

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

*One Flew Over
the Cuckoo's Nest*

by Ken Kesey

written by Jack Turner

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Background

1. Ken Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* while working part-time as a night attendant in the mental ward of a hospital. Some of the book was written while he was supposedly on the job, and most of the characters are based on patients with whom he held extensive conversations. (At the time, he was also a student at Stanford University.)

Acting as his supervisor, write a letter of reprimand telling him to concentrate on his work and stop his creative writing while at the hospital; list several reasons why he should follow your advice.

2. While at Stanford, before and during the writing of the novel, Kesey took part in experiments involving several hallucinogenic drugs, including LSD and mescaline (derived from the peyote cactus). Free write for fifteen minutes on the use and abuse of drugs in our society, keeping in mind that some mental patients have been hospitalized because of the effects of drugs on their brains. Do not neglect the positive uses of drugs, either. Try to write about both sides of the issue.

Part 1

3. The narrator of the novel, Chief Bromden, often writes as if he is insane or under the influence of a hallucinogenic drug. For example, near the beginning of the book, he says, "They start the fog machine again and it's snowing down cold and white all over me like skim milk, so thick I might even be able to hide in it if they didn't have a hold on me."

Explain to a fellow student what you think the imaginary fog represents, who "they" are, and what mental problems Bromden may have.

4. The Chief's narration begins in the present tense ("They're out there"), then he starts using mostly the past tense shortly after the start of part 2 ("The way the Big Nurse acted so confident . . . that worried me for a while"), but occasionally he narrates a scene in the present tense. In an entry in your journal, discuss the effect this shifting of tenses has on the reader. For example, do the scenes narrated in the present tense seem more (or less) exciting than the ones narrated in the past tense? Why do you think Kesey chose this shifting style of narration?
5. Write a short story in which you use an experimental narrative style of your choice. Try something different from what you have experienced in your readings. The story may come from your imagination or actual events in your life, and be prepared to share the story with the rest of the class if you choose to.

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6. Write a letter to a friend who has (in your imagination) been committed to a mental hospital. Try to assure him or her that you understand the situation and that you are hopeful for the future. Ask well-reasoned questions about the environment and the treatment, while being diplomatic and not upsetting your friend by being too pushy. The object of your letter should be to offer hope and comfort while finding out how the friend feels about the situation and how he or she is being treated by the administration.
7. Investigate the conditions and treatment at a local mental institution by means of interviews, news articles, and/or personal observation. (Be sure to get approval from your parents or guardians, school officials, and the hospital administration before doing any in-person, "primary" research.) Then write an article for your school's newspaper on what you find out. Try to delve into facts as well as stating your opinions based on research. Give the reader a full picture of the hospital, its staff, the patients, their treatment, and your feelings about the hospital and doing research for the article. If you are not able to do in-person research, just imagine a non-existent hospital and make up the story as you go along, labeling it upfront as a fictional article based on your imagination.
8. Explain the Chief's vocabulary to someone new to the ward (a classmate can play this part). Take the role of an inmate and define such terms as Combine, "fog," Acute, Chronic, Wheeler, Walker, and Vegetable, as the Chief uses them in his personal, somewhat distorted context. Add any other words he uses that you think a new arrival would want or need to know, such as Shock Shop and Disturbed. Together, create a glossary for the new ward member.
9. One of the most compelling and emotional characters is the young man who stutters, Billy Bibbit. Imitate the personality of Billy and write a letter to an advice columnist, asking for help with your problems. Use as much detail and family history as possible, even if you must invent some to form an interesting letter.

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10. McMurphy brags about the fact that he is a gambler and admits that one of the main reasons he has come to the hospital is to make money playing cards and making other bets. "I'm a gambling fool," he says by way of introduction, then sings part of a song: "whenever I meet with a deck of cards I lays . . . my money . . . down."

What is your opinion of gambling? In your journal, free write for twenty minutes on the subject. Keep in mind that gambling is not only a form of entertainment and a way to make money but can also be a way of life, in the sense that some people take many risks that have nothing to do with cards or casinos. Explore your feelings on gambling in particular and gambling in general.

11. Write a letter to the editor of your school paper or the local newspaper in which you argue for or against legalized gambling. Note in detail the advantages and disadvantages for the public, and use details either from your personal knowledge or research as to what really happens when gambling is legal in a community, such as Atlantic City or Las Vegas. You can also bring in the issues of slot machines and lotteries being legal in many states.
12. The Chief imagines that Nurse Ratched is a machine, and he thinks that the Combine puts little machines inside people's heads to make them all conform. Although this imagery is based on the character's delusions, Kesey is making a point about the way many people behave as if they were machines programmed by the authorities.

Compose a letter to the author in which you agree with him or disagree, based on your observations of those around you. If you agree, then congratulate him and offer examples to back up his point. If you disagree, offer detailed examples to refute his point, while at the same time being as diplomatic and objective as possible. Your object is not to upset the author but to cause him to think about what he has written in terms of the society that you are a part of every day. Does his view of conformity as bad and restrictive help or hurt those who agree with him? How so?

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13. One of the subtopics of the novel is the power that women can hold over men. Dr. Sigmund Freud famously asked, "What do women want?" and Geoffrey Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, has his Wife of Bath argue that women want "sovereignty" over men. In a journal entry, discuss this conflict as fully as possible and prepare to share your thoughts with classmates if you wish. You may or may not refer to Big Nurse and McMurphy. The objective of this assignment is for you to explore your feelings on the subject by providing details of how you feel and why you feel that way. Who has the most power in our society: men or women? What is that power based on? Is society better off this way, or should there be a shift in power to the other side? Why or why not? What would be some of the results of such a change in power?
14. One major conflict between McMurphy and Big Nurse concerns whether she is going to allow the men to watch the World Series on TV. At first the patients vote against the idea, hoping to win favor in the eyes of Nurse Ratched, but soon afterward they come around to McMurphy's side and vote to watch the Series. However, Big Nurse will not give in and shuts off the power to the TV.

Write a dialogue between you and someone in authority regarding a similar conflict you have had or are having. The conflict may or may not involve what you choose to watch on TV; it can be any conflict with authority. Prepare to present the dialogue to the class if you wish. Be sure not to include demeaning or blatantly offensive statements that could hurt the feelings of others or get you into trouble with your teacher, the school administration, or any other authority figures that could cause you serious problems. At the same time, try to make your dialogue realistic and convincing, taking both sides of an issue and presenting an interesting discussion.