

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the use and effectiveness of a narrator with questionable sanity.
2. analyze McMurphy as a contemporary tragic figure.
3. discuss the techniques Kesey uses to present the ward as a microcosm of the Combine.
4. analyze fantastic hallucinatory imagery and how it contributes to the work as a whole.
5. analyze Nurse Ratched as a castrating character.
6. discuss sanity and insanity, including false diagnoses of insanity.
7. discuss how size and power are related in the book and how perceived size changes.
8. discuss both the redemptive and repressive power of sexuality on the ward.
9. discuss the Combine as repressive of individuality and freedom.
10. trace the development of Chief Bromden from a passive mute to an autonomous, speaking character.

Background Lecture

ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY

While *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is not a tragedy in the classical sense of the word, it contains tragic elements, and McMurphy can be interpreted as something of a contemporary tragic hero.

ARISTOTLE'S DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

In *The Poetics*, Aristotle defined tragedy as follows: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions."

In the same work, Aristotle also delineated some characteristics of the tragic hero. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must be of royal or noble birth. He must be fundamentally good but have a fatal flaw that leads to his downfall. The hero's downfall is the result of his own free will, not an accident or a twist of fate. The audience must feel pity for the hero at his downfall because the hero's downfall is not wholly deserved. The tragic hero must die as the result of his flaw, but his fall results in increased self-knowledge. The hero's suffering must never be senseless; it should have meaning and purpose.

MODERN-DAY TRAGIC HEROES

In the Modernist era, a new kind of tragic hero evolved from Aristotle's classical definition. According to the modern definition, the tragic hero does not need to come from a royal or high position. Rather, he can emerge as an average person. In the Modernist definition, the tragic hero does not need to die as the result of his flaws.

MCMURPHY AS A TRAGIC HERO

McMurphy easily qualifies as a tragic hero, fitting somewhere between Aristotle's classical definition and the Modernist definition. McMurphy emerges as a larger-than-life character (although not of noble birth), who is fundamentally good. He is life affirming, independent, and full of personality. His fatal flaw is his arrogance, manifested in his belief that he can successfully escape Nurse Ratched's ward even after destroying her control by throwing a party. When McMurphy attacks Ratched, which leads to his lobotomy, he is acting on his own free will. He is heavily influenced by the expectations of the other men on the ward and by his desire to avenge Billy Bibbit's unnecessary suicide, but the decision to attack the nurse is ultimately his own. The reader feels pity and perhaps even outrage at McMurphy's fate. His suffering, while tragic, is not senseless. He has taught the other men on the ward about the power of individuality and the need for freedom and sexual expression. His suffering and death are redemptive for the patients on the ward. Despite his flaws, McMurphy qualifies as a contemporary tragic hero.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Part 1

Chapter One

1. What is the orderlies' motive for calling Chief Bromden "Chief Broom?"

2. Discuss the meaning of the figurative words referring to the Big Nurse's size, such as "swelling up," and "blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor."

3. What does the Chief mean when he says, "It's the truth even if it didn't happen?"

Chapter Five

1. Is the fog machine literal or metaphorical? What is its purpose?

2. Discuss Harding's assertion that they are the "victims of a matriarchy."

3. What is Harding admitting when he compares himself and the other patients to rabbits and Nurse Ratched to a wolf?

4. According to Harding, what is the only reliable weapon that men have against women?

5. Discuss McMurphy's motive in deciding to challenge Nurse Ratched.

Chapter Fourteen

- 1. Describe the significance of Old Rawler's method of suicide.

- 2. The Chief says, "What makes people so impatient is what I can't figure; all the guy had to do was wait." What does he mean?

Chapter Fifteen

- 1. What might the Chief's description of the "Shock Shop" and the electroshock therapy table foreshadow?

- 2. How is this chapter a reversal for Chief Bromden's character?

- 3. What does Nurse Ratched's method of tallying the votes reveal about her character?

- 4. How do the events in this chapter advance the conflict of the novel?

Chapter Twenty-Three

1. When McMurphy puts his fist through the glass, is his action premeditated or impulsive?

2. What does the abrupt beginning and end to the ringing in Chief Bromden's head signify?

3. What motif does McMurphy emphasize with this explanation?

4. How does this chapter clarify the conflict of the novel?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

1. McMurphy has the opportunity to escape the ward one last time with Turkle and Sandy. What does his decision to stay reveal about his character?

2. Why does Billy not stutter at all when Nurse Ratched first discovers him in bed with Candy? What theme does his perfect speech emphasize?

3. How does McMurphy's sexualized attack on Nurse Ratched ruin her authority forever?

4. Does Chief Bromden's decision to smother McMurphy cast doubt on his sanity?
