

# Free one flew over the cuckoos nest critiques psychiatry through literary devices...

[Environment](#), [Nature](#)



Western civilization has often tried to segregate variations from the established social norm. Prisons, universities and mental institutions were devised as a way to ghettoize those who think and act differently from others, giving them a place in society that is, at the same time, out of it. In the case of the latter of these organizations, in the 1960s there was much questioning of the nature of the people that truly deserved to be in it, and even if this was a proper separation or not. Many believed that this was a form of social oppression, with the psychiatrists holding excessive control over the patients. Others wondered what these institutions were really for, whether it was society's well-being or that of the individual. The mechanistic essence of American culture, which gave rise to both behaviorism and electroconvulsive therapy, looked to normalize the free, creative spirits of the supposed mental patients. The author Ken Kesey was a part of this counter-culture movement and experimented with psychotropic drugs so that he could feel himself as being freer; he also worked as an orderly in a psychiatric institution, giving him direct access to this problem. Furthermore, being a masterful author, he used literary devices to get this point across not only explicitly, but with artistic flourish as well, especially through symbolism. In *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, this author presents a treatise against oppression and the abuse of power in mental facilities, leading the reader to ask him or herself what the nature of mental illness really is, a theme expressed and enhanced by the use of literary devices. The American counter-culture movement in the 1960s looked for personal liberties against the oppressive regime of both economic and political factors that decided the fate of the country. This effort looked to protest against

many of the United States government's policies, including the imperial nature of its attacks on foreign soil. They believed that this State had too much power and control over its citizens, and that it did not truly represent them but the interests of big corporations with economic prowess. This also included the Civil Rights movement, which looked for equal rights for all the people living in the country. Notoriously, the people of this movement often turned to illegal recreational drugs for this experience of liberation that they sought, and believed that this society could not provide. As such, it was a very important time in American literature, with many creative minds raising their voices to participate and marking an important moment in the artistic and political heritage of this country. Kesey uses the fog to symbolize this oppression, isolation and clouded judgment in the novel. The former, because it is imposed on patients by Nurse Ratched. It represents isolation because it allows the patients an escape from their horrible reality by being able to hide in it, yet at the cost of being terribly alone. It also shows their clouded judgment by metaphorically expressing the lack of judgment that the patients had.

One of the most important aspects of mental institutions that activists protested against were the excessive control that the staff had over the patients. This included deliberating over the liberty to leave the facility both for recreational purposes or definitely. They also determined the activities that the patients could or could not do and forced them to take both psychological and psychiatric treatment. The interned patients were not allowed the liberties that many people believed that they deserved, only because they perceived reality in a way that was different from the rest. The

oppressive nature of this organization, which is almost a character in the story, is manifested more intensely through the use of stream of consciousness narration, with which one can feel the effects of the oppressive thoughts on the lead character. The quickness of his thoughts, manifested through punctuation marks, along with his frequent deviations that make reference to this secret organization, allow the reader to see and feel the horrendous effects of this organization on this character.

One of the great dilemmas that this poses is the importance that psychiatry gives to the well-being of society and of its individuals. Many argue that this science privileges the former over the latter. Indeed, many times the perceived craziness of the individuals only serves as a danger to their environment, but not themselves. The subversive nature of mental illness is presented through the character of Randal Patrick McMurphy; the institution is so intent on having a normalizing effect on him that they practically turn him into a vegetable, a plan that is mirrored with the character of Ruckly. “The most tragic moment in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, when McMurphy learns that he is the only non-voluntary patient. McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched and is then lobotomized against his will; at the same time, many of Cuckoo's voluntary patients recover their sanity and leave the institution” (Farland). As one can see, the pursued effects of the therapeutic processes were not necessarily for the patient's own benefit, but for society's, making the individuals conform to the established norm even through electrical or chemical methods. The novel shows this through the green light and seepage that develops when the staff congregate. As the Chief knows that they are morally dirty and is a schizophrenic, this

metaphorical filth is transported to reality into green muck, which appears when they unite to plot against the patients, and must be literally cleaned afterwards. One must also mention that this fight against social conformity was one of the most important aspects of the counter-culture movement, which believed the cultural policies to be outdated and oppressive.

As such, Kesey sharply criticizes the mechanistic nature of American culture, which tried to eradicate deviations from the norm, including subversive individuals. Modern science, from its Cartesian inception, looked to treat humans as automatous beings, immersed in the clockwork-like functioning of the cosmos. With its emphasis on statistics, it looked to predict and establish limits to human conduct, culminating in the behaviorist psychological program with B. F. Skinner and John B. Watson at its head. This emphasized the regulation of behavior and considered irrelevant that which could not be seen and measured, that is to say, everything except human actions. Later, statistics processes this data to establish standard ranges of behaviors that were usually in tune with societal markers and ideals. " The novel throws into relief the thin dividing line between sanity and madness, the extent to which definitions of mental illness depend on social as well as medical criteria, and the difficulty of judging whether someone is really ' mad' or not" (Loughran). The aim was for everybody to be normal, the same, and deviations from this pattern were thought to be abnormalities, mental illnesses that should be corrected.

This negation of the human soul, psyche or spirit, in tune with the mechanistic interpretation of the world, looked to homogenize human behavior, making everybody act the same. The eradication of subjectivity

and individuality that this implied, far from being a humanistic enterprise, also looked to change behavior by corporal punishment, through rewards and punishments. The most infamous of its treatments was electroconvulsive therapy, recommended for the most severe cases of schizophrenia and mood illnesses. This consisted in systematic electrical discharges through the central nervous system, in hopes that the disease would be cured through the reestablishment of the chemical balance in the brain. “ Ken Kesey's 1962 book, and the film version released 13 years later, are both credited with irreparably tarnishing the image of electroconvulsive therapy, or ECT, and quickening its departure from mainstream mental health care” (Swaine). *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in its dramatic climax, submits one of its main characters, McMurphy, to this type of treatment. Throughout the novel, McMurphy seems to be one of the characters that is most sane, yet the heinous treatment that they put him through basically makes him turn into the living dead. The mechanistic nature of America and behaviorism looked to benefit society from rebels like him, and achieved it many times through these procedures, but at the cost of liberty and independence. As many philosophers and historians have asserted, Western civilization, from its inception, has been intent on segregating those that think differently. One of the most notorious examples, which is not often taken into account, is Socrates' trial and subsequent suicide. Even though this philosopher is very highly regarded, his crime was going through town asking people questions about life. After his death, the precursor to contemporary universities, the Academy, was born, so that they would not bother other people with their questions. This is also mirrored in the

character of Jesus of Nazareth, with which there are many parallels in the story. Using symbolism, Kesey draws a comparison between McMurphy and Jesus Christ, including his rebellious nature, his going fishing with his friends, the cross shape of the electroconvulsive therapy table and his companions' liberation after his death. Furthermore, he constantly uses parables as ways of explaining his theory of liberation. These metaphorical stories only serve to help the reader perceive the connection between these two characters, but to also enhance the literary experience through metaphorical devices. It is easy to see how Jesus would be labeled as insane if modern psychiatrists were to encounter him. He would also be probably diagnosed with schizophrenia and could even suffer the same fate as McMurphy with the doctor's intent of normalizing him.

As such, the novel reflects the suppression of independent spirits that was at the heart of psychiatry. McMurphy is portrayed as a rambunctious and free individual, who is in the institution because he faked insanity to escape from hard labor at a prison. However, as was mentioned, this liberty leads him to electroconvulsive therapy against his will, leaving him in a dull and almost vegetative state. "The implication is that there is no space on the ward, or in the wider social world, for independent spirits like McMurphy, who insist on breaking all the rules" (Loughran). This establishes the science of psychiatry as a law-establishing organization, intent on systematically eliminating free thinkers by labeling them as insane. McMurphy's parable of the rabbits and the wolf presents this in a metaphor. Nurse Ratched, the wolf, through her oppression, has turned the patients into submissive rabbits, which cannot function in the outside. The intolerance of heretics, crazy people, witches,

child corrupters, or whatever the name that these oppressive forces wish to call them, is at the heart of Western civilization's essence, and Kesey helped reveal psychiatry as one of the tools that it had at its disposal.

Part of the counter-cultural movement, Ken Kesey used recreational drugs and worked as an orderly at a psychiatric hospital, experiences that influenced him while writing *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. People of the counter-cultural movement, who looked to chemically achieve that which the laws of the society did not allow them, often used illegal substances. "Both novels explore what Kesey saw as the conflict between modern industrial society and individuality, a struggle between conformity and freedom. This struggle was also central to Kesey's personal life, where he turned to psychedelic drugs to find personal liberation" (Oregon Historical Society).

The author believed that the use of drugs made him a freer person, and he wanted this to happen in everyday life as well. The relatively recent declarations of Edward Snowden, a worker for the National Surveillance Agency of the United States of America, only serve to confirm that this state of affairs has evolved and augmented since the 1960s, even though there are few protests about the subject. Kesey's time working as an orderly in an Oregon mental facility also influenced the story. Furthermore, the minute details and efficient depiction of mental illness lend realism to the story, allowing for a better and more impacting social critique.

In conclusion, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a counter-cultural novel that exposes the dangers and oppressive nature of modern psychiatry. Going against the lack of liberties that they perceived to have, the counter-culture movement protested against the oppressive policies of the government of



the United States of America in the 1960s. The activists that oriented themselves towards the problem of mental institutions claimed that the doctors had excessive control over their patients. This led them to question if their job was for the patient's well-being or that of society. The mechanistic nature of American culture begat behaviorism and electroconvulsive therapy, ways to deal with what were perceived to be mental illnesses. Nevertheless, the novel raises questions whether they were not used as tools of oppression against independent spirits, responding to the historical interests of Western civilization, intent on eradicating all those that do not conform to the social norm. This is all shown in the novel through the use of many literary devices, as has been shown. Finally, Ken Kesey's recreational drug use, as a way to reach personal liberation, and work as an orderly are also reflected in the novel. While the psychiatric organization has changed somewhat from Kesey's day to contemporary times, it is sorrowful to see that the rebellious and protesting spirit in the United States of America has died out, with the government fulfilling the omnivoyeur and oppressive properties that many writers of the middle of the twentieth century predicted.

## **Works Cited**

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