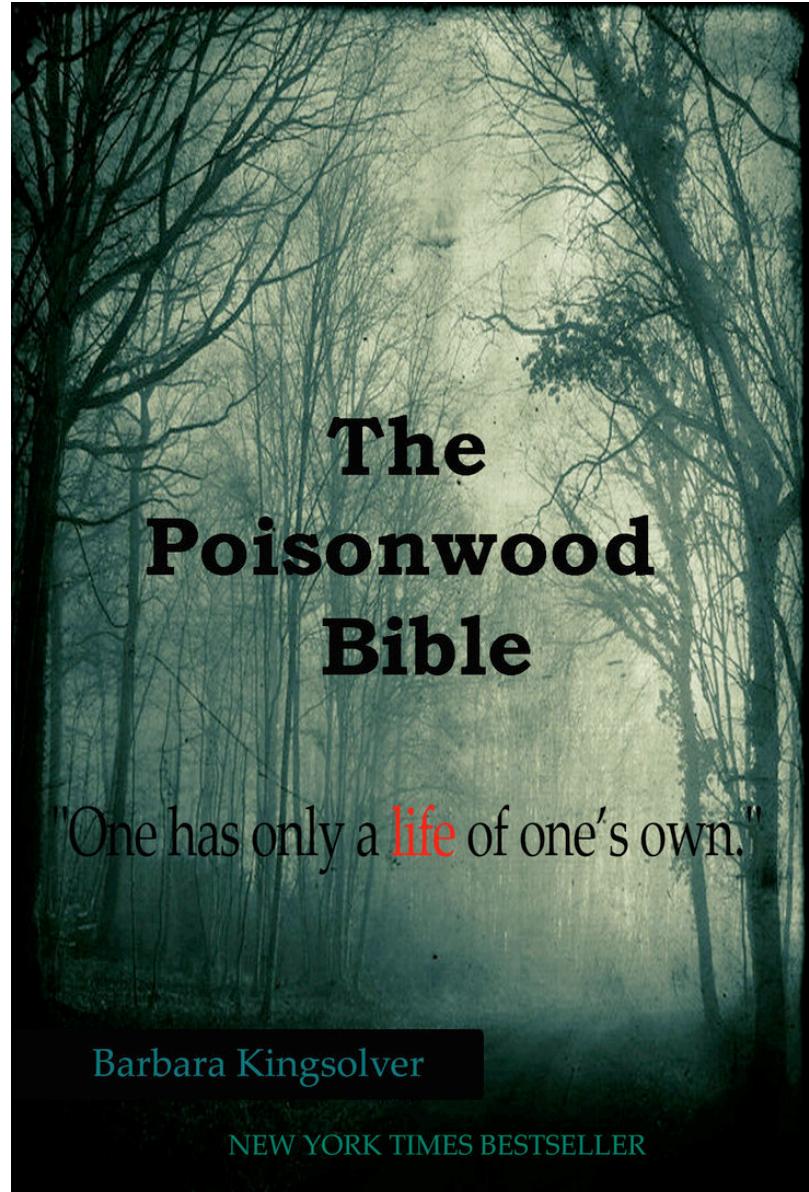
Related Text 4

“The Poisonwood Bible”

Set in the Congo, this novel by Barbara Kingsolver is narrated by Orleanna Price and her four daughters and tells the story of her husband, the overzealous Baptist preacher Nathan Price. As a child, Kingsolver lived in the Congo, but it was only in adulthood that she learned of the political situation that has seized the Congo while she lived there, when the United States had sabotaged the country's independence. She wrote this novel to address and publicise these issues.

The missionary's four children – Rachel, Ruth May, Leah and the crippled mute Adah – react differently to their father's work, but when poisonous snakes appear in their house, planted by the village's religious leader, they

try to convince their father to let them leave. He refuses, and Ruth May is killed, prompting her mother to leave the village with the other three daughters. Rachel goes on to marry three men and inherit a hotel in the Congo; Leah marries the village schoolteacher and dedicates herself to African independence; and Adah becomes an epidemiologist. The mother lives her life wracked with guilt. Each of the narrators struggles to deal with their guilt over Ruth May's death, but also the guilt of their role in the ruin of a country and, on a wider scale, Western guilt over its colonial past. The novel's title comes from the poisonwood, an African tree that Nathan Price is warned not to touch; he ignores the warning and suffers painful swelling. Kingsolver's message about Price's missionary zeal is clear.



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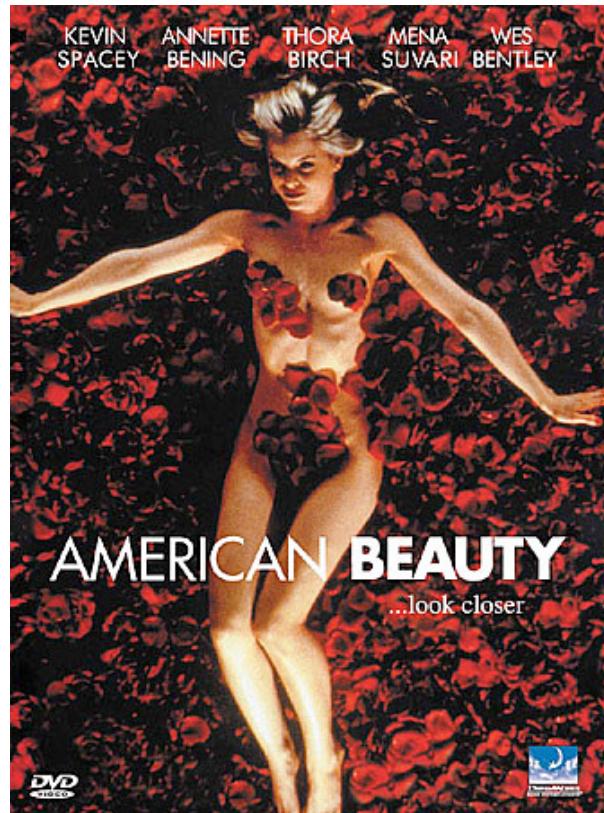
“American Beauty”

If Blue Velvet peeked behind the curtains of modern-day suburbia back in 1986, 13 years later, Sam Mendes’ “American Beauty” yanked them completely away from the windows and gave us all an unsettling, unnerving full view of what goes on inside.

‘This is my neighbourhood, this is my street, this is my life,’ says Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) in voiceover as the camera moves over his town before reaching his house at the start of the film. ‘I’m 42 years old. In less than a year, I’ll be dead. Of course I don’t know that yet. In a way, I am dead already.’ Like Joe Gillis in Sunset Boulevard, Lester and the audience know his fate from the beginning, but we realise that is just one small part of his story.

American Beauty is a dark, bleak comedy about what life is really like for those people supposedly living the American Dream – people who don’t lack for anything material but who are unhappy, unfulfilled and dissatisfied. Mainly, of course, this is Lester’s story, and with Spacey in the role it is an extremely fascinating one – that is, on the surface, a tale of one man’s midlife crisis as he tries to rediscover the freedom he has lost in the face of marital and parental responsibility. Forced to accompany his wife to a school basketball game to watch his cheerleader daughter perform, he becomes transfixed by the Lolita-esque Angela (Mena Suvari). He is soon having erotic visions of her (the most memorable being her naked but for a cover of red rose petals) that lead him to completely change his life in the hope that he will be able to seduce her.

Written by Alan Ball, who went on to create the acclaimed HBO television series Six Feet Under, this is a funny, sad, wistful, and even hopeful movie that never goes quite where you think it will. Beautiful and brooding, American Beauty is a truly remarkable debut from director Sam Mendes.



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“The Pianist”



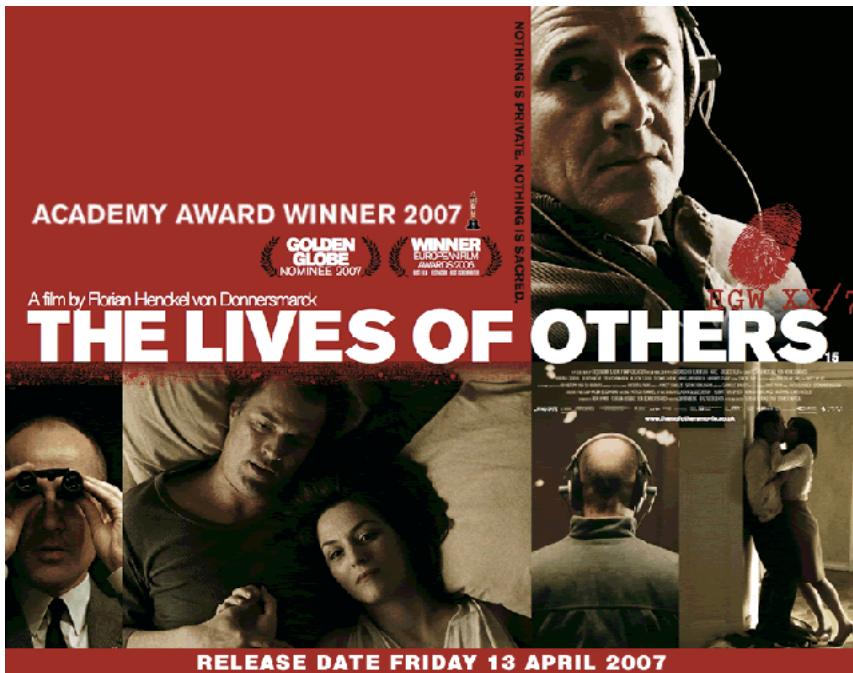
A drama about the survival of the Polish-Jewish pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman in the Warsaw ghetto, The Pianist is not an ideas movie. It has no particular ‘angle’ on the Holocaust, nor is it noticeably a Roman Polanski film. Yet the movie is made with humility and intelligence, and although it’s not the director’s own Holocaust story, one can hardly doubt it’s the movie he’s been waiting to make all his life.

Though labouring under an awkwardly expository screenplay by Ronald Harwood, the movie is gorgeously shot by Pawel Edelman. Rich dark browns with an edge of sepia – the colours of old photos, the colour of history – will break your heart many times over.

A wonderfully restrained Adrien Brody plays the rather chilly Szpilman, who evades the Nazis in a series of astonishing narrow escapes that nevertheless confirm his intolerable isolation as a fugitive dependent on the good will of strangers. The movie is particularly good at revealing the terrifying blend of arbitrary personal sadism of individual German soldiers and the institutional brutality of the Nazi machine. Wisely, Polanski doesn’t comment: he seems to have decided that in the face of such meticulously planned horror, the best one can do is get the details right.

Related Text 7

“The Lives of Others”



By turns both horrifying and darkly humorous, *The Lives of Others* – debut director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s story of the East German government’s obsession with tracking the populace’s every move – acts as an acid corrective to Wolfgang Becker’s cheerily ironic 2003 film, *Goodbye Lenin!*

It’s 1984 and ‘glasnost is nowhere in sight’ as crack Stasi hardliner Captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Muhe) decides to keep apparently squeaky-clean playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) under surveillance. When a bug planted in his Berlin apartment reveals the writer genuinely believes in the socialist state, Wiesler finds himself growing fascinated by the urbane Dreyman’s domestic life with his beautiful actress lover Christa-Maria (Martina Gedeck). Things become further complicated when his superior – culture minister Hempf (Thomas Thieme) – fancies Christa-Maria for himself and instructs Wiesler to clear the way for his advances by framing Dreyman. Pushed out of the comfort zone of government-sanctioned spying, the expressionless Wiesler is shunted in directions he is profoundly unfamiliar with.

The callousness of Cold War East Germany is chillingly conveyed, but when events threaten to become overwhelmingly dark, von Donnersmarck reigns back with a dose of black humour. A Kafkaesque spin on Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974), this is one of the most important German films of the last ten years.

“The Last King of Scotland”

It's really not surprising that the riveting story of Ugandan president Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland* is dominated by the towering central performance of Forest Whitaker as the vicious dictator. The star of *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Bird* (1988) sublimely captures Amin's potent blend of seductive charisma and unhinged violence. Giles Foden's 1998 source novel reinforced the reputation of Amin as a manipulative bully who kept the heads of his enemies in the fridge. Yet his bizarrely undeniable charm won over the people of Uganda (even after a military coup installed him as a despot) and his idiosyncrasies won him the support, albeit condescending, of the major powers – notably Britain – abroad.



Director Kevin Macdonald's first foray into pure feature after the magnificent 2003 docudrama *Touching the Void* confidently reveals the complexities of Amin through the eyes of gauche Scottish doctor Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy). The president is initially intrigued by the young medical volunteer because of Amin's strange obsession with all things Caledonian. Flattered by the attention, Garrigan all too quickly accepts the post of personal physician to the president and laps up the prestigious trappings, including a soft-top Mercedes. Dismissive of British Foreign Office claims of thuggish suppression of government opposition, Garrigan almost regards Amin as a father figure. It's only when he is allowed a glimpse of Amin's bloodily corrupt inner sanctum that he realises that behind the bonhomie lies a sadistic monster.

Ravishingly shot on location in Uganda by cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle and powerful adapted from Foden's bestseller by Jeremy Brock and Peter Morgan, *The Last King of Scotland* is the perfect example of a dazzling adventure yarn spun around a moral core. In Whitaker's sophisticated portrayal of a paradoxical tyrant, it boasts one of the top performances of 2006.

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Critical Response 1

Critical Overview: “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”

When “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” was published in 1962, it was well received by the critics and swiftly gained popularity among college-age readers. Critic Malcolm Cowley, one of Kesey's teachers at Stanford, commented in a letter to Kesey that the book (which he read in rough draft) contained "some of the most brilliant scenes I have ever read" and "passion like I've not seen in young writers before." R. A. Jelliffe, writing in the Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine of Books, praised the novel for its brilliant mixture of realism and myth, noting "this is an allegory with a difference." Time magazine praised Kesey for both his power and humor, describing the book as "a strong, warm story about the nature of human good and evil, despite the macabre setting." While some initial reviews faulted the novel as rambling, the majority agreed with New York Times Book Review contributor Martin Levin that Cuckoo's Nest was "a work of genuine literary merit."

It wasn't long after the novel appeared, however, that criticism arose over its negative portrayal of female characters. Julian Moynahan, for instance, argued in a 1964 New York Review of Books article that Cuckoo's Nest was "a very beautiful and inventive book violated by a fifth-rate idea which made Woman, in alliance with modern technology, the destroyer of masculinity and sensuous enjoyment." Similarly, Marcia L. Falk criticized the popular acceptance of the work and its Broadway adaptation in a 1971 letter to the New York Times. She noted that people "never even noticed, or cared to question, the psychic disease out of which the book's vision was born." Other critics have defended the work by noting, for instance, that the negative female stereotypes are there to support the novel's satire or that these negative characters are not truly representatives of women, but rather representatives of evil. Either way, the novel has inspired many articles analyzing how it portrays gender conflict and defines masculinity and humanity in general. As Richard D. Maxwell wrote in Twenty-Seven to One: "It is apparent that Kesey is not putting the entire blame [on women for men's loss of power]. . . . It is the male who is allowing the female and the corporation to chip away at his masculinity.

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Another debated aspect of the novel has been its portrayal of racial groups, specifically the black orderlies who work on the ward. Chief expresses hatred for these men, who are little more than stupid and cruel stereotypes, and he and McMurphy often express their anger with racial slurs. Several critics have pointed out, however, that these men are seen through the mind of the Chief, who himself has been the victim of prejudice as well as the "Combine" that dehumanizes people of all races. In this fashion Chief's racial observations create an ironic commentary on the nature of racism, as Janet R. Sutherland remarked in English Journal: "Just as the reader has to look beyond the typically racist language of the inmate to find in the book as a whole a document of witness against the dehumanizing, sick effects of racism in our society, so Bromden has to look beyond the perception of the world which limits his concept of self." A large number of articles have examined how the novel defines the role of the hero in a society which stifles individuality, and who exactly is the hero of the novel. While some observers have argued that McMurphy, who through his example and sacrifice shows the men how to escape, is the hero, many others suggest that it is Chief Bromden who is ultimately the hero of the work. While McMurphy leads his "disciple" Bromden to a new understanding, Barry H. Leeds noted in Connecticut Review, "it is not until the very end of the novel . . . that it becomes clear that Bromden has surpassed his teacher in the capacity to survive in American society." Ronald Wallace likewise argued in his *The Last Laugh* that Bromden rejects the "extreme" of total freedom and chaos that McMurphy represents and "has recreated himself in his own best image: strong, independent, sensitive, sympathetic, and loving, with a comic perspective on his human limitations." In the *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Thomas H. Fick placed Bromden's triumph as the hero in the tradition of the mythology of the American West, where a Native American guides a white man to greater understanding. Kesey has turned this myth

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on its side, noted Fick, creating "the first [instance], surely, that the Indian partner in such a pair has outlived his White brother." The result, concluded the critic, is "a powerful novel which effectively translates into contemporary terms the enduring American concern with a freedom found only in-or in between-irreconcilable oppositions."

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Critical Response 2

Cultural Climate: “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest has sold over eight million copies since its publication in 1962. Imagine a first novel so relevant to popular audiences and universities alike that it has spawned an Academy Award-winning film as well as hundreds, if not thousands, of academic articles, essays, and dissertations. Ken Kesey's first novel was certainly a blockbuster in every sense of the word, but what does this mean to readers thirty-five years and more after the fact? Cuckoo's Nest captured the fear and uncertainty of a postwar generation who came of age with the still-new and very real possibility of total nuclear destruction. Dissatisfied with the easy answers and assurances of their parents' generation, people began to explore for themselves new ways of coping with a rapidly changing world. The result was a culture of rebellion in the form of social protest, usually aided and abetted by the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Kesey's novel, like many others written between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, is a chronicle of that exploration of new possibilities. In the years since the publication of Cuckoo's Nest, new readers of the novel are not only further away in time from that era, they are also shaped by modern sensibilities about culture (especially music and literature) that were born in the 1960s. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest has endured because under these influences and through the passage of time, reading the novel has become a much more complicated task. Perhaps the biggest of these ongoing influences is Kesey himself. Although his celebrity status has considerably diminished, he was for years as well known as anyone in popular culture. Tom Wolfe, a novelist and frequent contributor to Rolling Stone and Esquire magazines, wrote a novel (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*) about Kesey and his group of friends, the Merry Pranksters. The group, including authors Larry McMurtry and Ken Babbs, met at Stanford University in 1959, and many volunteered for government experiments with LSD and related pharmaceuticals. Their most famous stunt was a cross-country bus trip made with movie cameras in hand so that the trip could be made into "The Movie." In 1961, Kesey volunteered on the mental ward of a veteran's hospital, whose patients inspired the characters in Cuckoo's Nest.

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The novel's narrator is Chief "Broom" Bromden, a man whose madness stems from a long process of isolation from his community of Native Americans in Oregon. This ultimately leads to confinement in the asylum and an attempted withdrawal from all of his surroundings as he feigns deafness and dumbness. Similarly, he clings to the drug-induced "fog" that he perceives around him because "you can slip back in it and feel safe." He needs to feel safe from "The Combine," that evil mechanical power whose stronghold is the mental hospital, and whose chief instrument is Big Nurse Ratched.

Bromden's situation paints a tiny picture of society as many saw it in the 1960s. Individual needs and desires were becoming less individual; government and corporate powers seemed to be either marginalizing these needs or making them conform to arbitrary moral standards about everything from race to sex to drugs and alcohol (Kesey himself was in and out of court and jail for over a year on the basis of a marijuana possession charge). Bromden's reaction is to withdraw from a society that wants control over him. He retains some sense of himself by pretending to be overcome by Nurse Ratched; this allows him to see and hear things that others do not. For example, he is permitted to clean the staff room during meetings because he is assumed to be deaf.

Into this world marches Randle P. McMurphy. A confessed con-man and brawler, he is determined to manipulate the system rather than allow it to manipulate him. While serving a sentence in a work camp, he gains access to the comparatively easy life of the mental hospital by playing at insanity as a fighting madman. Once admitted to Big Nurse's ward, he begins to subvert her systematic control by using it against her: his first big victory about television privileges during the World Series is gained through authorized patient voting, and he turns Doctor Spivey, the ward psychiatrist, to his side on issues like the basketball team and the fishing expedition. In the process, other patients are urged to do the same. Cheswick becomes more argumentative; voluntary inmates like Harding and the innocent Billy Bibbit begin to think about leaving, and Bromden defeats his fear of the system by choosing to speak again, and eventually escapes from the hospital.

Of course, the system is not defeated so easily. Cheswick kills himself out of despair when McMurphy temporarily gives up the fight for fear of being permanently committed; Billy Bibbit kills himself rather than face his mother with

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the shame of having slept with a prostitute; and McMurphy is lobotomized into a comatose state by Nurse Ratched when he is finally pushed too far and tries to kill her. If the mental ward is a miniature version, a microcosm, of the world as seen by a generation of young people in the 1960s, then these losses are symbolic of a warning. In the fight between the individual and those who would disempower him or her, there will be losses, and a clear winner may not emerge. McMurphy loses his life, certainly, but in the process, Chief Bromden regains his, as do Sefelt, Fredenckson and three other voluntary patients who choose the dangers of freedom over the safety of a controlled environment.

These distinctions make for grey areas in any modern reading of the novel. Big Nurse Ratched and the system with which she controls the hospital are clearly evil, and McMurphy's ultimate sacrifice on behalf of his friends on the ward is clearly good. But do readers still see all of society reflected in Big Nurse's hospital? Do we, like Kesey and like so many novelists of his generation, see the same need to fight or escape from a tyrannical society?

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest fits into a series of works that set a protagonist in search of freedom against a society determined to restrict that freedom. In 1953, Ralph Ellison published *The Invisible Man*. In it, Ellison chillingly portrays a black man bouncing off the walls of a white world where he had no voice and no power. Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road* is a much less gloomy novel that focuses on freedom rather than constraint. Its protagonist is Dean Moriarty, an unstoppable vagabond who pursues women, jazz music, and marijuana on coast-to-coast rides across the country in borrowed cars. Other members of Kerouac's "Beat Generation" included Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg, whose long poem "Howl" (1956) is just that: a long and bitter complaint that "the best minds of [his] generation" have been destroyed by a brutally cold society. In 1961, Joseph Heller published *Catch-22*, in which the members of a World War II bomber squadron find themselves in absurd and unfair conflict with their superior officers and the rules and regulations they control. This trend continues in the more obscure works of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* depicts a World War II U.S. Army soldier whose entire life is a sinister experiment by world governments and international corporations.

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Like these novels, *Cuckoo's Nest* raises serious issues about the individual's relationship with an often unfair society. Perhaps because these issues have become less central to contemporary readers, literary critics have over the years chosen very different paths in discussing Kesey's novel. Early interviews with Kesey reveal a standard interpretation of the novel. One, in *The Whole Earth Catalog*, has the interviewer asking questions like, "Do you think policemen and Richard Nixon and the rich people who run the country can relate to that?" Some years later, Leslie Fiedler and Carol Pearson argued that the novel owes more to ancient myths than social turmoil. Fiedler sees in the novel a pattern that dates back to ancient English verse, in which "the white outcast" (McMurphy) and the "noble Red Man" (Bromden) join forces against "home and mother" (Big Nurse). Pearson finds another myth wherein the buffoon (McMurphy) and the quiet hero (Bromden) defeat an evil king (Big Nurse) who has laid waste to the kingdom in pursuit of ultimate power.

Fiedler and other critics also see the novel as an updated version of the western. McMurphy ("He's got iron on his heels and he rings it on the floor like horseshoes") is the cowboy come to a corrupt town to set it right. Still another interpretation, popularized by Joseph Waldmeir, is that *Cuckoo's Nest* is a "Novel of the Absurd," a novel that presents an unreasonable, impossible world with usually comic results. Another critical catch-phrase is "the Carnivalesque": some critics believe that the novel fits into an ancient tradition of stories whose meaning derives from the pleasures and perils of wild carnivals. These critics usually point to the disorganized fun McMurphy brings to the ward with basketball, gambling, and fishing, despite Big Nurse's efforts to spoil the party. These different critical points of view all bring something to a modern reader's understanding of the novel.

Any interpretation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, however, must address basic story elements like character and narrative voice. As critical views multiply, this task becomes more difficult. For example, if this is truly a "Novel of the Absurd" that portrays an impossible, unrealistic world, what can we say about characters like McMurphy and Bromden? If they are not supposed to represent real people with real emotions and motivations, they are flat characters stripped of much of what Kesey has given them. Yes, McMurphy's behavior is sometimes inhuman. It seems doubtful that anyone could remain untouched by the multitude of shock treatments he undergoes, and his emotional reactions are not

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consistent: he barely notices Cheswick's suicide, while Billy Bibbitt's sends him over the edge. But Kesey does make the effort to round out McMurphy's character: "I'd see him do things . . . like painting a picture at OT with real paints on a blank paper . . . or like writing letters to somebody in a beautiful flowing hand." And once, he even looks "upset and worried."

We must also remember that all these observations are Chief Broom's. Bromden is both a character and the narrator who tells the story, and he is certainly insane. Perhaps the novel only seems absurd because its narrator believes that most everyone around him is built of metal, springs, and cogs. This type of narration makes it difficult to distinguish between the observations of the storyteller, Bromden, and the insights of the novelist, Kesey. For example, when McMurphy moves to kill Nurse Ratched, Bromden sees "slow, mechanical gestures" and hears "iron in his bare heels ring sparks out of the tile." At this point, we either hear Bromden telling us that McMurphy in nothing but boxer shorts is still the cowboy hero, or we hear Kesey telling us that McMurphy has lost and become one with his enemy, as mechanical and metallic as "The Combine" itself.

The greatest challenge presented by *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and by any novel of its stature in American literature, is to find the right balance of critical insight and personal opinion. Ken Kesey has gone on to write ten works of fiction and nonfiction, and the criticism and reviews of these books are ongoing. Kesey's second published novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, explores many of the same themes we see in *Cuckoo's Nest*, as its hero Hank Stamper struggles for freedom and independence within his Oregon home town. If *Cuckoo's Nest* is the first in Kesey's line of works to explore the theme of individual freedom, then it is the modern reader's enviable task to read it with a sort of double vision: one eye on the social history that inspired Kesey and his generation, and one eye on the contemporary critical views that continue to expand our understanding of it.

Source: Ian Cume, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997. Currie is a freelance writer based in British Columbia who has taught at Dalhousie University.

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Critical Response 3

Sexism in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”

Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a good novel—a really teachable novel. Students get caught up in it and are eager to talk about the characters and to explore the ramifications of the partial allegory. But despite these positive qualities, Cuckoo's Nest is a sexist novel. Certainly I don't want to discourage anyone from teaching it, but I do urge that colleagues should present the novel in a way that will disclose its concealed sexist bias. In order to get at the invidious aspect of Cuckoo's Nest, let me review the way Kesey structures his microcosm.

The novel offers a compelling presentation of the way society manipulates individuals in order to keep the bureaucracy running smoothly. The mental hospital is "a little world Inside that is a made to scale prototype of the big world Outside," with both worlds being operated by the Combine, Chief Broom's appropriate name for the Establishment. A combine is a group united to pursue commercial or political interests and is also a machine that cuts off and chews up and spits out a product. Kesey has fused both meanings in his image, with the byproduct being us—the members of society.

Boss of that "factor for the Combine" is the Big Nurse, the embodiment of the castrating female. If you're old enough to remember Philip Wylie's Generation of Vipers, you have met the Big Nurse before: she is Mom. Wylie described her this way:

She is a middle-aged puffin with an eye like a hawk that has just seen a rabbit twitch far below. She is about twenty-five pounds overweight with sharp heels and a hard backhand which she does not regard as a foul but a womanly defense. In a thousand of her there is not sex appeal enough to budge a hermit ten paces off a rock ledge.

You remember good old Mom. Kesey calls her Miss Ratched and thus acknowledges her role as a tool of the Combine. A ratchet is a mechanism that

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engages the teeth of a wheel permitting motion in one direction only. Kesey's metaphor is perfect. The ward is littered with casualties of "momism": Billy Bibbit's stuttering began with his first word, M-m-m-m-mama; Ruckley's only utterance throughout the novel is "Ffffuck da wife"; Harding's neurosis stems from inferiority feelings agitated by his wife's "ample bosom"; Chief Broom's self-concept shrank in sympathy with his once-powerful father after, he says, "my mother made him too little to fight any more and he gave up." McMurphy, on the other hand, has escaped the controls of the Combine because he has "no wife wanting new linoleum."

Kesey's eye is accurate in his depiction of this microcosm. The ward hums along on beams of fear and hate. The black boys are clearly serving the Combine in order to wreak vengeance on their white oppressors. The best hater of the bunch, "a dwarf the color of cold asphalt," peered from a closet at age five to watch his mother's rape, "while his papa stood by tied to the hot iron stove with plow traces, blood streaming into his shoes." Kesey makes his point melodramatically clear: the blacks are portrayed as villains because society has victimized them. They are merely retaliating.

But why is the Big Nurse so eager to emasculate the men in her charge? Why does she serve as a dedicated tool of the Combine? This is a question Kesey never answers; he apparently never thinks to ask it. He understands and castigates the injustice of prejudice against Indians. Remember how Chief Broom developed his habit of feigning deaf and dumbness: it was his response to people, he says, "that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all." You recall how the Indians are conned out of their homes and their way of life by the sneering, deprecating white people from town. Kesey shows himself sympathetic to oppressed minorities in our society. But what about our oppressed majority?

It never seems to occur to Kesey that possibly the Big Nurse relishes her job as "ball cutter" for precisely the same reason that the black boys take pleasure in their work. But anyone who has read Germain Greer's *The Female Eunuch* can see in the novel the fulfillment of the biblical injunction: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a castration for a castration. Philip Wylie thirty years ago observed that "the mealy look of men today is the result of momism and so is the pinched and baffled fury in the eyes of womankind." True, perhaps. But Wylie thought the

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solution to the problem was to force woman back into her proper subservient place where she would become content again—like those happy slaves on the plantation, I suppose. And you remember Kesey's solution: Harding suggests that "man has only one truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy." But even our virile hero McMurphy confesses that there's no way he could "get a bone up over that old buzzard." "There you are," says Harding. "She's won."

Women, you notice, keep winning these sexual battles—according to the men who manufacture them. Truth is, nobody wins—certainly not women. Consider how women are portrayed in Kesey's novel. We've already noted examples of the castrating bitch—Nurse Ratched, Mrs. Bibbit, Mrs. Harding, and Mrs. Bromden. Then we have the little nurse who hates the patients because her weak mind has been so warped by the Church that she thinks her birthmark a stain visited upon her because of her association with the depraved inmates. And there is the townswoman with the eyes that "spring up like the numbers in a cash register," who dupes the Indians by negotiating with Mrs. Bromden, rather than dealing with the Chief.

You may ask, are there no good women in Kesey's estimation? Well, yes. There is the nurse on the Disturbed Ward, an angel of mercy by virtue of ethnic origin—the little Japanese nurse. She accepts woman's time-honored role as nurturer of men and agrees with McMurphy that sexual starvation prompts Miss Ratched's perversity. "I sometimes think," she says, "all single nurses should be fired after they reach thirty-five." A sympathetic woman—to men, at least.

And there is also Candy, the whore with a heart of gold, and her friend, Sandy, who is equally charitable with her body. These women ask nothing of the men—not even money for their sexual performances. Kesey fantasizes that they come willingly to this insane asylum to service the inmates for the sheer joy of it. In his euphoric state, Chief Broom marvels:

Drunk and running and laughing and carrying on with women square in the center of the Combine's most powerful stronghold! . . . I had to remind myself that it had truly happened, that we had made it happen. We had just unlocked a window and let it in like you let in the fresh air. Maybe the Combine wasn't so all-powerful.

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What came in through the window "like fresh air"? The two prostitutes. Kesey implies that if all women would just behave generously like Candy and Sandy, the Combine might then become vulnerable.

Kesey, I think, is wrong about the way to loosen the stranglehold of the emasculating female and break up the Combine. He is simply visionary to suggest that women should emulate the attitude of the happy hookers. The truth is that women are not likely at this point to give up bossing their men around when this remains their only means of achieving a semblance of importance in society. Yet I agree with Ann Nietzke that contrary to popular belief, women do not want to castrate men, it's just that we are tired of being eunuchs ourselves. This does not mean that women want penises but that we want the powers, freedoms, and dignities that are automatically granted to the people who happen to have them.

If the Combine could be subverted to the extent of giving up its ratchet—of allowing women genuine equality—then women could stop emasculating men and turn their energies to more self-fulfilling pursuits. Given the opportunity to run that ward in her own right, instead of having to manipulate the rabbity doctor, perhaps Miss Ratched might have run it more humanely. Forcing people into deviousness can hardly be expected to improve their character. And inequality is almost guaranteed to generate malice.

Thus we need to help students see that Nurse Ratched is no more to blame for her malice than the black boys are for theirs. The Big Nurse happens also to be the Big Victim when viewed with an awareness of the social and economic exploitation of women. Kesey didn't have exactly this in mind, I grant, but we can still derive this insight from his novel and correct the damaging impression that the book leaves—that women, through some innate perversity, are the cause of all of society's failings.

Source: Elizabeth McMahan, "The Big Nurse as Ratchet: Sexism in Kesey's Cuckoo's Nest," in CEA Critic, Vol. 37, 1975, reprinted in A Casebook on Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," edited by George J. Searles, University of New Mexico Press, 1992, pp. 145-49.