

Symbolical elements in the novel english literature essay

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Category 1

" Exploring the symbolical elements in the novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and how it depicts it the setting as a microcosm of our society"

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Abstract -

After reading the novel ' One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest' by Ken Kesey, I came to understand that it is much more than just a work of contemporary fiction. Beneath the unusual yet successful setting of a story in a mental asylum, the author has injected a strong dose of symbolism. Also, one can notice, that most of this very symbolism is directed at commenting on our society. This essay probes into the denotations in many aspects of the novel, which are only cloaked truths about the society we live in. The question ' Exploring the symbolical elements in the novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and how it depicts it the setting as a microcosm of our society' is answered by studying the denotations in the major components of the setting. The title, the characters, objects and certain events. This essay contemplates the underlying symbolism in these aspects, while directly highlighting their depiction of the setting as a microcosm of the society. After one deeply analyses ' One Flew Over..' it isn't extremely difficult to understand the author's brilliant use of the whole concept of symbolism. Almost every

aspect of the novel honestly comments on the kind of happenings in our society. The control of the powerful and the suppression of the weak, smothering of individuality, silent conformity and finally, the idea of revolution. These very themes in the novel are nothing but a mirror image of those in our society too. And the author exceptionally, re-emphasizes this very representation, with the brilliant use of symbolism in the setting throughout the novel. Word count – 263

Introduction -

'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest' is a novel by Ken Kesey that tells a story of power and suppression, revolt and silence set in the backdrop of a mental asylum. Narrated by a protagonist, who is 'silent' in his own terms, this novel looks at the whole concept of 'insanity' from an unexplored and fresh perspective. The striking feature is however, how the author puts us through the entire plot, showing us the other side of what we believe is 'reality'. The narrator Native Indian Chief Bromden, the cold and emasculate Nurse Ratched, and the revolutionary McMurphy may appear to be the protagonists of this novel, each in their own way, paving the story and playing their respective roles. But Ken Kesey has left it ultimately to the reader to realize how these people are not mere characters but a representation of all that persists in the real world. While The Chief is an embodiment of a common man, running away from the claws of force, injustice and suppression, the nurse stands for power, control and invisible torture. McMurphy, throughout the novel, personifies courage, change and hope. Apart from these characters, Ken Kesey efficiently included denotations in almost every

theme. From objects such as the fog machine, to events such as the 'fishing trip' and the idea of 'shock therapy', there is a symbolic representation of everything that we see and everything that we 'happen' to ignore in our world. Ken Kesey brilliantly manipulates the setting, establishing the theme of how the asylum is nothing but a microcosmic depiction of society, a society we love so much but which is maybe not as good as it is made out to be. The literary term for such a term is the use of 'microcosm'- a small universe representative of a larger one. In the entire course of reading this book, what captivated me is how deceptively appears to be a piece of fine contemporary fiction but in reality is a bitter commentary on highly transparent masked truths about society. This pushed me to explore all the possible hidden symbolical elements in the novel and study 'To what extent does the use of symbolical elements in the novel depict the setting as a microcosm of society in the novel 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest?'

Symbolism in the title -

The title 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' comes from a child's rhyme, which also serves as an epigraph. Cuckoos are birds that do not build their own nests and are not even raised by their own mother. Often a person is called a 'cuckoo' when considered insane. The title is clearly allegorical in its intent. The "cuckoo's nest" is the hospital, where the patients are unwanted and isolated from the real world. They have no one to call their own, no place to belong to. And the one who allegorically "flew over" is McMurphy. The Chief also quotes the entire poem in Part 4, recollecting it as a game he played with his grandmother. There is also a large amount of symbolism

towards birds throughout the novel. Birds mainly stand for complete freedom and for being clear-headed but the patients of the psychiatric ward are essentially caged birds, trapped physically by the locked doors and burly guards as well as mentally by drugs, electro-shock treatments, and Nurse Ratched's psychological abuse. The title holds a deep symbolical meaning throughout the novel, comparing all the inmates to cuckoos in a nest, lost and helpless. But the one that flew over McMurphy portrays how he might have wanted to fly over the system itself. Even in our society, the cuckoos are the people held helplessly through control, going in different directions, flying east and west following their respective destinies. But while some stay caged and pushed down in their nests there are also the others. The ones who defy control, who fly over the 'cuckoo's nest'.

Symbolism in the setting -

The setting of this novel is quite understandably that of a mental asylum. The course of the novel takes place majorly if not entirely within this very asylum. Even with the absence of an elaborate, detailed description of what the ward or hospital physically looked like, one can almost immediately imagine how it would have been, owing to either the stereotypical image of a mental asylum or The Chief's insights. The author brilliantly manipulates the setting to show the reader its underlying connotations. The asylum by itself is a metaphorical representation of a type of society that persists in our world. Kesey uses the specific setting of a fictional mental asylum to represent the non-specific realities of the real world. The literary term for such a technique is the use of a "microcosm" - a small universe

representative of a larger one. Throughout the novel, the inmates can be seen to aware of only two places in their world, ' the inside' and the ' outside'. The inside is a trap, a delusional safe place held with The Combine's cold claws of control, but the outside seems a distant place, and ironically enough, it even terrifies the inmates. That is maybe why, rarely do the inmates talk about the freedom outside, even though they might secretly hope to released. They are trained into believing that the asylum is a more secure place. While for the inmates it is a simple difference of ' inside' the asylum and ' outside' the asylum (the real world), if we look deeper at what it could mean to the ' normal' or ' sane' people, these two words could symbolically represent the walls we build to protect ourselves from the troubles of the outside. And in spite of being aware of the existence of the evils in the society, we are so accustomed to safely hiding ' inside' and becoming oblivious to everything else on ' the outside'. The society, majorly consists of such people, just like most of the inmates of the asylum, who willingly let themselves be controlled, afraid to stand up to the power of the authorities, and hide ' inside' the safety of their homes and maybe hide even inside themselves, turning a blind eye to everything else, to the ' outside'.

Symbolism of characters -

Each character in the novel is destined to represent different kinds of people in our society. In their own way, the significant characters personify the types of people or groups that exist in the real world. It can be quite fairly said that the 3 most important are Nurse Ratched, Randle Patrick McMurphy and The Chief. Nurse Ratched, also known as the ' Big Nurse' is the head

administrative nurse at the asylum. While she is an embodiment of corrupt control and clever manipulation, she is also evidently the main antagonist of the novel. In the beginning she enters the ward and the novel 'with a gust of cold'[1]. Her name itself suggests a negative undertone, with Ratched bearing a striking similarity to the words 'wretched' or 'ratchet'. With an unusually perpetual calmness, and in complete control over her own emotions, she is the human face of The Combine. In contrast to her machine-like and stern personality, she possesses an undeniably non-mechanical and human feature in her large bosom; that she conceals with the help of her heavily starched uniform. Kesey's choice to portray Ratched as a tool rather than simply a living dictator alludes to the notion that she symbolizes the power, influence, and motives of the society employing her. This symbolizes a sense of sexuality that the Nurse exudes and accentuates her role as a twisted mother figure for the ward. Quite appropriately quoted by one of the inmates, Harding, when he says 'She has a genius for insinuation'[2]. In the eyes of Chief Bromden, she is herself like a machine who "sits at the center of this web of wires, like a watchful robot, tend her network with a mechanical insect skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants"[3]. Her kind of control and manipulation isn't the sort that is palpable. In an almost invisible sense, The Nurse has a strong power over the inmates' mental and physical well-being by the strategic use of shame and guilt. But even through all the inhuman torture she puts the inmates through, she is able to act like 'an angel of mercy'[4]. This false self she puts up symbolizes how the oppressive forces of the society gain more supremacy through the dishonesty of the

powerful. She poses a striking similarity to different political groups, universities and organizations that channel people into confined ways of thinking and living, without even sometimes letting them be aware of such. In an almost undetectable and cloaked form of control, oppressive authorities in the society kill the individuality of the people, suppressing their personal creativity or difference in opinion. Nurse Ratched is nothing short of a personification of all these forces and forms of power. Chief Bromden, the native Indian inmate, is the narrator of the novel. Probably one of the longest admitted patients, The Chief is an often bullied, timid and weak in ironic contrary to his otherwise 'big and strong' exterior personality. Even with the build that could frighten everyone else, The Chief is belittled, apparently from his childhood itself, which leads him to feeling 'small'. He even says to McMurphy at one point, who is the first person he talks in the asylum ever, "I'm way too little. I used to be big, but not no more "[5]. The symbolism of how size is not just a physical aspect, but that in the mind of The Chief, 'big' means control and 'big' also means defying control is evident when he calls Nurse Ratched 'The Big Nurse' and the same time tells McMurphy "You're twice the size of me"[6]. Not only as a result of him succumbing almost completely to the powers of the control panel, but also owing to his troubled past, The Chief pretends to be deaf and dumb. This act symbolizes how he chooses to become oblivious to everything around him, maybe because he believes that it is the safest thing to do. But ironically, this very character poses as the narrator, which emphasizes how in spite of his feigning deaf and dumbness, he is actually the one with the deepest insights throughout the novel. We also are informed at one point, by the chief himself "It wasn't

me who started acting deaf, it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all[7]. Chief Bromden is a seamless example of 'the ones who give in'. The kind of people, who are weakened over time, exhausted from hoping, that eventually they fall prey for the forces of any kind of oppression. The real world comprises of such people too, who unable to fight against the societal norms, choicelessly let the power take over. Numbed of thinking and sometimes voluntarily blinded towards all that is happening around them, they live in silence and under command like The Chief did for over 10 years until McMurphy became his change, and led him into overcoming his fears and weaknesses. The chief also represents the 'earthy' and ancient way of life that was washed away in the name of 'modernization' and 'globalization'. Nature's lack of voice in modern society is further highlighted by Chief's pretense as a deaf and mute. The Indian uses silence as a cover and a voiceless barrier against the threats he faces. The forests, gods, and animals of Bromden's tribes are silenced and rooted out to allow modern mechanized society to expand, as exemplified by the relocation of "Papa's" tribes and the deforestation of the country. Such destruction is seen in the morality of modern man as well, since businesses and admirable leaders in the community at times employ deceit and fraud for their own betterment. The 'hero' figure and protagonist of the novel, Randle Patrick McMurphy is a personification of change and revolution. Quite aptly described by The Chief "He was the logger again, the swaggering gambler, the big redheaded brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare"[8]. McMurphy represents the coming of change. He stands a source of inspiration and long

awaited hope for the inmates and symbolizes the kind of people or than one person who helps the people under control break free and rebel against the authority. We've seen the likes of such people in our society namely Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks or from a religious perspective, Jesus Christ. McMurphy also teaches the inmates the power of laughter. The Chief, after ridiculing this very aspect of his in the beginning later realizes the reason behind McMuprhy's constantly pestering the inmates to learn to laugh, he says " Because he knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy"[9]. Laughter symbolizes freedom, and letting go. In the asylum, it stands for unknown happiness and freeing ones self from the conformity of The Combine. The call of change brought in by McMurphy is present even in his name, since the initials of Randall P. McMurphy yield " RPM," an acronym for " revolutions per minute." McMurphy fights small but significant battles throughout, like that one instance where he arranges for a vote to watch a baseball game. McMurphy successfully introduces the idea of democracy into the closed, totalitarian atmosphere of the mental hospital. With the powers of democracy liberated and firmly strapped to his belt, Mac took a step toward the philosophy of passive resistance through his actions. Following the steps of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., McMurphy and the patients defy societal commands and pressures by defiance rather than violence. Despite such noble defiance, society seems to have trouble handling the revolutionary sense that created the foundations of the people's own country. Apart from these 3 significant characters, the other minor ones such as Harlding, Billy Bibbit and the doctor also add to the symbolical aspect of

the novel in their own imperative way, representing the different kinds of 'normal' people existing in the society, who have given into societal norms and believe that they do not have the power or strength to rise against the command of either the society or The Combine.

Symbolism in the objects -

Throughout the course of the novel, the reader is introduced to several objects and their purpose of existence in the asylum. While a few of these are primarily from the narrator's point of view, and have no adequate proof for their existence otherwise, they embrace a deep symbolic meaning individually and there is a very evidently strong reason why the author has included them in the novel. A recurring object/ occurrence that The Chief constantly addresses in the book is The Fog Machine. However, the reader cannot be sure whether in fact, a fog machine does exist in the walls of the asylum like the narrator claims it to be owing to the reason that The Chief is diagnosed with schizophrenia. The fog that frequently surrounds him, especially in situations where he is distress could either be due to his habit of hallucination or the adverse effect of the drugs given to him by the hospital. However The Chief believes that ' the fog' is released by The Nurse during the occasional meetings with her mind numbing routines. He even admits to feeling ' safer' within this fog, and that is probably because the fog is way of escaping reality, and a mask from the things that actually happen around him in the ward. This fog is more of the mind, and a place that is far and more secure from the otherwise harsh truths of the asylum. Proved exactly so when The Chief says, " I know why now, as bad as it is, you can

slip back in it and feel safe"[10]and also talks about how " being lost isn't so bad anymore"[11]. And when McMurphy begins to free the inmates from their inhibitions and fears, The Chief says," McMurphy keeps trying to drag us out of the fog"[12]which symbolizes his attempt to bring them to face reality and have a clearer stand, rid of the fog and murkiness in their minds." I see there's light seeping out this peephole, green light, bitter as bile. The staff meeting is about to start in there, is why there's this green seepage', says The Chief when he is called to clean the room while the staff members and the Nurse have their meeting. This could be well another hallucination of The Chief, but the symbolism of the green light and the seepage cannot be overlooked. As he talks about the poison that oozes of out the skin of these orderlies and nurse, the color green and these occurrences might even symbolize the evil and poisonous thoughts and actions of these members only further reinforcing the fact that the asylum is not a place of healing, but only harm for the patients. The Shock Shop referred to as the ' filthy brain murdering room[13]' by The Chief is the place where the EST (Electric Shock Therapy) takes place. EST, as put quite bluntly by McMuprhy is ' shooting electricity through the skull'[14]and is an extreme end of punishment if any inmate dares to go against The Combine. Lobotomy as Harding explains to McMurphy is ' Front-lobe castration. I guess if she can't cut below the belt, she'll (Nurse) do it above the eyes[15]'. These forms of severe torture are the nurse's indirect warnings to the inmates to stay silent and controlled. And she even convinces the inmates to believe that these for in fact for their own benefit. " Everything done here if for the patient's good[16]" Harding ironically exclaims. The therapeutic meetings held during these torturous

forms of punishments, inflicting pain upon the bearers are also persistent in our society. Anyone who dares to rise against the law, even if right in doing so, is pushed down through such means. And all the actions taken by those in power are masked under the notion that it is for the sake of our good. Wars fought, development at the cost of others lives and many such activities are justified under the misled belief that ' everything that the government, or the country does is for the greater good'. The Combine is The Chief's concept of elements in the society that aim at conforming people to match their wants. He refers to it as ' a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she has the Inside'[17]. The Combine throughout the novel, is what stands as a representation of authority and control and The Nurse is only considered a public face for this inhumane system.

Symbolism in actions and events -

Another deeply symbolic element in the novel is the instances where The Nurse controls not just the inmates but every aspect of their daily life to an unimaginable extent." The Nurse is able to set the wall clock at speed she wants, by just turning one of those dials in the steel door[18]", says The Chief. The fact that The Nurse controls the time itself in the asylum speaks volumes about how helplessly controlled and smothered in the claws of The Combine, the inmates are. The radio and TV that they watch is also manipulated to fit The Nurse's choice, misleading them into believing that ' world news might not be therapeutic[19]'. The control panel helps the nurse control all such things. Even in our society such ' control panels' are present.

For instance, the powerful source of media that is evidently moderated by certain censors, editors and political groups who try to influence what we think by controlling what we see and delude us into believing that it is 'reality'. The event of the 'fishing trip' is somewhat a radical departure from their otherwise tedious and normal life at the asylum. It is a symbolically an escapade and a direct conversation with reality for the inmates. Alone in the water, away from the Nurse, the asylum and society itself, here the inmates are in charge of their own destiny, for the first time ever. They are in control of their actions, and with intuition and judgment as their only tools; the inmates learn to embrace their individuality during the course of this trip. This event symbolically represents how structured a person's life is in the society today, and certain occurrences like this might help change that and teach one to break free from the shells of conformity.

Conclusion -

It is undeniable that the setting is clearly the main source of Kesey's attempt in posing his perspective to the readers. It is difficult not to notice the extremely hard-hitting truths the author addresses through the story of this novel. The highly symbolical elements present in the setting are indeed an effective way of communication between the author and the reader. 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest' is nothing less than an unswerving commentary on the reality of the kind of society that we live in. Though we often give into believing that we live in a truly free society, we fail to see the kind of controlled freedom that we possess. The profession one chooses, their education, their lifestyle, their opinions and thoughts, their economic status

are all variables that society almost forces one into pre-determined guidelines. Personal thinking and creative is smothered, in fear of being a threat, and not everyone who wants to succeed is given a chance. People who prove otherwise are deemed 'unstable', and submerged. This is all ironically practiced under the name of 'development' and for the 'greater good', because in our society the painful yet glaring truth is that more hurting happens than healing, that which we sometimes fail to notice. And Kesey's choice of this very asylum for the setting, with the inclusion of it's symbolical elements found throughout in the characters, objects, events and themes clearly underlines the hypocrisies of our society.