

ANALYSIS

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962)



Ken Kesey

(1935-2001)

“Chief Bromden, so named because he is of Indian descent but also because he is the chief sweeper in the psychopathic ward of an Oregon mental hospital, tells how he and the other inmates with whom he has shared confinement for ten years are buoyed by the arrival of Randle Patrick McMurphy. McMurphy, who has gotten himself transferred to the hospital from a prison, where he was serving time for statutory rape of a teenage girl, is a loud, laughing Irishman. He challenges the sadistic control of Head Nurse Ratched, who has browbeaten the frightened men into abject docility. Bit by bit he restores some self-esteem in the men and even stirs the long mute Chief to talk. For fomenting rebellion, and assaulting the Head Nurse, however, he is subjected to repeated shock treatments and a lobotomy that reduces him to blank passivity. As an act of mercy the Chief then smothers McMurphy and escapes into the outer world.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1946-83) 558

“*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey is a Gothic novel....an honest, claustrophobic, stylistically brilliant first novel which makes us shiver as we laugh...Gothic and comedy are Janus-faced.... The important theme is, again, the compulsive design. The ‘Big Nurse’—as the narrator calls her—is an authoritarian, middle-aged woman who tries to impose her will upon her lunatics—she must make them fear and respect her so that she can feel superior. She exerts power not to help others but to help herself: her compulsive design cannot stop—except through violence—because it is all she has. The ‘Big Nurse’ is no longer a woman—she has become a Frankenstein monster. All of her gestures, commands, feelings, and possessions are mechanized: ‘there’s no compact or lipstick or woman stuff, she’s got that bag full of a thousand parts she aims to use in her duties today—wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter, tiny pills that gleam like porcelain, needles, forceps....’ She is ‘precise, automatic.’ But...the Big Nurse cannot flee from nature. Although she is monstrous, she is still partially female—and the more she tries to exert her ‘will to power,’ the more she desperately wants (unconsciously) sex—some kind of affection....

The narrator, an inmate of the asylum, lives in a kind of fog, but he is able to recognize that the authoritarian ruler is more insane than he...In the upside-down world, the 'cuckoo's nest,' 'insane,' and 'sane' are meaningless words—words the Combine imposes....Mr. Kesey is less concerned with ideas than he should be. There are the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys.' The Combine is dismissed quickly, but we wonder whether it is enough to proclaim the insanity of the system...Opposed to...images of the Combine are natural images—free movement, warmth, pastoral....But Mr. Kesey realizes that such 'openness' is never completely achieved in the Combine-world. McMurphy *can only be natural by violence*....Mr. Kesey...is a poet, not a philosopher. He employs a consistent range of images to express his almost manic condemnation of the system—we accept these more easily than his 'message'."

Irving Malin
"Ken Kesey: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*"
Critique V.2 (1962) 81-84

"Only twice since the Second World War, in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, have serious American novelists made a conscious effort to transport the novel into the realm of the absurd—up to now the realm occupied principally by European dramatists and novelists (such as Genet and Kafka) and by Albee and Kopit in the United States....*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is as tightly organized and directed as *Catch-22* is loose and unfocused. It has few wasted moments or scenes; it has no wasted characters. The novel's greatest strength lies in Kesey's refusal to throw his people away for the sake of comic effect. Most of the characters in the novel, all of the principal ones, are connected with a madhouse, as either confinees or keepers. This is a situation made to order for the kind of comedy at which Heller excels, but Kesey expands it, enlarges it. His people are funny, but not in the same way as Heller's. They are not truly mad, for one thing....

Chief Bromden sees the nurse as a representative of 'the Combine'....Her three orderlies are frightened semi-sadists who relish their permission to tyrannize the patients as a compensation for their fear of the nurse and their strong feelings of inferiority—it is neither accident nor racism that Kesey makes them Negroes or that one of them, a dwarf, is the result of his mother's rape by a white man....

There is no flabbiness, there are no episodic loose ends in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as there so obviously are in *Catch-22*. Kesey's book is controlled, tight; it moves forward with the inevitability of great argument. And we have seen, perhaps paradoxically, the successful portrayal of absurdity, because it requires a tightness rather than a looseness of form, also requires argument, the positing of directions from which and toward which and around which the action and the characters may move—requires, if you will, at least the potential existence of the Court or Godot or the Rhinoceros or an American Dream or a Combine....*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* thus becomes the first truly successful American novel of the absurd since World War II."

Joseph J. Waldmeir
"Two Novelists of the Absurd: Heller and Kesey"
Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature V.3 (1964) 192-204

"As the comic doomsday vision has come to dominate the fiction of the post-World War II period, it has recently acquired the title of 'black humor'....Never before in our literature, perhaps, has the blackness been so bleak or the comedy so savage. Recent examples which loom largest, all novels of the 1960s, are Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Thomas Pynchon's *V*. If, for example, we read Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest* as a paradigm of the predicament of modern man, we find the entire world a nuthouse, with Big Nurse in her stiff, starched white, imposing her power through the use of all her gleaming, glittering, flashing machinery...

Her power completes the degradation and dehumanization of her victims, who are efficiently divided into two groups: the 'hopeful' Acutes, who 'move around a lot. They tell jokes to each other and snicker in their fists...and the hopeless Chronics, who are the culls of the Acutes—the 'Chronics are in for good...[and] are divided into Walkers...and Wheelers and Vegetables.' The great fear of the Acute is to become a Chronic, as has happened to one Ellis, who came back from the 'brain-murdering room,' or the 'Shock Shop,' nailed against the wall in the same condition they lifted him off the table for the last time, in

the same shape, arms out, palms cupped, with the same horror on his face. He's nailed like that on the wall, like a stuffed trophy....Ellis may be one version of modern man, hopeless, helpless, self-crucified, committed for life to a super-efficient asylum that destroys what it cannot dehumanize."

James E. Miller, Jr.
"The Humor in the Horror"
Quests Surd and Absurd
(U Chicago 1968)

"The novel is set in a mental institution which is, in many respects, a microcosm of the society-at-large. It is to Kesey's credit that he never strains to maintain the parallel at any cost—it is a suggested parallel at most, and, where it suits his novelistic purposes, Kesey lets it go completely. His protagonist is one Randle Patrick McMurphy, pronounced psychopathic by virtue of being 'overzealous in [his] sexual relations.' His purpose in the institution, as in life apparently, is both to have a hell of a good time, and to defy "ball cutters," defined by McMurphy himself as 'people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to.'

McMurphy is a truly monumental character—a gambler, a braggart, a fantastic lover, and a gadfly who insults and goads those who resist his charismatic injunctions. While he is something of a sensualist who dwells regularly on the ecstasies of sexual transport, and even goes so far as to bring his whores into the hospital to restore the vitality of his moribund fellow-psychopaths, McMurphy feels himself and his comrades the victims of women, not their lords and masters...His techniques of resistance and defiance are mostly pathetic, as they can achieve what are at best pyrrhic victories. One is never tempted to question the validity, the nobility, or even the necessity of McMurphy's defiance, but no mature reader will be convinced that his techniques can realistically accomplish what Kesey claims for them at the novel's end—the reclamation of numerous human beings who had grown passive and torpid...

At one point, McMurphy characterizes the inmates of the hospital as 'victims of a matriarchy.' In Kesey's view, modern society is a reflection of womanish values—archetypically responsible, cautious, repressive, deceitful, and solemn. One must look to the spirit of the whore if one would know what is best in women, and what can best bring out what is vital in men. There is no doubt that Kesey labors under a most reactionary myth, involving the mystique of male sexuality, which sees men as intrinsically better than women in terms of the dynamism and strength they can impart to the universe. Unable rationally to account for the disparity between such a projection and the puny reality of our male lives, Kesey waxes fatalistic, though never submissive, and sees 'ball cutters' everywhere. It is a kind of paranoid, conspiratorial view of things, not without its measure of accuracy....

At the heart of Kesey's notion of what is possible for modern liberated man is a phenomenon which one may call porno-politics....Advocates of porno-politics are usually utopian socialists who lack the vision and patience to realize their goals politically: that is, they are youthful dreamers who are frustrated by the customary routines through which men achieve power or influence...Unable to affect the masses of men or to move political and social institutions, he transfers the burden of realizing a perfectly harmonious society to sex. In Kesey's novel, we have what seemingly amounts to a *reductio ad absurdum* of familiar Freudian propositions. It is repressed sexuality which ostensibly lies behind every psychosis, and which is responsible for the acquiescence of all men in the confining conventions of Western society. It is in the spirit of random and thoroughly abandoned sexuality that Kesey's McMurphy would remake men, and subsequently the world...Other talented people are caught up in such projections, and are delivering gospels of sexual salvation with a hysterical dogmatism that is, for many of us, laughable and pathetic....

Kesey's brilliance is evidenced by his ability to be seduced by porno-political utopianism, and yet not to yield to it entirely. What saves him are his sense of the ridiculous and his understanding of men as fundamentally dishonest and irresolute. Kesey wants to believe that the source of all terror and passivity is somehow sexual, that the liberation of sexual energies in the form of primal fantasies will enable men to conceive of themselves as more passionate and autonomous individuals....What the inmates have done is simply to exploit certain readily available clichés issuing from standard interpretations of modern man as

the perennial victim of sexual repression....What is sickening is their desire to please the therapists by revealing what they are supposed to, rather than what is really inside them....

Kesey loves McMurphy, and identifies with his aspirations—he wants men to be free, to laugh the authorities down, to refuse to be manipulated. He wants, moreover, to go along with McMurphy’s sexual orientation, and to be as optimistic as McMurphy about the effects of sexual liberation on the reigning political and social atmosphere....[Yet] we are never quite certain whether to laugh at McMurphy as well as with him....Throughout the novel, we know that nothing McMurphy does, or encourages his comrades to do, will make any substantive difference to the system that we all despise....His is a heroic endeavor in every way, but McMurphy is at bottom a little lost boy who gets into the big muddy way up over his head....His libertarian apocalypticism is sincere, but in McMurphy’s own character we can see that a libertarian sexual orientation ultimately has little to do with making men free as political and social beings. McMurphy needs no sexual swagger to be free...

When he loses his laugh, he grows desperate, and places upon sex that burden of hope for transcendence which the reality of sexual experience must frustrate. When, at the very conclusion of the book, McMurphy rips open Big Nurse’s hospital uniform, revealing, for all to see, her prodigious breasts, we see where McMurphy’s porno-political vision has led him. Unable to affect a world that victimizes him, a civilization which, in the words of the British psychoanalyst R. D. Laing ‘represses not only “the instincts,” not only sexuality, but any form of transcendence,’ McMurphy is driven to rape the reality incarnate in Big Nurse.... By his action, he demonstrates the original futility of his project.”

Robert Boyers
“Porno-Politics”

The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences 376
(March 1968) 36-52

“Chief Bromden is his real name, this immense schizophrenic, pretending he is deaf-and-dumb to baffle ‘the Combine,’ which he believes controls the world: ‘Look at him: a giant janitor. There’s your Vanishing American, a six-foot-six sweeping machine, scared of his own shadow....’ Or rather Bromden is the name he has inherited from his white mother, who subdued the full-blooded Chief who sired him, called ‘The-Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-on-the-Mountain.’ ‘He fought it a long time,’ the half-breed son comments at one point, ‘till my mother made him too little to fight any more and he gave up’....

Its very sentimentality, good-guys bad-guys melodrama, occasional obviousness and thinness of texture, I find—like the analogous things in Cooper—not incidental flaws, but part of the essential method of its madness. There is a phrase which reflects on Kesey’s own style quite early in the book, defining it aptly, though it pretends only to represent Chief Bromden’s vision of the world around him: ‘Like a cartoon world, where the figures are flat and outlined in black, jerking through some kind of goofy story that might be real funny if it weren’t for the cartoon figures being real guys’....One might, indeed, have imagined Kesey ending up as a comic book writer, but since the false second start of *Sometimes a Great Notion*, he has preferred to live his comic strip rather than write or even draw it.”

Leslie A. Fiedler
“The Higher Sentimentality”
The Return of the Vanishing American
(Stein and Day 1968)

“In essence, any version of the story is a transcendental one. Central to it is the hero, more Jacksonian than Jeffersonian man, intuitive in action, non-intellectual in habit, anti-social, anti-urban, and full of the freedom and strength inherent in Nature. The enemy he fights is society, artificial, complex, institutionalized—civilization, if you will, the enemy of Randle McMurphy and Hank Stamper [*Sometimes a Great Notion*] as it was of the Virginian and Huckleberry Finn. Oppressive, conformist, regulatory, civilization is the suppressor of individual freedom and the mindless slave of a material goal. Opposed to it, the hero becomes the ultimate idealist, sacrificial but triumphant, intuitively sensitive to a higher and more spiritual good, and, in spite of the trappings of reality with which his author may surround him, the central figure of a romance.... He becomes the familiar sacrificial figure; like Robert Jordan protecting the flight of Maria, or Sidney Carton at the guillotine, he imitates the Christian martyr....

Big Nurse Ratched [is a] matriarchal symbol, destroyer of manhood, rule-maker, civilizer, and devil. The conflict thereafter is simple: Hero McMurphy vs. Villainess Ratched.... She [is] supported by all the resources of the hospital and staff. Nobly, altruistically, McMurphy sets out singlehandedly to rescue his wardmates from oppressive, regimented civilization.... In a last defiant gesture, McMurphy rips the uniform from Big Nurse, exposing her as a mere woman, and is led away captive to lobotomy to become a mindless vegetable.... Though he does not escape, his ally, the Columbia River Indian Chief Broom does, and in him the natural man ultimately triumphs. For it is Chief Broom, the Indian pretending dumbness in the face of civilization's blind indifference to him, who rescues McMurphy's mindless body by choking it to death, and goes over the hill to his own freedom."

John A. Barsness

"Ken Kesey: The Hero in Modern Dress"

Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Language Association XXIII: 1

(March 1969) 27-33

"Although first published in 1962, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* still enjoys a wide readership. Kesey's 'hippy' reputation and the book's unusual expression of anti-Establishment themes, ranging from rebellion against conformity to pastoral retreat, would explain its current popular appeal. The critics' response to the book is less understandable. A warm reception by reviewers has been followed by relatively little critical interest....

The insightful Harding clearly recognizes that McMurphy, like the comic strip savior, whose silver bullet annihilates Evil, has freed the inmates from the clutches of the monster Big Nurse. The Lone Ranger reference underlines an aesthetic set out clearly in the novel. Briefly, Kesey's method embodies that of the caricaturist, the cartoonist, the folk artist, the allegorist. Characterization and delineation of incident are inked in bold, simple, exaggerated patterns for obvious but compelling statement. As in the comic strip, action in Kesey's novel turns on the mythic confrontation between Good and Evil: an exemplary he-man versus a machine-tooled, castrating matriarch ever denied out sympathies. Both are bigger than life; both are symbolic exaggerations of qualities; neither is 'realistic'.... Characters and incidents are types, bound by set characteristics, before they are uniquely individual....

The television 'western' intersects the Lone Ranger and folk song references to emphasize frontier values. Kesey uses the stereotyped cowboy hero for precisely the reasons he is often attacked: unrelenting selfhood and independence articulated with verbal calmness and defended by physical valor and ready defiance of opposition. Stock 'western' formulae constitute a convenient reservoir of popular literary associations for depicting McMurphy in easily definable terms. Kesey's mode of simplification voices a moral vision rooted in clear-cut opposition between Good and Evil, between natural man and society, between an older mode of existence honoring masculine physical life and a modern day machine culture inimical to it, between the Indian fishing village and the hydroelectric dam. Modern society standardizes men and straitjackets its misfits; it causes the illness which it quarantines. The spiritual residue of the American Old West opposes the machine culture; but the West, as such, is doomed like McMurphy....

For Kesey, the comic book superheroes...were the true mythic heroes of his contemporary adolescent generation....He realized this interest most spectacularly later in Merry Prankster days by affecting the superhero's costume to image transcendent human possibility (witness his Flash Gordon-like garb at a Vietnam teach-in in 1965 and his cape and leotards at the LSD graduation in 1966).... Bromden's vision of McMurphy as a saving giant recalls airborne superheroes like Superman and Captain Marvel, miraculously aiding others in one fell swoop; also, we are hereby conditioned for the depiction of McMurphy as Christ, crucified on the cross-shaped electroshock table on behalf of the ward. For Kesey, the heavenly Christ and the supernatural comic book hero stand on common mythic ground as images of human potential. McMurphy's...power of miracle is transmitting his traits to others. He can do the impossible by executing the fishing trip against Big Nurse's wishes and healing sick men with his fists. He has the superhero's efficacious physical power but, like Christ, the magnitude of his threat to society forces his crucifixion....

The comic strip also inspires the characterization of Big Nurse. The Combine, a machine culture which harvests and packages men, is modern Evil; and Big Nurse, its powerful agent. She shares the comic strip villain's control over modern technology....and she punishes on the electroshock table. She is Miss

Ratched—the ratchet—essential cog in ward machinery (also the racket wrench, adjusting malfunctioning inmates?). Her giantism is expressed in her nickname, Big Nurse, and frequently in descriptions of her.... A hard shell of plastic, starch, and enamel encases Big Nurse's humanity. The impenetrable surface of her 'doll's face and doll's smile' iconographically represents her stunted feelings. The militaristic, stiff nurse's uniform constrains the sexual and maternal potential of her admirable bosom. She is part of a machine attempting to level even sexual differences....Our lack of sympathy is tied to her static nature as a principle, not a human being. The comic strip is essentially a pictorial representation of stereotyped moral and psychological truths for unsophisticated readers....

Kesey looks to dormant Indian values, represented in [potential] by Bromden's size, for answers to problems of modern culture. Residual Indian pastoralism and regard for physical life, plus a yet strong sense of community, represent a possibility for life in defiance of the Combine; but these values need inspiration, inflation by McMurphy's Spirit. Kesey's central image is the superhero's metamorphosis from mortal weakness to supernatural strength....Bromden is McMurphy's Tonto, the silent but loyal Indian companion under auspices of his white spiritual guide. Equation of McMurphy and the 'masked man' not only stresses McMurphy's savior role in 'western' terms, but also sums up the previous relationship between McMurphy and Bromden in order to overturn the traditional expectation of Indian subservience. The Lone Ranger and Tonto become, respectively, the sacrificial Christ and his independent disciple, a writer of Holy Scripture carrying Good News composed of both men's values.

Only Tonto leaves the asylum: Bromden's Indian values imbued with McMurphy's Spirit are Kesey's final answer to the questions asked by the book. Strategic use of the Lone Ranger, just before McMurphy's demise and Bromden's complete metamorphosis, crystallizes the book's pivotal racial relationship before redefining it....We are reminded that McMurphy is not a 'realistic' character, but a representation of certain qualities shared by Moby Dick—natural vitality, strength, immortality, anti-social destructiveness. However, this is a caricature white whale, emblazoned on the Irishman's black underpants to emphasize his sexually intoned vitality, and bearing a devilish red eye linked to McMurphy's red hair and volatile Irish nature. This is a cartoon Moby Dick, minus the cosmic horror and mystery, precise in its suggestions and domesticated for Kesey's purposes....

Harding has concealed his homosexuality, at least bisexuality, behind his considerable learning. He is the modern intellectual avoiding simple realities...Harding is closest to the intended reader, college educated and uprooted from moral values of Popular culture by academic prejudices. Like the reader, he can recognize the comic strip aesthetic but is unwilling to admit its moral truths. The novel offers simple truths in a simplified mode, taunting the reader for his literary condescension and related moral weakness... Kesey encourages anti-intellectualism, at least anti-academicism....

The book leads us in the wrong direction. Even the reader recognizing the self-indulgence in exaggerating the modern world's complexity may deny that moral problems are simple or that a frontier defiance dependent upon physical courage and raw individuality can solve them....In my judgment the book's major weakness lies partially in a wavering treatment of McMurphy as 'symbol.' Kesey rejects the profounder symbolism of Melville, frightening in its incomprehensible mysteriousness, for the delimited symbolism of the comic strip superhero. Our sympathy with these 'unrealistic' and superhuman heroes is always reserved. We cannot expect psychological fullness from them. Kesey wishes to shorten partially this aesthetic distance to increase our sympathy with McMurphy, the human opposite to the plastic monstrosity Big Nurse. Kesey risks the simplification of his statement. Unfortunately, he does not manage to have it both ways: as he rounds out the character McMurphy, we rightly expect a fuller range of human response than necessary for a 'symbolic' representation of masculine physical vitality. But our expectations remain unsatisfied.

The rebel McMurphy resembles the prankish schoolboy against the schoolmarm or the naughty boy against the mother. Although the book recommends laughter as necessary therapy against absurdity, there is a euphoric tone of boyish escapism and wish-fulfillment to McMurphy's humor too often reminiscent of the bathroom or locker room. The euphoria at times embarrasses, as in the maudlin, communal warmth of the fishing boat trip and the ward party. In sum, the novel too often shares the wish-fulfillment of the comic strip without preserving the hard lines of its mythic representation....

Bringing prostitutes into the asylum is saving therapy which, contrary to Kesey's intents, fails to save.... Sefelt's prodigious sexual powers are merely adjunct to his epilepsy and Billy Bibbit's sexual initiation brings suicide. Despite McMurphy's joking estimate of Bromden's sexual potential, the Indian is asexual; he embraces only the lobotomized body of McMurphy in defense of the Spirit.... We are left with a somewhat sentimentalized over-simplification of moral problems.... Kesey has not avoided the dangers of a simplistic aesthetic despite his attempts to complicate it. He forgets that the comic strip world is not an answer to life, but an escape from it."

Terry G. Sherwood
"One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and the Comic Strip"
Critique XIII.1 (1971) 96-109

"*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is about a mental hospital (Kesey worked in one while writing it). It is dominated by Big Nurse, a female of dread authority. She is the servant, or rather the high priestess, of what is referred to as the 'Combine' or 'system,' another version of the notion that society is run by some secret force which controls and manipulates all its members, which is so common in contemporary American fiction. Big Nurse keeps the patients cowed and docile, either by subtle humiliations or punitive shock treatment. In a crude way she embodies the principles of Behaviorism, believing that people can and must be adjusted to the social norms.

Into her ward comes a swaggering, apparently incorrigible character called Randle McMurphy. He is outraged to see how Big Nurse has reduced the men to puppets, mechanically obeying her rules. He tries to inculcate by example the possibilities for independent action, for the assertion of self against system. By the end Big Nurse finds an excuse to have him lobotomized, but her authority has been broken and most of the inmates break free of the institution. The opposition is intentionally stark. Big Nurse speaks for a fixed pattern, the unbreakable routine, the submission of individual will to mechanical, humorless control. McMurphy speaks an older American language of freedom, unhindered movement, self-reliance, anarchic humor and a trust in the more animal instincts.

His most significant act is to persuade a group of the inmates to accompany him on a one-day sea voyage. Most of the men are frightened to venture outside at first (they are mainly self-committed to the institution). It is this fear which keeps them cowering inside Big Nurse's routines. But McMurphy persuades the men to come with him, and he duly leads them to the edge of the land—where the ocean starts. The voyage they embark on is one of very unconcealed significance: it affords the various pleasures of sex, drink, fishing, and the authentic joy and dread of trying to cope with the immense power of the sea. McMurphy has brought them all out of the System, and into—'Reality.'

It may be objected that such a parabolic simplification of American life is excessively schematic. McMurphy is like a cliché hero in a cartoon-strip, a Captain Marvel or Superman; while Big Nurse is a cartoon horror—like Spider Lady, who drew her victims into an electrified web (cf. the electric shock treatment meted out by Big Nurse). I think this is deliberate. Comparisons with cartoons are made throughout, so Kesey is hardly unaware of his technique. Someone calls McMurphy a TV-cowboy; a girl gives him some underpants with white whales on them because 'she said I was a symbol.' He is addicted to comic-strips and TV which have in turn nourished his stances and speeches. You could say that he is acting out one of the most enduring and simple of American fantasies—the will to total freedom, total bravery, total independence.

Big Nurse is a projection of the nightmare reverse to that fantasy—the dread of total control. Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) records Kesey talking about 'the comic-book Superheroes as the honest American myths,' and Kesey may be defying us to distinguish comic-book clarity from mythic simplicity. In the contemporary world as he portrays it, to be a hero you have to *act* a hero (it is a discovery in his next novel that while weakness is real, strength has to be simulated: 'you can't ever fake being weak. You can only fake being strong'). McMurphy has had to base his act on the only models he has encountered, in cartoons and movies. He is, if you like, a fake, a put-together character with all the seams showing. But, the book suggests, such fakery is absolutely necessary, unless you want to succumb to authentic weakness and the mindless routine supervised by Big Nurse. It is McMurphy's fakery and fantasy which lead others out into reality. In time, it would be Kesey's.

What makes the novel more interesting than just another cartoon, or John Wayne film, is that Kesey understands the need or compulsion to fantasize which is prior to the emergence of such apparitions as McMurphy and Big Nurse. As some of the men in the institution realize, they are really driving McMurphy to play out the role of heroic rebel. When he finally moves to attack Big Nurse, the act which gives her the excuse to have him lobotomized, the narrator recalls: 'We couldn't stop him because we were the ones making him do it. It wasn't the nurse that was forcing him, it was our need that was...pushing him up, rising and standing like one of those motion-picture zombies, obeying the orders beamed at him from forty masters.'

Fantasies of the weak converge upon him; one of the burdens McMurphy is carrying (and he is exhausted by the end) is the number of wish-fulfillment reveries which are secretly, perhaps unconsciously, projected on to him by the inmates. The cliches he acts are the cliches they dream. It is worth remembering that he was committed to the institution as a psychopath: the psychopath as hero is not a new idea in America....The inmates of the asylum in Kesey's novel are American and as such they have a particular popular culture determining their most elementary fantasies. If they could dream collectively they would dream McMurphy. From one point of view that is exactly what they do.

We must read McMurphy, then, in two ways. In a sense he is an authentic rebel who steps to the music that he hears; yet there is a sense in which he is marching to the music of the fantasies projected on to him and, as such, in his own way a kind of 'zombie' too, a servitor of the versions imposed upon him. Perhaps Kesey intends us to understand that McMurphy's heroism is in realizing this second truth, and nevertheless continuing with the imposed role. He is a singular man inasmuch as not many people would be able to support the fantasies of strength and independence projected on to him; the majority are more likely to submit to the controlling plot and imposed pictures of the Combine and step to the mechanical music of Big Nurse.

But how we react to McMurphy necessarily depends on our sense of the narrator, since his version of things is the only one to which we have access—and he is a giant, schizophrenic Indian called Big Chief. He is a rather notational Indian, a representative of the towering vitality of the original life of the American continent, now tamed to terrified impotence by all the mechanical paraphernalia of the white man's institutions. McMurphy teaches him to regain the use of his strength and at the end of the novel he is running away from the hospital and towards the country of his ancestors. This is all fairly obvious. What is unusual is the brilliant way in which Kesey has recreated the paranoid vision of a schizophrenic in the narrating voice.

Big Chief's vision of the hospital as a great nightmare of hidden machinery, wires, magnets, push-buttons, and so on, is utterly convincing. He is sure that the powers in the institution have fabricated a completely false environment: 'they' can accelerate or decelerate time, the windows are screens on which they can show whatever movie they want to impose as reality, they have fog machines which fill the air with a dense scummy medium in which Big Chief gets utterly cut off from everything and lost. They can do whatever they like with individuals because they have installed automative devices inside them (such as Indwelling Curiosity Cutout). It is a very Burroughs-like vision. This coherent paranoid fantasy extends to the world outside the hospital ward, for that world too is being 'adjusted' by Big Nurse and her like.

What others would call factories and suburban housing developments, Big Chief sees as evidence of the spreading power of the Combine, which works to keep people 'jerking around in a pattern.' What the Combine is spreading is another version of entropy—all individual distinctions and differences erased and nature's variety brought down to the deadly uniformity of a mechanically repeated pattern. Some people may want to get 'out,' or protest, but any such deviants are sent to the hospital where special machines can adjust them. (One interesting point is that a simple man may escape the Combine—'being simple like that put him out of the clutch of the Combine. They weren't able to mold him into a slot.' This sense of the special value of simplicity is recognizably American, and it is related to the detectable anti-intellectualism in Kesey's work.)

For Big Chief, McMurphy is the man who demonstrates that the Combine is not all-powerful: McMurphy makes the fog go away and enables him to see things clearly; he makes the pictures imposed on

the windows vanish, so that when Big Chief looks out he sees the actual world. He gives Big Chief the sense of what it is to be an individual; he restores reality to him, and restores him to reality. At one point Big Chief writes: 'I still had my own notions—how McMurphy was a giant come out of the sky to save us from the Combine that was net-working the land with copper wire and crystal.' The importance of people's notions of other people, and reality, looms large for Kesey."

Tony Tanner
Cambridge University
City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970
(Jonathan Cape 1971) 373-76

"The present adaptation, said to be more streamlined than the former [produced with Kirk Douglas], is a gruesome soap opera, but the audience is delighted. It laughs, applauds, and at times shouts its approval. At least that is what occurred at a (sold-out) preview I attended. The play was literally a howling success and may very well continue to be so, especially with the kind of young folk I saw at the performance....

Over all [the] unfortunates—who prefer the 'protection' of the asylum to the horrors of outside—rules the efficient and rigorous Nurse Ratched, in whose official solicitude and severe discipline one suspects sadism....McMurphy's insubordination helps Chief Bromden overcome his condition as a deaf-mute, a state induced by the humiliation of his father and race on the part of government and real estate interests. When McMurphy, outraged by one of Nurse Ratched's most unfeeling ploys, tries to strangle her, she vengefully orders a lobotomy for him. This turns him into something less than a man. Now rid of his physical disabilities, Chief Bromden, after a mercy killing of his savior, McMurphy, makes a dash for freedom: he it is who flies over the cuckoo's nest.

One might suppose all this to be quite grim, but there is only a dab of sentiment and lots of fun in the telling. What arouses the audience's mirth is the show's derision of vested authority, the comeuppance of rule and order. Nurse Ratched, who even browbeats her medical adviser, is less a character than a stand-in for external power, of which the most common symbol is the police. Prohibited drinking, smoking of pot, crude fornication are joyfully viewed as signs of happy release from oppression.

At a midnight party, a girl is brought in to provide the uninitiated youth with his first 'experience.' When Nurse Ratched's entrance interrupts this adventure and she upbraids him and asks if he is not ashamed of himself, his answer (for once unimpeded by a stutter) indicates that he is immensely pleased by what has happened. The audience responds with a scream of satisfaction. This is followed by the nurse's threat to tell the boy's mother of his misbehavior. After stuttering once more in helpless fear, he runs off stage in panic. A moment later we learn that he has cut his throat. The audience quickly forgets this only to cheer once more when McMurphy rises to strangle the woman for her villainy.

All this is swift and summary: the trite canon of hand-me-down psychoanalysis, the ready acquiescence in and indeed the celebration of facile rebelliousness and a wretched 'idealism' or 'revolution' without pain—automatic, mindless, cheaply triumphant, popular—are the hallmarks of the occasion. This state of being is real in the audience and thus gives substance to the play's sham."

Harold Clurman
The Nation (5 April 1971)

"The audience for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is almost entirely composed of the very young, teenagers, early twenties at most—not of people the age of Ken Kesey, who wrote the novel, or of Dale Wasserman, who made a play of it....Nurse Ratched is not so much engaged in a process of relieving the guilt feelings her crippled patients may have as she is determined to fix her charges forever in doubly guilt-ridden states. A boy who probably loves his mother and is hounded by fear of failing her is persuaded that he really loathes her and has become ill as a means of punishing her. Our prim friend, patently as sound of mind and spirit as anyone walking the streets of today's cities, is persuaded that he is effeminate or has been emasculated by his wife. The therapy is geared to make the psychosis permanent. One and all are being conditioned to regard themselves as helpless....

A swaggering fellow named Randle Patrick McMurphy arrives, simian grin at the ready when he isn't solemnly chewing gum....His revolt takes various forms: he runs a kind of gambling syndicate despite regulations against gambling, he conducts a campaign for longer television hours, he secretly helps the Indian to overcome his therapy-induced muteness and deafness, he takes bets that he can best Nurse Ratched in open conflict. With each bravura challenge to the 'system,' with each bracing thrust of the shoulders to throw off 'conditioning,' the present audience breaks into delighted cheers and applause.... What they most fear is just that 'conditioning' which is the central action of the play. They are afraid that they are conditioned, will be conditioned, have been conditioned. They have been taught to make responses that are not their own, and have so been robbed of identity....

Nurse Ratched is the key to the piece, its prime force and ultimate symbol....Nurse Ratched isn't human. She is entirely malevolent, without any saving softnesses or familiar margins for error. She is herself a computer. And she is all-powerful. When McMurphy gets a bit out of hand, and is having rather too much success in restoring their identities to his companions, he is whisked to the laboratory and given shock treatments. When the shock treatments do not tranquilize him ('Sin while you may,' the fellow in the bathrobe cries, 'for tomorrow we shall be tranquilized!'), he is subjected to a frontal lobotomy. Nurse Ratched, with the controls at her finger-tips, has made him a vegetable."

Walter Kerr

"...And the Young Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"
The New York Times (1971)

"To the Editor: In response to Walter Kerr's belated review of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: I too saw the show after it had been running for quite a while, in San Francisco. I was shocked at what I saw (though I should have known better, having read the book) because, in the long time the play had been running, never once had I read a review which warned me of the blatant sexism I was to witness onstage, or even asked some of the most obvious questions about the political statements of the play.

Kerr finally raised the key question: Why is Nurse Ratched, the omnipotent, omni-malevolent villain of the play, a woman? Kerr didn't speculate why, but he did note parenthetically that 'There are other such women in the background of the play.' The truth is that every woman in the background is such a demonic figure, and the play is full of false yet dangerous clichés about their power over men.

The most striking example is Chief Bromden's mother: she has made his father small, she has grown to twice his size. It is largely because of her power to threaten male virility that the Chief is now in a mental institution. Of course, she is *only a symbol*; as a white woman married to an Indian man, her emasculation of her husband only *represents* the White Man's brutal destruction of all cultures other than his own.

Why is white racism depicted in these terms? It should be remembered that this white woman's singular unforgivable act was her refusal to take on her husband's name! Somehow, in the confused vision of the author and playwright, the refusal of women, an oppressed class, to utterly submit to male-oriented social structures is identified with the attack of white men, the oppressor class, on peoples of color.

The whole play is constructed from such a muddled vision. It pretends to challenge all the reactionary institutions in our society—prisons, mental hospitals and the Federal Government itself, which has destroyed the Indian reservations. But it never once challenges the completely inhuman sexist structure of society, not does it make any attempt to overthrow sexist or racist stereotypes. The only blacks in the play are stupid and malicious hospital orderlies. And the only right-on women in the play are mindless whores. In fact, in this play, if a woman is *not* totally mindless, she is a direct threat to (male) life.

Thus the play offers us this basic sexist dichotomy: women are either dumb and silly (like the quivering young nurse, terrified of McMurphy; like the squealing, wiggling prostitutes who come to build up the men's egos) or they are shrewd, conniving, and malicious (castrating wives, dominating mothers, and a super-powerful domineering nurse). Every man in the play has been psychologically mutilated by a woman, from the guilt-ridden Billy Bibbit, whom his mother and Nurse Ratched are in cahoots to destroy, to the cynical Harding, whose 'wife's ample bosom at times gives him a feeling of inferiority.'

It goes without saying that, just as there are no positive, fully human female figures to identify with, there are likewise no strong, healthy male figures. Of course, we are *supposed* to believe in McMurphy, the super-male macho hero who equates strength with sexual parts and whose solution to every problem is sex. We laugh and cheer as McMurphy humiliates the young nurse by sticking a banana up her skirt, manhandles his girl friends as he passes them around (confident of his masculinity, he can afford to be generous), and generally bullies everyone in his social sphere.

If *that* represents the healthy exercise of the human spirit, then the White Man too was healthy as he stole from the Indians everything they had, raping their culture and treating them as objects not worthy of human respect.

Kerr points out that *Cuckoo's Nest* is a play about conditioning in this society, and that young people identify with it because it exposes that threat to human freedom. This play is not *about* conditioning nearly so much as it *is* a dangerous piece of conditioning itself. With a pseudo-radical posture, it swallows whole hog all the worst attitudes toward women prevalent in our society and delivers the pig right back to us, suitably decorated and made righteous.

If you do not perceive exactly how destructive this work is, imagine for a moment the effect it must have on a girl child watching it. Who, in this play, can *she* grow up to be? Where is *her* place in the struggle for human freedom? At best she can mature into a good sex object, equipped to build the egos of emotionally crippled men by offering a 'liberated' attitude toward sex! Above all, she learns from viewing this play that any aggressiveness, intelligence, strength, or potency on the part of the female is always dangerous, evil, and ugly. She learns to hate women who dare to try to be as powerful as men. She learns to squelch her own potential for strength, or she learns to hate herself. She is, after all, destined to become a woman, and women are hateful and fearful things.

The answer to Kerr's question seems to be that Nurse Ratched is a woman because Ken Kesey hates and fears women. And apparently Dale Wasserman, along with everyone else who helped adapt Kesey's novel and engineer it into a piece of theater, are so thoroughly conditioned by the basic sexist assumptions of our society that they never even noticed, or cared to question, the psychic disease out of which the book's vision was born." "[Ms. Falk has requested that her original wording be noted here. In paragraph 7, lines 5 and 6, 'balls,' should be substituted for 'sexual parts' and 'to get a good fuck' for 'sex.' Likewise, in the penultimate paragraph, line 5, 'sex object' originally read 'piece of ass.']"

Marcia L. Falk
English Department, Stanford University
Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times* (1971)

[Kesey was a graduate fellow at Stanford 1958-59; in 1971, the year of the letter above, Wallace Stegner quit teaching at Stanford in disgust at radicals, typified by both Kesey and Professor Falk. M. H.]

"During the ten years that followed its publication in 1962, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* had a sale of more than a million copies, generally increasing from year to year, and this testifies to its acceptance by readers who obviously felt the pressures of what Kesey symbolizes in his novel by 'the Combine'.... Powerless, frustrated, docile, the men of Kesey's disturbed ward feel no such curse as that which impelled Hamlet 'to set it right.' For them any reordering must come from without, ironically from the same society that they blame for having caused their withdrawal. They must choose either the disordered world of R. P. McMurphy or the intolerably ordered world of Big Nurse Ratched, for whom no paradoxes exist. That they can unqualifiedly accept neither world, and yet must make a choice, provides the basic tension of the novel.

The characters in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* cannot bring themselves to admit all possible points of view, an admission that Kesey regards as necessary for a truly sane existence. What he thinks is needed—according to Tom Wolfe, who wrote a widely read book about Kesey, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—is the ability to apprehend the 'synchronicity' of life, to force one's mind to 'reach for connections between...vastly different orders of experience.' But among the inmates of Nurse Ratched's ward—which stands in some measure for the world outside—most persons react with what Wolfe calls 'the inevitable

confusion of the unattuned' What one should not question is the perfectly painful reality that is depicted in precise detail by a completely believable schizophrenic....

If a person is unattuned, if his point of view differs markedly from that of a person with more power, then he risks being called insane. I think one should approach this novel by paying close attention to point of view, in life as well as in fiction. What one person accepts as reality may well be regarded as delusional and schizophrenic by another. After all the narrator, Bromden or 'Chief Broom,' is insane by anyone's standards. He has not always been so, but his perception has been clouded by the pressures of a hostile and changing world, much in the fashion that his fictional identity was altered as Kesey reworked his novel.... That Kesey fixed on Chief Broom as his narrator is what Wolfe says was his 'great inspiration'

Inspiration is a term that has become increasingly important to Kesey since the publication of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Certain passages, he attests, were truly inspired, whether the catalyst might have been drugs, experience, or insight.... Inspired as he may have been, Kesey does admit that the rhymes (first noticed, he says, by Malcolm Cowley in a Stanford writing course) were made much more explicit in revision. Whatever the sources of Kesey's inspiration in the novel, it should be seen primarily as related to point of view, not only that of the narrator but also that of the artist himself. Working 'the midnight-to-eight shift...five days a week,' Kesey endeavored to create a narrative that would be completely objective. 'In the antiseptic wilderness of the Menlo Park VA Hospital,' he writes, 'I cleared a space and rigged a runway and waited for my muse to take the controls.'

What resulted is a novel that shows the author's awareness of the essentially schizophrenic nature of perceived existence—of a multifaceted, often foggy *discordia concors* that offers only occasional flashes of day-glo-painted truth. The vehicle for this awareness is the narrative of a schizophrenic American Indian. Obviously neither this view of life nor the use of a first person narrator to reveal it is new in American literature. In some ways Kesey's vision is not unlike that of Melville or Mark Twain or Steinbeck, the last author being one whom Kesey admires deeply, though not for what he says are 'the wrong reasons—for his social commentary.' He respects Steinbeck for his point of view, his synchronicity....After admitting that the name and character of Billy Bibbit were suggested by Billy Budd, Kesey has denied remembering that the first Billy stuttered in the same fashion as the second....

Where Kesey differs from those others who told stories in the first person is in his use of a narrator whose own values are not only to be questioned but are often patently unreal. [Also true of Huck] Unlike Melville's Ishmael, Hawthorne's Miles Coverdale, or Huckleberry Finn, Kesey's Chief Broom is obviously deforming the events that figure in the early part of his narrative. That fact distinguishes him too from Faulkner's Benjy in the first part of *The Sound and the Fury*, for Benjy sees exactly what happens, even though he doesn't connect one event with another. Chief Broom makes connections, but sees everything through a distorting haze. The fact that he is insane produces the same state of mind in him that Kesey attempted to produce in himself while writing the novel, a state in which there are no preconceptions. At times Kesey produced the state by taking drugs.... Says Kesey, 'Peyote, I used to claim, inspired my chief narrator, because it was after choking down eight of the little cactus plants that I wrote the first three pages'

Other first-person narrators color what they perceive with their own preconceptions, their own limitations and oversights. It is only by looking behind their masks that we can glimpse the visions of their authors. No such problem is offered by *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* because the personality of Chief Broom is only a small factor in our judgment; it is primarily his failure to see things clearly that counts. For the Chief, reality is being transformed at every moment. While the fog swirls or the lights glare, he cannot glimpse the real outlines of his world, but the reader can. What the Chief does see is a basic struggle for survival, with McMurphy as the 'good guy' on his side. 'All you could do,' he says, 'was keep on whipping it, till you couldn't come out any more and somebody else had to take your place.' But McMurphy too is a psychopath, and the Chief's 'All you can do' might apply equally well to Big Nurse, who would no doubt agree with the statement from her own point of view. All McMurphy's scheming, his humor, and his leadership serve only to delay the inevitable confrontation, in which neither side can win out completely....

Not one [critic] comes back with a satisfactory discussion of the novel as a whole, but all have interesting points to make. John A. Barsness, for example, sees a basically simple conflict, McMurphy versus Big Nurse, as a result of which Chief Broom, the 'natural man,' comes out the victor. Joseph J. Waldmeir equates the politics of the ward with that of a 'true democracy.' Leslie A. Fiedler, among others, invokes Melville by noting that it is Chief Bromden who is 'left to boast: *And I only am escaped alive to tell thee.*' The Melvillean allusion is expanded by Waldmeir when he associates McMurphy first with Ahab, then with Christ. But what Waldmeir will only imply is the quite proper comparison between Big Nurse and Melville's equally white leviathan....One value of this novel is that it admits and substantiates almost any interpretation....

That *The Cuckoo's Nest* makes its critics uneasy has become apparent, but equally obvious is the fact that it is supposed to do so....The novel's multivalent synchronicity (elsewhere I have used the term 'syncretic allegory') often makes it impossible to assign a precise meaning to any one allusion. Some critics define the world of this novel as being absurd. I should disagree: it is all too real. As can be seen by comparing the characters with the persons whom Kesey actually observed, no one except Nurse Ratched is unbelievable in the same fashion as many characters in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Big Nurse herself is a creation of the schizophrenic Chief....In addition to being the man so well described by Tom Wolfe, [Kesey] is also a professed Christian who follows the *I Ching*...and who attends his children's school Christmas plays....

One should avoid, for instance, referring to Kesey's belief in 'the Combine.' It is the Chief who defines it, with McMurphy's help. If there is a real tragedy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, it may well be due to the fact that persons of different perceptive capacities believe in the real existence of the Combine. When their quixotic attacks on the monster windmill fail, they manage to blame everyone but themselves. Should we regard McMurphy's last futile attempt to impose an alternate order by force as pathetic, inevitable, or tragic? After all, his merely spontaneous disruptions—much on the order of Kesey's 'merry pranks'—are the one thing that has made existence in the ward (call it the world) not only bearable but even delightful. When McMurphy stops laughing--when he attempts to fight Big Nurse on her own terms—he in effect has given up.

In the consciousness of Ken Kesey, I suspect, there is a feeling that the martyrdom of McMurphy is inevitable, but in itself not ultimately tragic. It is as inevitable as was the loss of that American safety valve, the existence of illimitable land. It is certain as the vanishing of the Red Man as we have known him from the myths of our past. For Kesey there is obviously no going back; what counts is the point of view with which we must always go forward. Unlike Hemingway's clean, well-lighted café, Kesey's place of 'a certain cleanness and order' is the disturbed ward of a mental hospital, the last refuge of those who seek an end to chaos. What Kesey suggests is that sanity is not produced by any perceived order, but by just the opposite, that is, by a recognition of disorder leading to productive change. One should not forget that most of the patients in *The Cuckoo's Nest* have committed themselves voluntarily to a world that they can most certainly not control, but one that they might comprehend. Whether or not they do comprehend it as a result of McMurphy's death is a question left to the awareness of the reader.

All the inmates except those who have either given up or been broken are free to go—where? To Canada, if they wish, but they do not have to go there. Kesey's Canada is not Joseph Heller's Sweden. The Chief says at the end of the novel, 'I might go to Canada eventually,' but not yet, not until he has looked 'over the country around the gorge again, just to bring some of it clear in my mind.' His own consciousness newly restored, the Chief may well see what readers of the novel can also see: the meaning-filled clutter of existence, the spontaneity of life, the multifaceted, many-colored mess which is what living is all about. Those who believe in the Combine will repeatedly fail, no matter which side they happen to be on. The struggle will continue, to be sure, but how we bring it clear in our own minds is entirely, and rightfully, up to us."

John Clark Pratt, ed.

Introduction

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Text and Criticism
(Viking/Critical Library 1973) vii-xv

“Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) is a vision of America as an insane asylum run by Big Nurse who serves the ‘Combine.’ Like [Robert] Stone, Kesey suggests that the country is run by a corrupt force using all institutions to consolidate its power and manipulating all inhabitants, punishing with humiliation or shock treatment or lobotomy. Oppressive society is projected in the novel as Big Nurse, who controls and infantilizes in the name of the best interests of the inmates.

The apparent hero of the novel is McMurphy, who comes to the asylum voluntarily, thinking it will be better there than in the county jail to which he has been sentenced for six months. But the actual hero is Chief Bram, a virtually catatonic Indian whose consciousness forms the basis of Kesey’s best writing. McMurphy is a larger-than-life figure whose ebullience and affection for the inmates bring him into conflict with Big Nurse. ‘We couldn’t stop him,’ says one of the inmates, ‘because we were the ones making him do it. It wasn’t the nurse that was forcing him, it was our need that was...pushing him up, rising and standing like one of those motion picture zombies obeying orders beamed at him from forty masters.’

McMurphy is pushed by the need of the inmates toward the attack on Big Nurse that gets him lobotomized. Chief Bram seems to have required the sacrifice of McMurphy’s energy to give him life. He kills McMurphy, presumably out of love, incorporates his strength and escapes. The model hero here is not the man who dies for the cause, but the man who waits for another to die and is thereby released. Chief Bram runs out, self-propelled, his own man because he has no living attachments, and no capacity for them.

Ironically, it was Kesey’s success within the system (he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Stanford; his first novel was a success) that financed a revolt against establishment values that itself turned out to be a parody of authoritarianism. Kesey founded a tribal society, the Merry Pranksters, which became the subject of Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. LSD was the spiritual center of the Pranksters, but it was dispensed by Kesey, who financed all the group’s activities and was called ‘the Chief.’ The commune was callous toward people who had too many bad trips and fascinated with the Hell’s Angels as a violent ‘out’ group. Despite the buoyancy in Wolfe’s depiction of the Pranksters’ pranks, his most memorable portrait of Kesey is as the Chief bereft of his tribe, the man who has lost his followers and is hiding from the law in Mexico. This underground renegade comes across as a small town Napoleon on a Central American Elba.”

Josephine Hendin
Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1979) 132-33

“It can be instructive to play off the maturity of the [Peter] Matthiessen novel [*At Play in the Field of the Lord*, 1965] against the puerilities of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962). [This critic, Professor Frederick Karl, is opposed to all pastoralism as “reactionary” and “anti-intellectual.”] Although ideas of pastoral are fundamental to both, Kesey establishes categories which are reductive and self-defeating. For he posits that whatever is anti-system belongs to pastoral and whatever is system is anti-pastoral. The categories, as worked out, are limited, ideologically infantile. Not for nothing did *One Flew* become a cult novel. [Kesey is a libertarian Oregon farmer, whereas this critic is a New York socialist who personifies what Kesey is rebelling against.]

Kesey’s novel is a response to the 1950s world of Skinner’s utopian *Walden Two*, where systems control everyone and aim at infinite potential for happiness. In Kesey’s reworking of a cuckoo utopia, everyone’s potential for happiness is stunted. The system blights, and the individual exists to the degree he can undermine or evade the system. Counterfeiting is all.

Kesey’s narrator is Chief Bromden or Broom, half Indian—and therefore someone whose instinctive life is being destroyed by the systems of Nurse Ratched’s cuckoo’s nest. He has assumed a condition of deafness and muteness, so that he functions as a drugstore Indian, silent, observing, unresponsive. Accustomed, as an Indian, to being treated as ‘not there,’ he has, as a consequence, taken on that persona. Since he is the registering intelligence of the novel, real changes that can occur in an individual are suggested by changes that occur within him. Unlike Matthiessen’s Moon, however, Bromden is not to be redefined, he must simply revert.

The asylum in Oregon, the cuckoo's nest, is under the operation of Nurse Ratched, who has devised the systems which govern the institution. ["'Wretched,' or 'ratchet,' a toothed bar or wheel that is engaged by a pawl so as to make sure movement occurs in one direction only."] These systems are likened, by Kesey, and more directly by Chief Broom, to programs: the inside of the asylum is like the guts of a computer, all elements wired and interconnected. (Barth's university in *Giles Goat-Boy!*) Ratched is the programmer, the inmates the programmed, the entire system the computer. In order to ensure that her organization runs smoothly, Ratched plans every move like a military maneuver. She is the epitome of White's 'organization man,' her organization a cuckoo's nest, not a business or university. The system does not fit the men; the men fit the system.

'Practice has steadied and strengthened her until now she wields a sure power that extends in all directions on hair-like wires too small for anybody's eye but mine; I see her sit in the center of this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend her network with mechanical skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants. What she dreams of there in the center of those wires is a world of precision efficiency and readiness like a pocket watch with a glass back, a place where the schedule is unbreakable and all the patients who aren't Outside, obedient under her beam, are wheelchair Chronicles with catheter tubes run direct from every pantleg to the sewer under the floor.' Her section is akin to a totalitarian state, overseen by a dictator, its inmates marked for a kind of death as social misfits.

What can upset this is a rebel, a radical, a Panurge—the force or element designed to disrupt systems. This Panurge comes in the shape of an ex-con, ex-farm worker, current brawler, gambler, funster—Randle Patrick McMurphy, Donleavy's Ginger Man. Since we are dealing with a cult novel of the 1960s, it may prove interesting to examine what occurs behind the brawling scenes of the novel, for *One Flew* in its reception became far more than the sum total of its parts. So caught up did Kesey become in his own cult that, later, as leader of the Merry Pranksters, he tried out McMurphy's very role. If *The Catcher in the Rye* was the cult novel of the fifties, *Cuckoo's Nest*, along with *Catch-22*, expressed enough of the sixties to become 'in' novels of that decade.

What is remarkable is how Kesey played off traditional elements: we are immersed here in an updated pastoral. The asylum epitomizes urban values—programmed, organized, systemized. The sole way to counter urban order is by way of the pastoral, whether actual pastoral or with values usually associated to the idea: release, escape, ease of movement, lack of control, individual decision-making, ordering of one's life. The novel ends, in fact, with a note reminiscent of Huck Finn, as Chief Broom escapes from the asylum and comments, 'I been away a long time.'

If the asylum is the city, and the world outside is represented by Broom's past and McMurphy's rebellion, then Nurse Ratched designates all that stands between freedom and imprisonment. The ideology is, of course, very familiar; for behind all the difficulty is not the men's individual insanity but a woman who forces men into the condition of children. With her benign manner, her huge frontal development, her 'big nurse' quality, Nurse Ratched is, of course, the 'great mother,' the great bitch goddess, woman as monster. She is the embodiment of what women do to men: she slices off their manhood and turns them into incompetents, fearful, helpless charges. One thinks of Thurber's cartoon in which the man arrives home, to see his wife's form rising out of the very roof, a dominant goddess waiting to engulf him in her power.

What gives her mechanical possession of the section is the control panel, a piece of metal weighing perhaps a quarter of a ton, anchored to the floor by any number of connections. To upend the control panel is, in a way, to strike directly at Nurse Ratched, equivalent in the terms of the novel to raping her. First McMurphy tries to rip the panel out, but he is unable to do it. So his next strategy is to build up Chief Broom, a much larger man, until he is capable of doing it—the novel, after all, belongs to him. As for McMurphy, his rebellion must be lobotomized; to become a vegetable is his destiny in the order of things.

Overall, hatred of women fuels the novel, far less subtly than it does in so many fictions of our postwar novelists. A career woman is a monster, and the 'good women' are the whores McMurphy brings in.... The central episode, and one that is very well handled, contains the fishing expedition. It is solidly within

the pastoral tradition, the embodiment of the anti-system which counters programming. The men who choose to go have put themselves on the line: for they have exchanged the 'fog' of Big Nurse's machinery for the clarification of fishing. The fishing expedition—openness, sex with women who give it away, freedom for the day—embodies McMurphy's sense of life: but given the circumstances, it is fraught with dangers. This the inmates recognize, and thus their fear in joining him and the expedition. Their manhood is on the line.

McMurphy represents 'tall tale' America: braggart, physicality, audacity, adventurousness. Such a man roams forests and rivers. His predecessors include those rogues who appeared on the frontier or on the Mississippi, Simon Suggs coming to mind...The tradition is a long one in American frontier humor, from Paul Bunyan on. McMurphy's relationship to this tradition, dipping also into Rabelais's Panurge, of course makes him anathema to any system. Systems exist for him to sunder.... McMurphy has many of the qualities we associate with the 'Yankee,' the man who fulfilled the myth of the archetypal American: crude, vulgar, humorous, strong, swaggering. Connected to him is the backwoodsman, a Mike Fink or a Davy Crockett. Cooper's Natty Bumppo is a distant relative: the rifle that never misses, the legends and feats attached to his prowess, his inability to fit suitably into civilized life, and yet his superiority to all systems. McMurphy combines these qualities, and not untypically, women do not fit in this world, except as whores, and even there infrequently....

The fishing expedition, then, expresses everything McMurphy is capable of. When he lacks authorization to take the men out, he steals the boat. When the captain intervenes and insists on order, McMurphy deceives him and then wins him over; he finds chinks in the system everywhere. By showing the men that their fears are conditioned, not innate, he undermines order. He brings them back into normal time, not the temporal distortions Ratched has enforced on them. Although deeply troubled, the men have become organization men; the need is to reorganize their problems by creating self-reliance. McMurphy's romanticism is clear, as is Kesey's: disorder is sanity, order is the real insanity.

Implicit in such pastoral fiction is awareness that the immediate asylum situation emblemizes the 'nation-wide Combine,' the big force in which Nurse Ratched is 'a high-ranking official.' To strike a blow against Big Nurse is to rebel against the entire Combine, which represents a colonialism embodying death, like the Tristero System in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* [1963]. McMurphy's organization of Acutes and Chronics is an attempt to pull off a minority rebellion: revolutionary America against England, minorities against their colonial oppressors.

Inevitably, Kesey touches all the bases of what will be 1960s ideology, but he founders on one shoal after another. Despite brilliant episodes and some inventiveness of scene, the book lacks center because ideologically it is so soft, and in the case of its women, insidious and infantile. Not only are its themes in the American romantic tradition, its sexual divisions stereotypical...but its view of life is not far removed from Holden Caulfield's. The fact that *One Flew* became a more 'adult' cult novel than its counterpart in the 1950s, *Catcher*, is not coincidental. Both strike at that 'Animal House' mentality which underlies the making of a cult book. The 1960s were, in fact, far more sophisticated and significant than Kesey's view of the decade would make it appear. Yet, necessarily, any fantasy view of pastoral or the 'new Eden' must include the kind of simplification and elementalism which underpin *Cuckoo*.

We return to Chief Bromden as the central intelligence of the novel. Kesey has, of course rightfully, always insisted on Bromden as his pivotal figure. When the very fine film was made of the novel, he protested that the screenwriter and the director had refocused the novel so as to make McMurphy central. This was perhaps inevitable given the actor who played McMurphy, Jack Nicholson. The film did shift the value system around, from the one who survives (the vanishing Indian) to the one who succumbs (the lobotomized McMurphy). A great deal in Kesey's novel functions only if we perceive that the Chief's values, observations, and final act—smothering the lobotomized McMurphy—are crucial.

Kesey's relegation of Bromden to a central intelligence, as both the observer and the recipient of the action, is connected to his 'soft' ideology. For Bromden represents what will perhaps save us from the Nurse and the Combine she represents. He, the deaf-mute Indian, is 'witness' to what is happening, to his people and to all the oppressed (the cuckoos). And the quality that makes him a survivor is his Indian half,

his association with that part of America which has remained pure and true. Because Bromden is uncorrupted, he feels a kinship with McMurphy, his primitive half. It is to McMurphy that Bromden first reveals he can speak, and that revelation is linked to his brotherhood with him, their awareness of a pure, green America....

Unfortunately, once Bromden makes his escape, he has nowhere to go except dreamland. He plans to make a journey into his past, stopping along the Columbia River for some former haunts. He will look back into the time the government intruded and tried to 'buy their right to be Indians.' In their associations, Indians have somehow held on to some revelations that the white man is not privy to, and Bromden, by making contact with that, will be revived.

Not unusually, we pick up Kesey later in the decade in the hallucinatory trips that Tom Wolfe wrote about so brilliantly in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. The psychedelic bus and its spaced-out travelers replace the vision of the Indian. The 'new purity' is that of visions, hallucinations, fantasies reinforced by drugs, all held together by Kesey's charismatic figure. He has, in a sense, come to live out what Bromden cannot possibly fathom; the Chief's sense of things must fail, or else trail off into the drug culture. The sole purity left is not Bromden's defiance of a dispossessed Garden, but a spaced-out individual: his sense of spatiality now given over to a transformation of inner space. The movement out to discover America and destroy the machine becomes an ego trip.

Walden Two has in the main won. There is no reason to rejoice that Kesey's vision has failed, that Bromden will be assimilated into the mainstream of the Combine. When Bromden escapes at the end of the novel, he disappears into what will swallow him."

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