



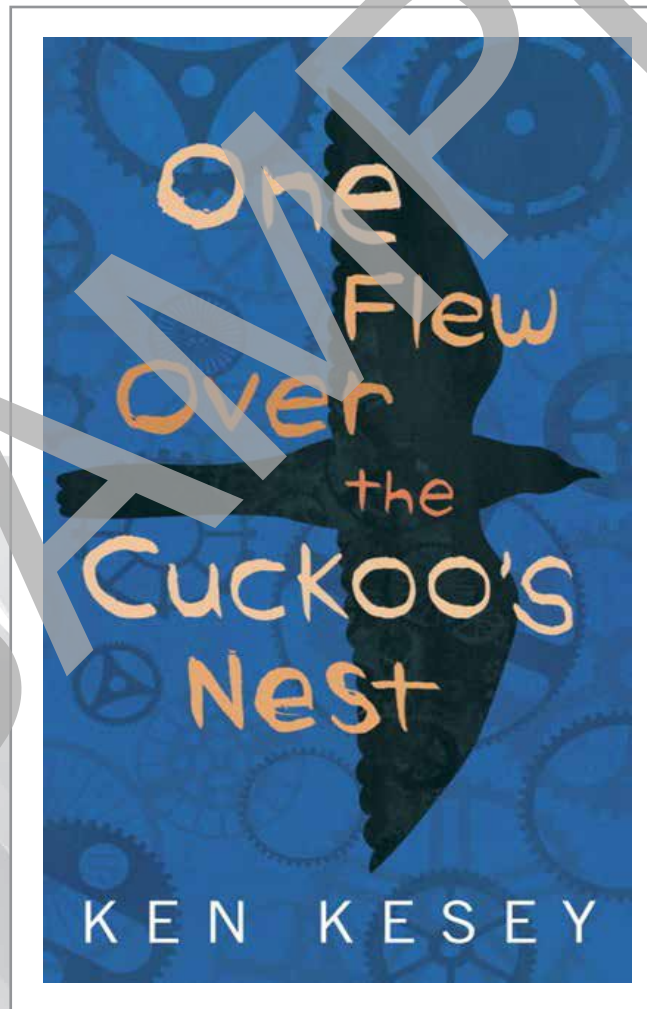
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**

Ken Kesey



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Ken Kesey

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Research, compare/contrast,  
analysis

### Literary Elements

Characterization, simile,  
metaphor, personification,  
theme, allusion, symbolism,  
inference, foreshadowing,  
plot development

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,  
application

### Speaking/Listening

Interview

### Writing

Character sketch, poems,  
response, review, Public  
Service Announcements, TV  
script, research paper

### Comprehension

Predictions, cause/effect,  
problem-solving, conflict

### Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, papier mâché;  
Drama—acting, script;  
Music—appropriate  
selections; Current Events—  
newspaper/magazine;  
Technology—Internet  
research

**Genre:** fiction

**Setting:** mental hospital somewhere in Oregon; late 1950s

**Point of View:** first person

**Themes:** sanity/insanity, conformity/nonconformity, courage, good vs. evil, freedom vs. control, individuality, sacrifice

**Conflict:** person vs. person, person vs. “the system”, person vs. self

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** primarily pessimistic; moments of optimism

**Date of First Copyright:** 1962

**Movie version:** 1975, 133 min., rated R; directed by Milos Forman, stars Jack Nicholson, Louise Fletcher, Brad Dourif; won five Oscars—Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director, and Best Screenplay

## Summary

In a ploy to escape imprisonment on a work farm, Randle Patrick McMurphy cons his way into a mental institution. He encounters men who are dominated and intimidated by the cruel Nurse Ratched. McMurphy begins to challenge her authority and rally the other patients together. He annoys and makes fun of Nurse Ratched and attempts to change hospital policies. He gambles with, plans activities for, and ultimately inspires the other men by his courage. He befriends Chief Bromden, the narrator, who lives in his own foggy world, pretends that he cannot hear, and never speaks. The hostility between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched escalates into an all-out power struggle. Ratched insists that McMurphy and Bromden must undergo Electro-Shock Therapy when they defy authority and engage in a fight with attendants. McMurphy attacks Ratched when he realizes she has driven one of the patients to suicide. The plot culminates when Ratched forces McMurphy to undergo a lobotomy that leaves him unresponsive and uncommunicative. Bromden suffocates McMurphy and then finds the strength to escape.

## Characters

### Main Characters

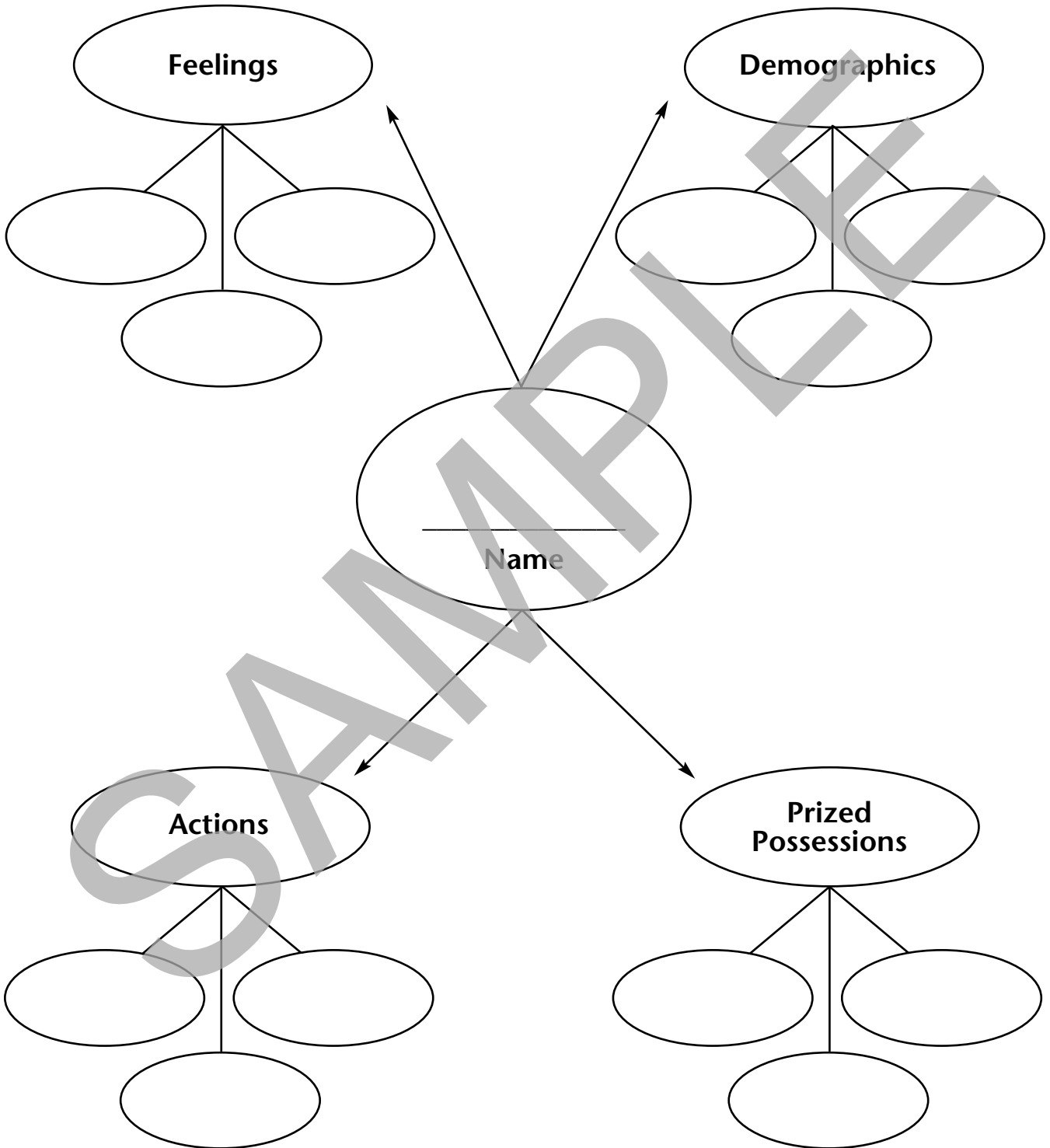
**Randle Patrick McMurphy:** loud, strong, bold protagonist; represents overt sexuality and freedom; chooses to be institutionalized in a mental hospital rather than serve jail time; determined to change the oppressive atmosphere of the hospital and to destroy Nurse Ratched’s control of the patients

**Nurse Ratched, a.k.a. Big Nurse:** stern, unfeeling, manipulative antagonist; controls the mental institution; represents suppressed sexuality; mentally and emotionally emasculates the patients

**Chief Bromden:** narrator; large, half-Indian patient who has been in the hospital the longest; nicknamed Chief Broom; pretends to be a deaf mute; suffers from hallucinations; believes himself to be weak in spite of obvious physical strength

# Character Web

**Directions:** Complete the attribute web by filling in information specific to a character in the book.



**Note:** *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is replete with similes and metaphors. Examples of these and other literary devices are included in the Supplementary Activities of each section. Guide students to discover and list metaphors and similes from each section.

## Part One, pp. 9–41

Chief Bromden, the narrator, is a patient in a mental institution where Nurse Ratched dominates both patients and staff. Bromden pretends to be deaf and mute and often retreats into a mental fog. McMurphy arrives and inspires the other patients with his charismatic personality. McMurphy quickly becomes a threat to Ratched's authority.

Vocabulary
cagey (10)
psychopath (18)
therapeutic (19)
bent (24)
philosophy (29)
neurology (31)

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the characteristics of Nurse Ratched, Chief Bromden, and Randle Patrick McMurphy. (*Nurse Ratched, also known as Big Nurse, is the antagonist. She is efficient and organized, runs the hospital with precision, and completely dominates everyone with calculated, mechanical authority. Her outward smiles and assumed concern hide her manipulative, cruel nature. She delights in referring to her "successes" with difficult patients, e.g., arranging for them to receive Electro-Shock Therapy or other treatments. Staff and patients are afraid of her. Chief Bromden, the narrator, is a half-Indian who assumes the persona of a deaf mute because of circumstances*

*throughout his life. He retreats into a mental fog when he feels threatened by others or when he must endure a humiliating procedure. His hallucinations about being in an Air Raid indicate former service in a branch of the armed forces. Randle Patrick McMurphy, the protagonist, is bold, loud, and manipulative. He faked insanity in order to be admitted to the mental hospital rather than complete his sentence at a prison work farm. McMurphy immediately convinces the other patients to gamble with him. He swaggers into the hospital and proclaims that the court has ruled him to be a "psychopath." From the first time he meets Nurse Ratched, he begins to undermine her authority and initiate changes in the institution and among the patients. pp. 9–18)*

2. Analyze the significance of Bromden's reference to the bird and the hunting dog. Note the importance of the "fog," a motif that recurs throughout the novel. (*At first, Bromden compares himself to the bird and the black hospital aides to the hunting dog. He experiences fear as a bird feels when a dog pursues it. He believes he will be safe as long as he remains hidden and still, but the aides capture him when he leaves the closet. He begins to hallucinate that he is in an Air Raid, and he retreats into a mental fog, where he then imagines a dog that is lost and afraid because it can't see. The fog symbolizes Bromden's retreat into his own world. When the fog lifts, he returns to reality. Kesey uses this hallucination to allude to the narrator's fear as he prepares to reveal the truth about the horrors of the mental institution. pp. 12–14)*
3. Examine the classification of the patients on the ward when McMurphy arrives. Discuss their individual characteristics. (*They are classified as Acutes, those who can possibly be "fixed," or Chronics, those who will probably remain in the institution for the rest of their lives. Acutes—Cheswick is the first one McMurphy greets; Billy Bibbit stutters; Dale Harding, a college graduate, is president of the Patient's Council. Chronics—Ellis remains perpetually in the same position with a look of horror on his face, and Ruckly unthinkingly holds a picture day after day. Both are former Acutes who are now Chronics because of hospital mistakes. Colonel Matterson, the oldest Chronic, is a WWI veteran. Bromden has been in the hospital the longest, since WWII. Old Pete is mentally retarded because of a brain injury at birth. Big George constantly washes his hands to avoid germs. pp. 19–28)*

4. Analyze the atmosphere in the mental hospital when McMurphy arrives and how he reacts. *(The atmosphere is oppressive. The men on the ward are restrained and controlled. The routine, beginning at 6:30 a.m., rarely varies, and the men subdue any overt laughter. They spy on each other, recording bits of information in the nurses' log book. The "spy" is rewarded with a star by his name and the privilege of sleeping late the next day. The exposed issues are then addressed in the Group Meeting [pp. 42–48]. McMurphy greets each patient, shakes his hand, and attempts to engage him in conversation. He jokes with the men and begins challenging Nurse Ratched and her rules. pp. 19–28)*
5. Analyze the metaphors Bromden uses to describe the hospital and the ward. *(Bromden refers to the hospital as the Combine and the ward as a factory for the Combine. The Combine represents the entire mental hospital, a well-organized, powerful machine designed to control everyone and everything. The ward is the Combine's factory, and its goal is to repair the mistakes of society. Nurse Ratched is the person in charge of the factory, and she delights in sending a docile, submissive dismissal back into the world. She is unconcerned if the treatment leaves the patient without initiative or diminishes his quality of life as long as he is no longer a problem to society. She considers Mr. Taber a "success" story because her prescribed treatment turned him from a manipulator into a meek, submissive man. Nurse Ratched guards her authority carefully, and when an admission arrives, her primary goal is to bring that patient into compliance with her routine and to keep her "machinery" operating smoothly. pp. 20–21, 29–30, 35–40; inference)*
6. Analyze Nurse Ratched's methods of control. *(Intimidation—Previous doctors only lasted between three weeks and three months before she found one submissive enough to suit her. She threatens the Acutes with the possibility of their becoming Chronics if they don't cooperate with staff policies; Fear—She chooses the three black boys as aides because of their hatred so patients will fear them. She ensures that patients see others taken away for "treatment" and then observe their condition when they return; Covert actions—She gives secret oral instructions to the three aides so no visitor will ever read written instructions. She hides her cruelty behind a fake smile. pp. 29–41)*
7. **Prediction:** How will McMurphy keep the hospital from running smoothly?

### Supplementary Activities

1. Working in small groups, have students stage one of the following: (a) McMurphy's arrival to the ward, including pantomiming the body language of the patients (b) the Group Meeting (c) the initial conflict between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched.
2. **Similes**—I creep along the wall quiet as dust (p. 9); tiny pills that gleam like porcelain (p. 10); He opens out his nostrils like black funnels (p. 12); [Ellis] nailed...on the wall like a stuffed trophy; eyes...like blown fuses (p. 20); I feel like my veins are running ammonia (p. 31) **Metaphors**—black aides: black machinery (p. 10); patients: birds (p. 17); Chronics: machines (p. 19); McMurphy's hands: road map (p. 27) **Allusion**—Punch and Judy (p. 37)