

One flew over the cuckoo's nest- ken kesey's concerns essay sample

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Ken Kesey voices a wide array of his personal views and values through his novel 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'. These concerns may have accumulated during his time working in a mental institution. It is in the orientation of the novel that these concerns are introduced. It could be argued that his main concerns were that of reality versus imagination, society robbing people of their individuality and the power of laughter. These values were very controversial at the time of the novel's publishing and essentially what caused 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' success.

Kesey introduces the question 'is this reality or imagination' early on in the novel through Chief's characterisation of being an unreliable narrator. After being detained due to his unwillingness to be shaved, Chief proceeds to explain his theory of the 'fog machine'. We, as the reader, know that this 'fog' is most likely a product of Chief's imagination. He then forces us to question this assumption through telling us, "It's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen." Kesey worked in a mental institution for some time, where he would have encountered patients such as Chief who believe beyond a doubt that what they see is reality. This provides the reader with a unique opportunity to delve into the mind of a person who society deems to be mentally unstable. Due to the effects McMurphy has had on the ward, Chief finally starts to listen to a man of the name Colonel Mattherson.

What Chief originally dismissed as a madman's ramblings, he now sees as sensible. He proclaims, "You're making sense, old man, a sense of your own. You're not crazy the way they think." This begs the question, is Chief really '

crazy the way we think'? Hitherto, Chief has narrated with a scary interpretation of the truth. He describes Nurse Ratched as she, "blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside." This is obviously not reality, but a mere crazed interpretation of it, most likely brought about by the administered narcotic drugs. Through the orientation of the novel and the introduction of the main character, we are forced to wonder whether we should trust Chief's observations. Chief's narration causes us to question what is reality and what is imagination throughout the rest of the novel.

It is apparent that one of Kesey's main concerns voiced in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is that society robs people of their individuality. The 'Combine' is an idea that is constantly referenced throughout the novel. The 'Combine' could be considered Chief's view of society. He believes that this hospital is the powerhouse for the rest of the Combine, with Ratched as the controller. "So she works with an eye to adjusting the Outside world too. Working alongside others like her who I call 'the Combine'... has made her a real veteran at adjusting things." The Combine acts as a way to mould people into what society deems to be normal. In the 1950-60's, those diagnosed with mental disabilities were shunned and defenestrated from society until they could be ridded of their 'illness'. This makes the mental institution in which Chief resides arguably the place where the most of the 'adjusting' occurs. Chief tells us about how the system works, "The ward is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighbourhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is." He

then goes on to say that once they have been fixed, they go back out into society “ good as new” and fix other ‘ mistakes’.

What Chief calls ‘ mistakes’, are actually personality traits that differ from the norm. The character Harding is a prime example of this. It is suggested that Harding admitted himself due to his homosexuality. Homosexuality was, and still is, shunned by many people in today’s society. The only difference being, in the 1950’s, homosexuality was considered a curable illness, whilst today it is widely known as genetic and perfectly natural. Upon reading the way Chief describes the Combine, readers are brought to ask the question: “ Am I part of the Combine?” Chief would say ‘ yes’, but the Nurse Ratched would deny it’s very existence. When characters with an abundance of individuality, such as McMurphy, come into the picture, we start to see the system as what it truly is: a way to smother creativity and liveliness.

When the lively character McMurphy enters the ward, he presents the patients with a concept that will eventually prove to be a better cure than the Nurse’s rule: laughter. McMurphy is first introduced to the story as the patients are hearing his voice echo throughout the ward. What was strange about this particular event is that instead of seeing McMurphy “ creep in the door and slide along the wall and stand scared”, McMurphy jests with the Black Boys. Joking and laughing was probably something the patients of the ward seldom hear. This establishes early on that McMurphy is not going to be an average patient, that he will be a catalyst for change in the ward. When the patients first see McMurphy, he greets the ward as a whole, then commences to laugh. “ Nobody can tell exactly why he laughs, there’s

nothing funny going on... it's free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth... This sounds real.

I realize all of a sudden it's the first laugh I've heard in years." It is after this event that the patients seem to, slowly but surely, become better. This is apparent through Chief's quick transition from fractured thinking, to fluent readability. The effects of McMurphy's light-heartedness is also seen through the other patients, such as the change from being too frightened to vote against the Nurse, to the majority ruling in the revote. Such drastic changes cause the reader to wonder if laughter truly is a cure, and how Kesey would know this. Given that Kesey spent time in a mental institution, one could assume that he either witnessed the positive effects laughter had on patients, or saw what a detrimental effect a lack of laughter could have. McMurphy immediately states what his intention will be in the ward, " to bring you birds fun an' entertainment". This aim is achieved within his first week of being admitted, which (coincidentally or not) is when the patients begin to make progress. Kesey values the power of laughter and it's positive effects on patients, this value is personified through the character of McMurphy.

' One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' is riddled with injections of Kesey's own views and values. However, it is in the orientation of the novel that these ideas are most potent as they are being introduced. It is through his characters that these concerns are discussed. The author uses Chief as a means of posing the question of reality versus imagination. Chief's fractured stream of consciousness causes the reader the question his reliability as a

narrator. Kesey created the character of Nurse Ratched as a way to present his belief of society robbing people of their individuality. It is through her tyrannical ruling and ' the Combine's machinery that the patients are being moulded to what society deems to be acceptable. The author uses McMurphy as a way to present his idea of the best cure: laughter. The free spirited McMurphy is what eventually brings the patients to make progress. Kesey, very subtly or otherwise, presents his views and values at an early stage in his novel ' One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'.