One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the story of R.P. McMurphy's humorous and tragic exploits as an inmate in an Oregon mental institution. McMurphy describes himself as a "bull goose cat skinner for every gyppo logging operation in the Northwest," and as the novel opens, McMurphy implies he has conned his way into the mental institution, believing this to be an easy alternative to serving a sentence on an Oregon work farm where he had been incarcerated for various petty crimes. He soon learns, however, that life in a mental hospital can be even more treacherous than prison.

This novel was published in the early 1960s; writers like Ken Kesey, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter Thompson were expressing in their work a growing dissatisfaction with American society as they had experienced it in the 50s. They campaigned against conformity, regimentation, the sterility of suburban life, and the threat of too much governmental control over the citizenry. They favored individuality and non-traditional life styles. They thumbed their noses at authority, especially the pettiness of institutional functionaries who mindlessly enforced strict adherence to meaningless rules. In a highly organized, industrialized, and technological society, they warned the American people not to become robots, not to lose their humanity. Ken Kesey is himself a character like this in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Kesey and a small group of friends dub themselves "The Merry Pranksters" and set out on a cross-country journey, critiquing American society, searching for alternatives. Kesey's fictional character R.P. McMurphy is the embodiment of these same attitudes.

Ken Kesey garnered much of his inspiration for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* from his own experiences in a mental institution. He worked the graveyard shift at a mental hospital and participated in government-sponsored drug experiments. Kesey was paid seventy-five dollars to take LSD, Ditran, mescaline, and IT-290; along with other college students, Kesey's reaction to the drugs was studied by the government. While working on the mental ward, Kesey became sympathetic to the patients and began to question the boundaries that had been created between the sane and insane. He began to consider whether madness really meant the common practice of conforming to a mindless system or the attempt to escape from such a system altogether. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey turned the mental ward into a symbol of the tricks of control taking place in postwar American society.
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Read and answer the following questions honestly and to the best of your ability.

1. Do you believe people diagnosed with mental illness should be kept away from society in institutions? Why or why not?

2. Do you believe that people diagnosed with mental illness should be treated with medication? Why or why not? What would be an alternative?

3. Would you rather express your individualism and be shut out of society, or conform and exist within society? Why?

4. When is it “okay” to conform?

5. When is it “okay” not to conform?

6. Can there be true individualism in our society? Why or why not?

7. Can you think of examples in which the efficiency of technology has distanced us from ourselves and others?

8. Can you think of instances in which you were dealt with in a faceless, impersonal way by government or big business?

9. Is schooling a dehumanizing experience? Work? The military?

10. What does it mean to be a hero in our contemporary world?
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Significance of the Title

The title of Kesey’s novel, which comes from a nursery rhyme, playfully invites the comparison between the workings of civilization and those of nature. A cuckoo’s nest may be just a playful name for a madhouse, but the common association of cuckoos and insanity comes from the baffling and brutal behavior of the cuckoos themselves. In nature, cuckoos lay their eggs in other birds’ nests, depositing one egg per nest. Because the newly hatched cuckoo chick is not related to its step-siblings, it throws the other eggs and even live chicks from the nest. It is a process by which an outcast becomes a tyrant and in which disorder, displacement, and competition hold sway over sensible design.

Darwin himself saw the behavior of cuckoos as an instinct, like the slave-making instinct of ants, that argues for nature’s brutal machinery of natural selection instead of divinely beneficent design. Nothing can escape being at some point destroyed by nature’s technologies: Indians used the ancient trick of fishing to lure and catch unsuspecting salmon. And salmon are lured to swim upstream to spawn and die.

How, then, are the traps of civilization different from those of nature? Or are they?

Give an example of nature’s cruelty to things that are weak and/or different.

Give an example of society’s cruelty to things that are weak and/or different.
Symposium

The first part of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* not only sets the scene for a battle between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, but also brings us into the world of freedom fighting against oppression. It is in our best interest to discuss the symbolism, themes, and implications of Part One.

Each group will pick one of the topics below and discuss it in front of the class. You will *not* meet before your presentation day. The symposium is essentially a conversation between all of you in which you offer your ideas, and agree and disagree with each other. While you have your conversation in the front of the room, the rest of the class will keep a log of your dialogue. After your group has discussed the topic at hand for about 15 minutes, the rest of the class will have the opportunity to ask questions, clarify ideas, and extend the discussion.

**Topics**

1. Critics refer to some scenes in this section as “black humor.” They deal with disturbing subjects like death with bitter humor. Cite three examples of black comedy in Part 1.
2. Discuss the importance of names in this novel: Ratched, Big Nurse, Chief Broom, Billy Bibbitt.
3. Cite incidents from the story to support or refute the following statement: The women in this story are being blamed for the illnesses many of the men suffer.
4. Cite incidents from the story to support or refute the following statement: Laughter and sex are necessary for a man to live a sane and happy life.
5. This novel was written in the 1960’s, a time when individuals believed that sometimes rules needed to be broken so that the individual can grow. Discuss the rules in the hospital and how they may be inhibiting the patient’s road to sanity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation (40)</th>
<th>Awesome (40)</th>
<th>Admirable (32)</th>
<th>Acceptable (28)</th>
<th>Amateur (24)</th>
<th>Awful (0)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates extensive planning and thoughtfulness with evidence from novel</td>
<td>Demonstrates planning with evidence from novel</td>
<td>Understands the topic</td>
<td>Has a moderate understanding of the topic</td>
<td>No evidence of preparation</td>
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<tr>
<th>Participation (40)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Offers his/her opinions and responds to groups’ ideas in a thoughtful and reflective manner</th>
<th>Offers his/her opinion and responds to groups’ ideas</th>
<th>Only offers opinion once or twice; does not engage with other group members</th>
<th>No participation</th>
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</table>
Characterizing Nurse Ratched

In Part I, we have been given the portrait of a strong, self-assured, perhaps deeply programmed woman, who is in charge of a ward in a mental institution. The author displays many qualities that give a good image of Ratched, the prime antagonist in the book. We know that she maintains a great deal of self-control as she attempts to “cure” the patients in the hospital; in staff meetings, she is the main force behind decisions; in any conflict with Doctor Spivey, she emerges victorious.

On the following TRAIT CHART, fill the blank space in the second column after each of Nurse Ratched’s traits with evidence from the text that supports that trait. In the last column, put the page number or numbers where you found the evidence. I have done the first one for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlling</td>
<td>Furious with the black boys for gossiping; makes her anger known to them. Tells another nurse that McMurphy is a manipulator; calls him insane. Shoots Pete with tranquilizer to make him stop talking.</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28, 29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourceful/Manipulative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanical</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-assured</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Condescending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined</td>
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</table>
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The Symbolism of Machinery

Throughout the course of your reading, you will keep a log of quotations that support the following statements. Using the bullet points as sub-headings, list the quotations on paper, noting which page each is from, and under which sub-heading (numbered statement) it belongs. You should have 30 entries by the end of the novel – at least one in each category.

1. Bromden’s fantasies are dominated by machines, as are the images of the novel.
2. The machine is seen as the opposite of everything that is natural.
3. The “Combine,” the name the Chief gives to organized society, is a term for a threshing machine, used for mowing down and harvesting wheat. How is this image appropriate?
4. When the Big Nurse is angry she is compared to a diesel truck, smelling of burning oil.
5. The machines in the stock shop are used to punish patients who step out of line.
6. The fog machine is used to isolate and confuse patients.
7. Machines are installed in the walls of the ward, and even in the patients themselves, to keep everything running according to the Combine’s plan.
8. The machines are the images of the mechanical order which the combine is attempting to impose on society; yet, paradoxically, they are instruments of chaos, associated with destruction and confusion.
9. When the inmates travel outside the hospital they notice the mechanical conformity that has been imposed upon the world during their absence.
10. The absolute conformity of the machine is not order, but chaos replicated over and over again with monotonous regularity.

Example

1. “Hum of black machinery, humming hate and death and other hospital secrets” (page 10).
2. “Before noontime they’re at the fog machine again but they haven’t got it turned up full; it’s not so thick but what I can see if I strain real hard. One of these days I’ll lose myself in the fog the way some of the other Chronics have… ” (page 42).

[ sub-heading number ..... quotation ..... page number ]
Figurative language

One of the most compelling features of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is Kesey’s knack for using unique phrasing. In Part 1, for example, Kesey says in the Chief’s voice, “I looked hard at anything that came into sight and hung on like a man in a blizzard hangs on a fence rail.” [a simile] In Part 2 he writes that Harding’s hands “are dancing the story to the tune of his voice...” [personification]

As you have seen from analyzing his similes in Part 1, they can be re-written, perhaps not as distinctively as Kesey would have phrased them, but in other words just as easy to picture. On the following FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE CHART, take the literary terms we have supplied below from Part 3, identify which type each phrase is, and re-write each one in your own words, appropriate to the book.

Literary Terms used:
alliteration
internal rhyme
metonymy
personification
allusion
irony
paradox
repetition
hyperbole
metaphor
parallelism
simile
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIGINAL</th>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>YOUR WORDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;...she was like a picture turned to the wall.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;I had to keep on acting deaf if I wanted to hear at all.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;...the one that got out of the back, is an old white-haired woman in an outfit so stiff and heavy it must be armor plate.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Have you ever in all your born days seen the like? Have you now? I swear to heaven, have you ever?&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;I'll wager it's a regular oven in there.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;...the men are standing their places on the scaffolding on the falls, just plaidshirted shapes in the mist from this distance.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;...the dust keeps coming...settling on the sage and soapweed round about and making it look like chunks of red, smoking wreckage.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;...Ellis pulled his hands down off the nails in the wall and squeezed Billy Bibbit's hand and told him to be a fisher of men&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Even the swing's stopped, nailed out at a slant by the sun, with the fat man petrified in it like a rubber doll.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;...I saw the house had its eyes clenched shut...&quot;</td>
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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

By Ken Kesey

Study Questions

Part One:

Pages 3-34

1. Identify Chief Bromden, Nurse Ratched, and McMurphy and give two characteristics of each one. What is Bromden's nickname?
2. What does Bromden do when he feels threatened? What does this indicate about him?
3. Identify the setting. How would you describe the atmosphere? Why?
4. Identify and explain the two classifications of patients on the ward when McMurphy arrives. Give the name of two patients in each classification. How is McMurphy classified?
5. What metaphors does the narrator use to describe the hospital and the ward? What does this suggest to you?
6. What is Nurse Ratched's objective for each of the patients? What methods does she use to achieve this?
7. Who is Mr. Taber? Why does Nurse Ratched consider him to be a success story?
8. Predict how you think McMurphy will keep the hospital from running smoothly.

Pages 35-64

9. Describe how nurse Ratched manipulates the patients during the first Group meeting McMurphy attends. What is Bromden tempted to do? Why doesn't he do so?
10. What does Ratched reveal about McMurphy? How does McMurphy react to her?
11. Why has McMurphy been sent to the mental hospital?
12. Describe Dr. Spivey. Do you think he is competent? Why/why not?
13. To what does McMurphy compare the Group Meeting? What do you think this means?
14. To what does Harding compare the patients? Why does he do this?
15. How do the men react after the Group Meeting? Why are they all afraid to oppose Nurse Ratched? How do you think this affects McMurphy?
16. What does McMurphy wager he can do in one week? How much does each man bet?
17. Why does the author, Ken Kesey, capitalize phrases like "Group Meeting"?

Pages 64-86

18. Identify three indications that Chief Bromden suffers from a serious mental illness.
19. What does Bromden think is inside Blastic when the men cut him open? What might this symbolize?
20. How does McMurphy react to the patients? How does his arrival affect the patients and staff? How does he initially affect Bromden?
21. What does Harding reveal to McMurphy about life on the ward?
22. Describe McMurphy's shorts and explain what you think they symbolize?
23. What does McMurphy do that causes Ratched to lose her composure?

Pages 86 (middle) - 108

24. Identify three changes McMurphy attempts to achieve on the ward. What is he able to achieve?
25. What do McMurphy and Dr. Spivey discover they have in common? How does this affect life on the ward?
26. Following Rawler's suicide, what do you think Bromden means by saying, "all the guy had to do was wait"?

Pages 109 - 122

27. How does Bromden correlate his "fog" with his experiences in WWII? Why does he try not to get too deeply immersed in his mental fog?
28. Relating to the fog, what does Bromden think McMurphy is trying to do to the men? Why does this upset him?
29. Why does McMurphy become angry and lose control during the first discussion about watching the World Series? How does he retaliate against the patients?
30. How does McMurphy suggest the men escape? What does he think will be effective in this plan?
31. When did Billy Bibbit first start stuttering? How has this affected his life? What do you think this signifies?
32. What happens in the second vote concerning the World Series? What do you think this reveals about McMurphy, Bromden, and Ratched?
33. What is the final outcome of the conflict over the World series? Explain whether or not you think McMurphy "wins."

PART TWO
Pages 125 - 147
34. How does Nurse Ratched retaliate against McMurphy for staging the silent protest?
35. How does Bromden learn what goes on in the staff meetings? Why is he allowed to be there?
36. What does Bromden believe he must clean up after the staff meetings? What do you think this symbolizes?
37. What does the staff doctor tell the staff about McMurphy? What do the residents conclude about him? To what three historic figures does one of the residents compare him?
38. What does Nurse Ratched intend to do with McMurphy? Why? Explain why you do or do not think her plan will succeed.
39. Briefly explain McMurphy's effect on Bromden,
40. What does McMurphy learn that causes him to be submissive to Nurse Ratched? How does he act differently? What effect does this have on the other patients?

Pages 147 (bottom half) - 167
41. What happens to Sefelt? Why does this happen? How does Ratched use this to warn the other patients?
42. Describe Vera Harding. How does Harding react when she comes to visit?
43. How does Vera Harding treat her husband? What do you think this indicates about their relationship?
44. What does McMurphy see in his bad dreams? What do you think these dreams symbolize?
45. What does Harding tell McMurphy about Electro-Shock therapy? About a lobotomy?
46-46. Identify the metaphor Harding uses to describe EST. What does he mean by this?
47. How does McMurphy classify Nurse Ratched to the other patients?
48. How does McMurphy explain his rationale for changing his tactics with Ratched? How do the men react?
49. What causes McMurphy to resume hostilities with Ratched? What does he do in retaliation? Why do you think he does this?

PART THREE
Pages 171-188
50. How do McMurphy and Ratched treat each other after he shatters the window? What do you think this reveals about both of them?
51. What is Ratched’s response to McMurphy’s first request for an Accompanied Pass? What does McMurphy then do?
52. Identify two ways McMurphy harasses Ratched. Which one of these do you think most irritates her?
53. Who becomes McMurphy’s ally in trying to improve the lives of the patients? How does he help?
54. What does McMurphy plan to do when his second request for an Accompanied Pass is granted? Who will be the chaperones? What does Ratched do to counteract McMurphy’s plans?
55. Explain what you think Bromden means by his statement, "...it wasn’t me that started acting deaf; it was people that first starting acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all" (175).
56. Identify two things from Bromden’s past that have caused him to feel incompetent and unnoticed.
57. What does Bromden tell McMurphy about his father and mother? What caused his father’s death?
58. Explain what you think Bromden means when he refers to the Combine.
59. What happens that causes Bromden to speak to McMurphy? What does Bromden say? Why is this significant?
60. What does McMurphy offer Bromden if he can lift the control panel?

Pages 188-218
61. Who does McMurphy sign up as the ninth man for the fishing trip? How do you think this makes both of them feel?
62. Why doesn't George Sorensen want to go on the fishing trip? How does McMurphy manipulate him into going?
63. What complication arises before the men can leave? How is it resolved?
64. How do the men at the service station initially treat the patients? How does McMurphy handle the situation?
65. Why does the boat captain refuse to take the men out in the boat? How does McMurphy solve the problem?
66. What changes occur in the men during the fishing trip? Why do you think they change?
67. How does S. Spivey avert a problem with the police after the men return to the dock? What does this reveal about him?
68. What has Bromden noticed about McMurphy throughout the day of the fishing trip? What does this indicate about McMurphy?
69. What plan does McMurphy intend to help Billy Bibbit arrange?

PART FOUR

Pages 221 - 245
70. Briefly explain Nurse Ratched's next maneuver and how it affects the men.
71. How does McMurphy react to the men's subtle accusations? What do you think this reveals about him?
72. During a group meeting when McMurphy is absent, what does Ratched tell the men about him? What sways Bibbit and Bromden to question his motives?
73. Explain what you think Bromden means by the metaphor, "...McMurphy was a giant."
74. How far is Bromden able to move the control panel? What does McMurphy then do that causes Bromden to feel differently about him?
75. What is Nurse Ratched's pretense for ordering special showers for the men who went on the fishing trip?
76. What causes McMurphy to attack Washington? Who joins him in the conflict? What is the immediate result?
77. Contrast the nurse on the Disturbed Ward with Nurse Ratched. What does she tell McMurphy and Bromden about Ratched?
78. How can McMurphy avoid EST? Why do you think he refuses?
79. Explain your interpretation of the rhyme Bromden remembers from his childhood as he is about to receive EST.
80. How does Bromden's reaction to EST differ from previous times? Why do you think this is so? What is significant about this treatment?
81. What does McMurry tell Bromden about his treatments? What physical signs does Bromden observe in McMurry before each EST?
82. Why does Ratched have McMurry returned to the ward? How does he act when he returns?
83. What do the other men want McMurry to do? How do they plan to achieve this?
84. Describe the Saturday night party on the ward.
85. What is revealed about Billy Babbitt's mother? Why is this information significant?
86. What does Fredrickson sprinkle over Sefelt and Sandra? What might this symbolize?
87. In the aftermath of the party, what does Nurse Ratched threaten to do concerning Billy Bibbit's action?
88. What happens to Billy? Who does Nurse Ratched blame? What is the irony of her accusations?
89. How does the conflict between McMurry and Ratched end?
90. Describe Nurse Ratched's physical and mental condition when she returns to the ward. What happens to most of her patients?
91. What is Nurse Ratched's "final play"? What effect does she expect this to have on the other patients? How does Bromden foil her plan? Why do you think he does this?
92. Explain what happens to Bromden in the denouement.
93. In retrospect, what does Bromden believe about the events in the denouement?