

Sanity and insanity in one flew over the cuckoos nest and the yellow wallpaper



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The question of how to determine what is sane and what is insane is explored in both Kesey's Novel ' One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' (1962) and Perkins Gilman's ' The Yellow Wallpaper' (1896). The terms " sanity" and " insanity" are often attached to a great amount of ambiguity; one definition states that sanity is " the ability to think and behave in a normal and rational manner". It can be argued that one of the key themes of both texts is exploring the limitations of and challenging such a strict definition; the readers are led to question who has the authority to decide what constitutes as " madness" and what does not. At a glance, it appears obvious who is " sane" and who is " insane" in both texts, while Perkins Gilman's novella may appear to focus on the deteriorating mental state of its protagonist and Kesey's novel seemingly following the journey towards freedom from an institutionalised madness. However, when examining both texts further, this differentiation becomes much more indistinguishable.

The representation of insanity in Kesey's novel is communicated to the readers solely through the eyes of the " crazy" Chief Bromden, revealing his past in a narrative of hallucinations and anachronism. Kesey uses the symbolism of the " combine" to portray the idea of dramatic irony throughout the novel; instead of being actually therapeutic, the ward has the machine-like intention of distorting the characters into the submission of conformity to social expectations by replacing " clarity of mind" with a " fog". Due to this distortion, it is questionable to what extent the readers can trust the judgement of Chief Bromden when analysing what is and what is not sane. It is clear that with this symbolism, Kesey is portraying the idea that insanity can be looked at from more than a psychological perspective -

the manipulation of people can make them believe they are insane and they can therefore be controlled. Looking specifically at the character of Harding, it is hard to tell whether it is his non-compliance with the social expectations laid out by the ward that makes him appear insane through such distorted eyes of the Chief, or if he is truly insane. Kesey tells us that Harding's wife "gives him a feeling of inferiority" due to his "limp wrists" signalling the possible homosexuality that has forced him to seclude himself in a psychological unit to 'recover' from what, in 1962, was seen as illness. From a 21st century perspective, it is certainly hard in this case to distinguish between what is insane and what is actually manipulation of a character who failed to conform to what was expected of "normal." Kesey's use of this first person narrative successfully manipulates the readers' own ideas of insanity. However, the idea of being unable to distinguish between insanity and manipulation resurfaces towards the end of the novel when the Chief speaks for the first time in 15 years to McMurphy about his ideas regarding the "combine" after always being seen as "deaf and dumb." McMurphy's response, "I didn't say it didn't make sense, Chief, I just said it was talking crazy", actually breaks down the distinction between "crazy" and "sense", implying that there is a great difference between what does not make sense to the society of the time and what is truly "crazy". Therefore, it appears that as the characters themselves make the realisation of how mechanic the ward is, the distinction between sane and insane becomes much more obvious.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is an 1896 novella that follows the story of an unknown narrator and her struggle to escape from the constrained life

enforced on her by her husband, John. In a similar way to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the journal-like narrative of Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' uses the motif of madness as a metaphor to oppose the attitudes of 19th century society. The novella portrays the status of 19th century women; we are told "He (John) hates me to write a word", implying that were a woman to partake in typically male activity and have to think academically, it would be detrimental to her health. However, Perkins Gilman's use of varied language and metaphorical speech regarding the wallpaper, such as how "flamboyant patterns commit every artistic sin", implies just how educated the narrator is. Therefore, when she states how "it is such a relief!" to have an outlet for her feelings, it is much easier to trust the narrator's judgement and conclude that the narrator's eventual and arguably inevitable insanity is not because she has no ability of "rational thinking", but because she is under the restricting control of a male dominated world; it is more the lack of public voice and isolation that is detrimental to her health and not the writing itself. However, literary critic Beverly A Hume has declared "female authors dramatize their own self division, their desire to both accept the strictures of patriarchal society and reject them." This argument would suggest that it is questionable to what extent Perkins Gilman intended the narrator to appear truly "insane", or if it is her uncommon yearning to contest social expectations that forces the narrator to simply believe she deserves the title of "hysterical". In a very similar way to *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the novella explores dramatic irony to contest how common beliefs of the time may have been much more manipulative and even exploitative than helpful for the mentally ill. This manipulation inescapably blurs the boundaries between how to

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distinguish between what is Sane and what is insane and suggests that while it may have been the author's intention to portray how "division" from society leads to insanity, this is actually questionable.

Alternatively, it can be argued that in Kesey's novel, while manipulation by the mechanics of the "combine" forces the characters to believe they are insane so they can be controlled, it may seem that McMurphy's unmanageable influence allows the characters to reclaim their "sanity" and turn it into a level of strength. When comparing the men in the ward with the Big Nurse in part 4 of the novel and the Chief admitting, "maybe the Combine wasn't all-powerful" it could be argued that Kesey is implying that it is much more "insane" of the Big Nurse to have had so much control; the realisation of Harding towards the end of the novel that "perhaps the more insane a man is, the more powerful he could become" makes the readers question whether Kesey is really arguing that power is, or should be, the ultimate goal of the characters, or if it is just the strength to realise that no matter where or who they are, they can survive in reality. After the key event of the fishing trip in part 3 of the novel, Chief Bromden realises "you have to laugh at the things that hurt you...to keep the world from running you plumb crazy". It is this moment where the laughter of the characters portrays that they can't be truly insane and would suggest that this realisation allows the characters themselves to finally distinguish between sanity and insanity and escape from the distorted and "foggy" world the Big Nurse trapped them in. Therefore, with the fact that the characters themselves are able to eventually distinguish between sanity and insanity, it can be argued that the novel itself serves an overarching purpose of

questioning the conventional meaning of insanity. Therefore, if we trust Kesey's interpretation, making it uncomplicated too distinguish between the two.

In both Kesey's novel and Perkin Gilman's novella, characterisation and plot development is extremely important when making the distinction between sanity and insanity. In 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', the form of the novel, being split into four parts, portrays the gradual weakening of McMurphy as a character. The readers are led to question whether the protagonist McMurphy is actually psychopathic, or whether he pretends to be to escape from the "rigorous life on the work farm" he had been forced employment on for "fighting and fucking too much". Upon his arrival in the ward, he declares himself "bull goose loony"- language that can arguably be seen to disregard the dangers of mental illness and portrays McMurphy's initial misunderstanding of how the ward is progressively oppressive the more "crazy" a person is. It is clear that his deviant behaviour and "hassling" of Nurse Ratched is represented in a comical way, almost as though it is a game to him to defy "the combine". Throughout the novel, it appears McMurphy is a "martyr" to the other characters; the fact that he is not affected by the "fog" that the other characters are so terrified of perfectly symbolises the power, or strength, he holds over the carefully constructed system. It is clear that his purpose is to allow the other characters to realise they are "no crazier than the average asshole out walking around on the streets", suggesting that Kesey is trying to explicitly make a differentiation between sane and insane. However, the final part of the novel presents McMurphy's "exhaustion" escalate into what could

arguably be seen as him truly having psychopathic tendencies. While it can be argued that his death portrays the idea of his strength saving the other characters, the final attack on the Big Nurse, “ after he’d smashed through that glass door” seems to be driven by a violent madness where McMurphy had gone past “ rational thinking” and much further than what was solely a fight against her domination.