

One flew over the
racist, sexist, and
homophobic nest



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The amount of characters in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey may seem unusual and maybe even a bit overwhelming. The patients and staff of the ward make up the novel's long list of characters. However, Kesey's choice of numerous characters goes deeper than just names. From Nurse Ratched's "ball-cutting" tendencies to Dale Harding's homosexuality, the characters seem to represent an issue that was present in society during Kesey's time. Although the issues of mental illness itself are evident in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey shows and promotes the racism, homophobia, and sexism present in society through the characters of the ward.

Living as a minority in a judgmental, discriminatory society was a common issue during Kesey's time. Blacks were disrespected, and almost always treated as inferior to whites. Instead of addressing the racism and projecting a change in a positive, revolutionary way, Kesey reinforces the inferiority that blacks faced. This is seen throughout *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, when the only orderlies of the ward are black, and seen as slave-like. To Nurse Ratched and the patients, they are seen "as the enforcers of Big Nurse's will, they have little identity of their own. They are strong, dumb, and full of inarticulate hatred" (Horst 469). This idea ties back to society's view of blacks during Kesey's time. The fact that Kesey portrays the orderlies in this slave-like matter proves that he accepted such racism as a reality in society. Kesey makes a racist remark in his writing when the orderlies state, "Why, who you s'pose signed Chief Bromden up for this foolishness? Innians ain't able to write" (Kesey 191). Thankfully, in today's society, illiteracy is not a

racial stereotype. However, such racism and stereotypes did exist during Kesey's time and he expresses that through the novel's characters.

At the time Kesey was writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, women did not have the freedom that they have today. This sexism and lack of freedom is enforced throughout the novel. Nurse Ratched, the "leader" of the ward, is powerful and demasculates the other men. However, does a strong, independent woman have to be portrayed in such a negative way? Nurse Ratched's domination of the ward patients is arguably necessary in order to properly run a mental institution. Her management, while also being a woman, is immediately seen as castrating. On the other hand, if a man were to take her place, would her actions be as 'castrating' to the men?

According to the ward patients, the only thing womanly about Nurse Ratched is her breasts; "A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big womanly breasts on what would of otherwise been a perfect work, and you can see how bitter she is about it" (Kesey 5-6). This quote shows that Kesey may have believed the traditional gender roles that women are sexual objects that revolve around a man's world since Nurse Ratched's big breasts seem to be the only attractive feature to the men. Therefore, it is not surprising that the men think of prostitutes like Candy and Sandy as the 'girls of their dreams'. As Leslie Horst states, "The social role of the prostitute is, of course, to serve men, to be available, and to make no demands for anything other than money. As many feminists have noted, these expected behaviors are at base little different from those of the traditional wife" (Horst 467). When Candy joined the men on the fishing trip, the men were delighted with the experience of being around a powerless

woman. This proves Kesey's portrayal of powerful, strong women like Nurse Ratched in a negative way; likewise, weak, dependent women like Candy and Sandy in a positive way. Overall, Kesey's enforcement of traditional gender roles and bashing Nurse Ratched's opposition to gender conformity proves his support of anti-feminism during his time.

It was not until recently that homosexuality was removed as a legitimate disease of the mind. Therefore, it is not surprising that homophobia was such a present issue in society during Kesey's time. Dale Harding, a voluntary patient on the ward is known for his "hands so long and white and dainty I think they carved each other out of soap, and sometimes they get loose and glide around in front of him free as two white birds until he notices them and traps them between his knees; it bothers him that he's got such pretty hands" (Kesey 20). His feminine qualities lead to strong belief that he was in fact homosexual. It was also seen to be that Harding was 'afraid' of his attractive wife. He even is threatened by her beauty, "According to the notes listed by various patients in the log, Mr. Harding has been heard to say that she 'damn well gives the bastards a reason to stare'...he has also stated that his wife's ample bosom at times gives him a feeling of inferiority" (Kesey 44). The fact that Harding felt inferior to his wife shows the gender roles are flipped. Since it was rare for a homosexual to 'come out' to society because of the harsh rejection they would have faced, it makes sense that Harding never admitted to his homosexuality. Therefore, the homophobia present during Kesey's time is expressed through Harding's character.

Every character of Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* tells an issue about society. The long list of characters may seem obnoxious at first, but <https://assignbuster.com/one-flew-over-the-racist-sexist-and-homophobic-nest/>

once one takes a deeper look, Kesey's expression of such issues are vividly seen. Once presented, Kesey's thoughts of such issues are brought out. He seems to agree with the racism, sexism & gender roles, and homophobia that are brought up, which shows how far society has come since Kesey's time of ignorant people. Although the issues of mental illness itself are evident in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey shows and promotes the racism, homophobia, and sexism present in society through the characters of the ward.