

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

by Ken Kesey

Copyright © 2000 by Prestwick House Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593.
www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to copy this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her
personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale. Revised March, 2001.

ISBN 978-1-60389-883-6

Reorder No. 200616

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Notes

The overall theme of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is that of a man's right to be an individual versus society's need to make him conform. This theme is reflective of the social climate of the 1960's. Some of the language and content in this novel may be offensive to minorities and women. It is important to remind the students that in 1962, when this story was written, the civil rights movement and the women's movement were in their infancy. Other themes also are in evidence throughout the novel: what is sanity, how does authority cripple people, is the natural man better off free, and can the simple force of one's personality overcome the repression of society.

While the story is rooted in the ideals and cultures of the 1960's, many of the concerns are as relevant today as they were then.

Note – Page numbers refer to the Signet edition of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, copyright 1962.

Brief Biography of Ken Kesey

The 1960's was a decade of social rebellion including the Civil Rights Movement, the beginnings of the women's movement, and the protest against the Vietnam war. Many people sought their individuality through free love, drug experimentation, or through organized rebellions such as sit-ins. After attending the University of Oregon and Stanford, Kesey joined this rebellious generation by volunteering for drug experiments at a mental hospital. He used these experiences as the basis for his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published in 1962. Later, Kesey traveled the country in a wildly painted bus, taking drugs, and rebelling against authority. He spent five months in prison for possession of marijuana before returning to his farm in Oregon.

Objectives

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

1. point out the significance of the following symbols in the story: the fog, the geese, McMurphy's underwear.
2. recognize the Christian images in the novel and discuss the question of whether or not McMurphy is a Christ-like character.
3. comment on the ways the author uses descriptions of the characters' hands to define personality.
4. define black comedy and cite examples of black comedy in this story.
5. discuss the extent to which the Chief is or is not a reliable narrator.
6. point out how the following words apply to the Chief's hallucinations:
 - combine
 - fog
 - time control.
7. show how McMurphy's presence in the hospital demonstrates the conflicts between the individual's needs and society's needs.
8. by citing comments or incidents from the novel, prove that the following are or are not themes:
 - women have the power to suppress a man's self worth.
 - laughter and comfort with one's sexuality are signs of strength and sanity.
 - people who do not conform to society's rules are sometimes judged to be insane.
 - sometimes rules need to be broken so a person can grow as an individual.
 - strength and courage come from being true to yourself.
9. define the following medical terms from the story: Therapeutic Community, EST, lobotomy, psychopath, Disturbed Ward, acutes, chronics, epilepsy.
10. point out the significance of the author's choice of character names in this story including: Ratched, Big Nurse, Chief Broom, Billy Bibbitt.
11. cite incidents from the story which illustrate the abuses the patients in the story suffer at the hands of the staff.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Define Combine, the fog, and time control. Why does the Chief describe the hospital as a large machine?
2. Some qualities of heroes are courage, self-confidence, and a willingness to sacrifice themselves for others. Cite incidents from the story proving McMurphy has these qualities.
3. In what ways do the men change on the fishing trip? What change does the Chief observe in McMurphy on the way back to the hospital?
4. Find three examples of Christ-like images in this story. Speculate on whether or not McMurphy is intended to be a Christ-like character.
5. Why is Harding a patient at the hospital?
6. For what reasons do you think Kesey chose to tell this story from the Chief's point of view?
7. Define black comedy. Cite three examples of black comedy in this story.
8. Research the state of mental hospitals today. Do they still use EST, lobotomy, and the Therapeutic Community as ways to treat the mentally ill? If not, what therapies do they use instead? Are there instances of patient abuse in today's institutions? Are epileptics placed in mental institutions? How is their disease treated today?
9. Describe McMurphy from Nurse Ratched's point of view.
10. Why do McMurphy and the Chief believe Nurse Ratched is not totally responsible for the misery the men on her ward suffer?
11. Compare Candy Starr and Vera Harding. Why does McMurphy seem to like each of these women?
12. Compare Mrs. Bibbit and Mrs. Bromden. What is the Chief's opinion of these women? How do they hurt the men in their lives?
13. Why do Cheswick and Billy commit suicide?
14. Discuss the significance of the title of this novel and what geese may symbolize in this story.
15. What is the importance of laughter in this novel?
16. Comment on the ending to this story. How does it tie in with the overall theme - a man's right to be an individual versus society's need to make him conform?
17. Why would many people be offended by Kesey's black and female characters? Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Vocabulary

Acutes – those who are severely mentally ill
amends – actions taken to make up for a wrongdoing
apathy – indifference
aplomb – confidence
astute – wise, smart
atrocities – shocking acts
balking – drawing back; recoiling
barker – a carnival employee who loudly advertises the attractions.
baron – an influential or powerful person
berserk – wild; crazy
bile – a digestive fluid
blind – a hunter's shelter
bluster – boasting; swagger
braggart – a person who brags
brashness – boldness; rudeness
bravado – boldness; swagger
brawn – strength
c'est la vie – [French] such is life
cagey – sly, careful
camphor – a medicinal compound
castors – wheels
chasm – a deep pit or gulf
chastising – punishing
chicanery – trickery
Chronics – those who are constantly ill
coherently – logically; clearly
conniptions – temper tantrums; fits
contemptuous – scornful; disdainful
contrivance – a device
cormorants – large ocean birds
corrugated – grooved, ridged
courtesan – a prostitute whose clients are generally upper class or wealthy
covey – a flock
crimped – folded; pressed
crookies – [slang] a thief; dishonest person
crooned – whispered; murmured
croupier – one who manages a gambling table
culls – worthless beings
dago – [slang] an Italian
dandyism – characterized by a man's focus on his appearance and style

When the fog clears to where I can see, I'm sitting in the day room.

1. How does the Chief know the new Admission is “no ordinary Admission”?

2. What evidence is there in this section of patient abuse?

3. Briefly describe R. P. McMurphy. What does the description of McMurphy's hands suggest to the reader about his character? Why is the Chief impressed with McMurphy's laugh?

4. Define “psychopath.” Why is McMurphy in the hospital?

Come morning, McMurphy is up...

- 1. McMurphy brushes his teeth with soap powder and the Chief remembers his father talking to government officials on the reservation. What do these two incidents have in common? In what way is the Chief like his father?

- 2. Find a definition of “oppression,” as it might be used to describe mental patients. In what way can Nurse Ratched’s behavior toward the other inmates be considered oppressive?

- 3. Why do you think the Chief believes Nurse Ratched would rather McMurphy had “been stark naked under that towel than had on those shorts”?

- 4. Find a passage in this section, other than the one describing his shorts, that compares McMurphy to the freedom available in nature.

4. What are the first words the Chief uses?

5. Explain how bigness or size plays an important part in this section.

6. Why do you think McMurphy wants the Chief to lift the control panel? Is McMurphy motivated only by selfish interests? Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.
