

Education Pack

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

A comedy-drama by Dale Wasserman, based on Ken Kesey's 1962 novel

MENTAL SYNOPSIS

The play is narrated by this Indian dude named Chief Bromden. He is a crazy guy, who hallucinates a lot. He doesn't like the hospital because it is scary and the head nurse is this evil guy named Nurse Ratched. Chief doesn't think he is a human, but a machine (he's crazy). All the people in the ward think the Chief is deaf and dumb, because he doesn't talk at all.

Then this new patient comes in. Her name is Rachel McMurphy. She is an obnoxious girl who seems normal. She tells everyone she is in a crazy hospital because it is much easier than working for a living (not true).

McMurphy butts heads with Nurse Ratched a lot. They hate each other. She is always pissing her off. One day she wants to watch the World Series, but none of the other patients get on her side to convince the Nurse. The next day she throws a panel through a window. The others get pumped up and vote to watch the World Series. McMurphy needs one more vote so she goes to the crazy Chief. McMurphy finds out the only way she can get out of the funny farm is if Nurse Ratched says she is okay, so she starts to listen to his rules instead of pissing him off. She is scared because she is one of the few people in there that did not commit themselves on purpose. She was put in there by someone else.

McMurphy finally gets the Chief to talk. She asks the Chief to get strong so she can lift the big control panel in the hospital and smash the window. Outside the hospital, everyone acts normal. McMurphy has really helped them become normal human beings. She is their hero. She helps them when they get attacked by a nurse aide. She also gets two of the patients hooker. So this one shy patient, Billy, gets to shag a chick and loses his virginity but when Nurse Ratched finds him with a hooker, he plays mind games with him, makes him feel so guilty that the dude kills himself.

McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched. The other patients aren't scared of him anymore because they see he is weak. McMurphy is sent to get a lobotomy. She comes back as a vegetable. The Chief smothers her with a pillow because he can't stand to see McMurphy like a vegetable. Then the Chief throws the big panel through the window and escapes.

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MAIN CHARACTERS

Rachel McMurphy

She is the main character. When she comes to the mental hospital, she shakes things up. She has lived a normal life being loud and obnoxious, and not taking take crap from anybody. She is a hero to the other crazy patients, because she teaches them how to act sane.

Chief Bromden

The only guy who can break him out of his shell is McMurphy. He is in the mental hospital because he thinks machines are out to get him.

Nurse Ratched

He is the head nurse in the crazy ward. He is a big bitch. He is a control freak and plays mind games with the patients so they fear him and listen to him.

Billy Bibbit

He is a dude that has mental problems. He also stutters. He is 30 and hasn't lost his virginity. He feels like a boy. McMurphy gets him a prostitute and Billy finally gets some. He gets in trouble and kills himself out of shame.

Dale Harding

She is a patient and a very smart girl. She is President of the Patients council. She is in a mental hospital because of her sexual problems. She is cured because of McMurphy's influence and leaves the hospital.

THE WORK OF KEN KESEY

Ken Kesey (September 17, 1935 – November 10, 2001), was educated at the University of Oregon and Stanford University. At a Veterans Administration hospital in Menlo Park, California, he was a paid volunteer experimental subject, taking mind-altering drugs and reporting on their effects. This experience and his work as an aide at the hospital served as background for his best-known novel, **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** (1962), which is set in a mental hospital. He further examined values in conflict in **Sometimes a Great Notion** (1964).

In the nonfiction Kesey's **Garage Sale** (1973), **Demon Box** (1986), and **The Further Inquiry** (1990), Kesey wrote of his travels and psychedelic experiences with the **Merry Pranksters**, a group that traveled together in a bus during the 1960s. In 1988 Kesey published a children's book, **Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear**. With 13 of his graduate students in creative writing at the University of Oregon, he wrote a mystery novel, **Caverns** (1990), under the joint pseudonym of O.U. Levon, which read backward is "novel U.O. (University of Oregon)." In **Sailor Song** (1992), a comedy set in an Alaskan fishing village that becomes the backdrop for a Hollywood film, Kesey examined environmental crises and the end of the world. Subsequently, with Ken Babbs, he wrote a neo-western, **Last Go Round** (1994).

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DALE WASSERMAN

Dale Wasserman (November 2, 1914 – December 21, 2008) born in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, was an American playwright. Orphaned at the age of nine, he lived in a state orphanage before spending his adolescence riding the rails and sleeping rough in Los Angeles. He started working in theatre at 19 as a self-taught lighting designer, director and producer. Believing he could write better plays than the ones he was directing, he became a writer, beginning with live television dramas in the 1950s and going on to screenplays, including **The Vikings** and **Mr. Buddwing**.

Besides **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**, he wrote the book for the musical **Man of La Mancha** as well as the screenplay for the film version. **Man of La Mancha** grew out of a 90-minute television drama that Wasserman wrote in 1959, called **I, Don Quixote**. He also wrote the plays **How I Saved the Whole Damn World** and **Boy on Blacktop Road**.

HISTORY

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962) combines the personal and professional experiences of Ken Kesey and reflects the culture in which it was written, yet it stands strong on its own merits. The novel was partly inspired by Kesey's part-time job as an orderly in the Palo Alto Menlo Park Veterans' Hospital. Kesey also had begun participating in experiments involving LSD and other substances for Stanford's Psychology Department. Speaking to patients under the influence of LSD, Kesey began to perceive that society had turned functional people insane instead of allowing them to find their way back to functioning in society. Kesey's use of LSD also prompted him to have hallucinations while working as an orderly. Kesey often imagined seeing a large Indian mopping the floors of the hospital, prompting him to later add the character of Chief Bromden as the novel's narrator.

Kesey published the novel to great critical and commercial success. Upon publication, the novel had a tremendous effect on baby boomers just beginning to awaken to stirrings of rebellion, for it mirrored and stirred up their new challenges to authority. In the context of the changing attitudes at the time, the novel in some sense forms a bridge between the bohemian beatnik movements of the 1950s and the counterculture movements of the 1960s. Kesey was significantly inspired by the beatnik culture around Stanford, and in the novel Kesey deals with a number of themes that would be significant in the counterculture movement, including notions of freedom from repressive authority and a more liberated view of sexuality.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest became so famous that it was adapted to become a legendary addition to theater and film as well. Dale Wasserman made the novel into a two-act Broadway play (1974) starring Kirk Douglas, and a 2001 Broadway revival starring Gary Sinise and Amy Morton won the Tony Award for Best Play Revival. In 1975, Milos Forman directed a successful film adaptation of the novel. The film, recently named as one of the twenty greatest films by the American Film Institute, featured Jack Nicholson as McMurphy and Louise Fletcher as Nurse Ratched. The film also won the Academy Award for Best Picture and gained awards for Nicholson, Fletcher, and Forman. It remains one of only three films to have swept the top five categories at the Oscars. Netflix and Ryan Murphy are producing a prequel series titled **Ratched** which follows Sarah Paulson playing a younger version of Nurse Ratched, featuring Sharon Stone, Judy Davis, Cynthia Nixon and Rosanna Arquette.

ORIGINS OF THE TITLE

It's hard to believe the title of the book and subsequent play and the movie came from a nice, seemingly sweet, nursery rhyme. In American slang cuckoo means crazy or madman. The title is clearly allegorical in its intent. The "cuckoo's nest" is the hospital, and the one who "flew over" it is McMurphy. The full nursery rhyme is quoted in the book by the chief, as he remembers his childhood while awaking from a shock treatment. It was part of a childhood game played with him by his Indian Grandmother. There are several versions of it:

Book version of the rhyme

*Ting, Tingle, tingle, tremble toes,
she's a good fisherman,
catches hens, puts 'em inna pens,
wire blier, limber lock,
three geese inna flock,
one flew east, one flew west,
one flew over the cuckoo's nest,
O-U-T spells out,
goose swoops down and plucks you out.*

*Vintery, mintery, cutery, corn,
Apple seed and apple thorn,
Wire, briar, limber lock
Three geese in a flock
One flew East, One flew West
And one flew over the cuckoo's
nest.*

*William, William trimble toes,
He's a good fisherman,
Catch his hands put ,em in the pans,
Some lay eggs, some not,
Wire, briar, limber lock
Three geese in the flock,
A one flew east, a one flew west,
A one flew over the cuckoo's nest;
O-U-T spells out
you dirty dish rag you go out!*

It is a counting rhyme; akin to **One potato, two potato** or **Dip, dip, dip my little ship**. Like most oral folk verses, changes have happened over time and the origins are difficult to determine. It was recorded as early as 1806, in Massachusetts and Connecticut, in the USA. This rhyme can be found in **The Real Mother Goose** (1916).

It was used to choose game participants, decide who was „it“ in several games, or otherwise serve the function of selection by elimination. All the players would stand in a circle with one or both fists extended toward the inside of the circle, one of the older players would stand in the middle of the circle and begin the chant, counting one fist with each accented syllable, starting with himself. The last counted was out. Then it would start over with the rest, until it was down to one.

SOCIETY'S DESTRUCTION OF NATURAL IMPULSES

Kesey uses mechanical imagery to represent modern society and biological imagery to represent nature. By means of mechanisms and machines, society gains control of and suppresses individuality and natural impulses. The hospital, representative of society at large, is decidedly unnatural: the aides and Nurse Ratched are described as being made of motley machine parts. Bromden's realization that the hospital treats human beings in an unnatural fashion, and his concomitant growing self-awareness, occur as a surrounding fog dissipates. It is no surprise that Bromden believes this fog is a construction of machines controlled by the hospital and by Nurse Ratched.

Bromden, as the son of an Indian chief, is a combination of pure, natural individuality and a spirit almost completely subverted by mechanized society. Early on, he had free will, and he can remember and describe going hunting in the woods with his relatives and the way they spear salmon. The government, however, eventually succeeds in paying off the tribe so their fishing area can be converted into a profitable hydroelectric dam. The tribe members are banished into the technological workforce, where they become "hypnotized by routine," like the "half-life things" that Bromden witnesses coming out of the train while he is on fishing excursions. In the novel's present time, Bromden himself ends up semi-catatonic and paranoid, a mechanical drone who is still able to think and conjecture to some extent on his own.

McMurphy represents unbridled individuality and free expression—both intellectual and sexual. One idea presented in this play is that a man's virility is equated with a state of nature, and the state of civilized society requires that he be desexualized. But McMurphy battles against letting the oppressive society make her into a machinelike drone, and she manages to maintain his individuality until her ultimate objective—bringing this individuality to the others—is complete. However, when her wildness is provoked one too many times by Nurse Ratched, she ends up being destroyed by modern society's machines of oppression.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPRESSING SEXUALITY

It is implied throughout the play that a healthy expression of sexuality is a key component of sanity, and that repression of sexuality leads directly to insanity. Most of the patients have warped sexual identities because of damaging relationships. Perverted sexual expressions are said to take place in the ward: the aides supposedly engage in illicit "sex acts" that nobody witnesses. Add to that the castrating power of Nurse Ratched, and the ward is left with, as Harding says, "comical little creatures who can't even achieve masculinity in the rabbit world." Missing from the halls of the mental hospital are healthy, natural expressions of sexuality between two people.

McMurphy's bold assertion of her sexuality, symbolized from the start by her playing cards depicting fifty-two sexual positions, her pride in having had a voracious fifteen-year-old lover, and her Moby-Dick boxer shorts, clashes with the sterile and sexless ward that Nurse Ratched tries to maintain.

McMurphy's refusal to conform to society mirrors her refusal to desexualize herself, and the sexuality exuding from his personality is like a dress waving in the wind like a flag.

McMurphy attempts to cure Billy Bibbit of his stutter by arranging for him to lose his virginity with Candy. Instead, Billy gets shamed into suicide by the puritanical Ratched. By the end of the novel, McMurphy has been beaten into the ground to the point that she resorts to sexual violence—which had never been a part of her persona previous to being committed —by ripping open Ratched's uniform.

FALSE DIAGNOSES OF INSANITY

McMurphy's sanity, symbolized by her free laughter, open sexuality, strength, size, and confidence, stands in contrast to what Kesey implies, ironically and tragically, is an insane institution. Nurse Ratched tells another nurse that McMurphy seems to be a manipulator, just like a former patient, Maxwell Taber. Taber, Bromden explains, was a "big, griping Acute" who once asked a nurse what kind of medication he was being given. He was subjected to electroshock treatments and possibly brain work, which left him docile and unable to think. The insanity of the institution is foregrounded when a man who asks a simple question is tortured and rendered inhuman. It is a Catch-22: only a sane man would question an irrational system, but the act of questioning means his sanity will inevitably be compromised.

Throughout the novel, the sane actions of men contrast with the insane actions of the institution. When McMurphy and the patients stage a protest against Nurse Ratched for not letting them watch the World Series, a sensible request for which McMurphy generates a sensible solution, he loses control and, as Bromden notes, looks as crazy as they do. Moreover, Kesey encourages the reader to consider the value of alternative states of perception, which some people also might consider crazy. For instance, Bromden's hallucinations about hidden machinery may seem crazy, but in actuality they reveal his insight into the hospital's insidious power over the patients.

Harding gives Hitler as an example in discussing Ratched, suggesting that he, like Hitler, is a psychopath who has discovered how to use his insanity to her advantage. Bromden, at one point, thinks to himself, "You're making sense, old man, a sense of your own. You're not crazy the way they think." "Crazy the way they think," however, is all that matters in this hospital. The authority figures decide who is sane and who is insane, and by deciding it, they make it reality.

LOBOTOMY

Today, the word lobotomy is rarely mentioned.

If it is, it's usually the butt of a joke. But in the 20th century, a lobotomy became a legitimate alternative treatment for serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia and severe depression. A lobotomy wasn't some primitive procedure of the early 1900s. In fact, lobotomies were performed well into the 1980s in the United States, Britain, Scandinavia and several western European countries.

In 1935, Portuguese neurologist Antonio Egas Moniz performed a brain operation he called leucotomy in a Lisbon hospital. This was the first-ever modern leucotomy to treat mental illness, which involved drilling holes in his patient's skull to access the brain. For this work, Moniz received the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1949.

In 1936, psychiatrist Walter Freeman and another neurosurgeon performed the first U.S. prefrontal lobotomy on a Kansas housewife. Freeman renamed it lobotomy. Freeman believed that an overload of emotions led to mental illness and that cutting certain nerves in the brain could eliminate excess emotion and stabilize a personality. He wanted to find a more efficient way to perform the procedure without drilling into a person's head so he created the 10-minute transorbital lobotomy (known as the ice-pick lobotomy). Freeman would go on to perform about 2,500 lobotomies. Known as a showman, he once performed 25 lobotomies in one day. To shock his audiences, he also liked to insert picks in both eyes simultaneously.

Freeman's ice-pick lobotomy became wildly popular. The main reason is that people were desperate for treatments for serious mental illness. This was a time before antipsychotic medication, and mental asylums were overcrowded. There were some very unpleasant results, very tragic results and some excellent results and a lot in between.

The U.S. performed more lobotomies than any other country, between 40,000 and 50,000. Curiously, as early as the 1950s, some nations, including Germany and Japan, had outlawed lobotomies. The Soviet Union prohibited the procedure in 1950, stating that it was contrary to the principles of humanity. How ironic.

ELECTROSHOCK THERAPY

Of all treatments in contemporary psychiatry, perhaps none is more commonly misunderstood than electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Its depiction in the popular media and in movies such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has contributed to its controversial reputation in the general public. Yet, the research indicates that nearly 80 years after its discovery, ECT remains the single most effective therapy for treatment-resistant cases of depression and some cases of bipolar affective disorder and schizophrenia. Although its exact mechanism of action is unknown, electroconvulsive therapy works by inducing seizure activity via electricity in the frontal lobes of the brain. The treatment itself lasts only few minutes, and a usual course of ECT involves treatment two or three times a week for a few weeks, followed by maintenance therapy on an outpatient basis.

Like many treatments in psychiatry and medicine, ECT was discovered serendipitously. Early asylum keepers recognized that the symptoms of psychotic patients who also suffered from epilepsy seemed to improve after having a seizure. The Portuguese psychiatrist Ladislav Meduna began experimenting with different ways to induce seizures, and in 1934 discovered that Metrazol, a stimulant drug, produced seizures if given in high enough doses. This new treatment quickly became known as convulsive therapy. Around the same time, Italian neurologist Ugo Cerletti was experimenting with seizure induction in dogs by delivering electrical shocks directly to their heads. Psychiatric legend holds that Cerletti was shopping at a butcher shop one day and noticed that the butcher would deliver an electrical shock to the heads of pigs before slaughtering them. The electricity caused the animal to enter an anesthetized coma-like state. Cerletti wondered whether electricity applied to the heads of human patients would similarly produce anesthesia before provoking convulsions. Electroconvulsive therapy was born. Beginning in the 1940s, the electrical technique was adopted by almost every major psychiatric institution around the world as a treatment for serious mental disease.

ECT's discovery as an effective treatment for severe mental disorder represented the first real hope for patients once considered to be untreatable, and it continues to offer patients relief from otherwise unrelenting and debilitating psychiatric symptoms. Its story reveals a history that is just as remarkable as its well-established effectiveness.

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST THEMES

Sexual Repression vs. Sexual Freedom

One of the prevailing motifs in the play involves the metaphorical contrast between clamped-down sexual mores and freewheeling, instinctive, „natural“ sexual freedom. The conflict is represented by the war between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched. The „Big Nurse“ represents a impotent, controlled sexuality, an attempt to button up natural instincts and resist impulse through conscious order. McMurphy, the symbol of total sexual abandon, ultimately tears the Nurse's clothes from his body to „unleash“ his breasts in a final climax of the battle. McMurphy herself is almost animalistic in her sexuality, which is a main reason she has been institutionalized by a repressive society. She is considered dangerous and hostile because she acts on her urges. Her primary crime is statutory rape, an offense she defends by arguing that the young boy pressed her to have sex rather than the other way around. At the end of the play, though McMurphy frees nearly all the main characters sexually--bringing a prostitute for fellow inmates, encouraging the men to rediscover the emasculated souls they've surrendered to Nurse Ratched--she must pay for her free sexuality by losing a part of his brain. Kesey suggests that fully unfettered sexuality is too dangerous for modern society to tolerate.

Independence vs. Acquiescence

Throughout the play, we consistently root for the inmates to find freedom, either through a mass escape or by overthrowing the regime and winning a new order in the institution. This is all subverted, however, when McMurphy discovers that she is only involuntarily committed inmates. The rest of the inmates are there by choice. They would rather be quiescent followers, surrendering themselves to institutional oppression, than independent in a society where they do not quite fit and may not be able to function. McMurphy sees emasculation as the prime reason for the choice to stay. The Nurse has found a way to mentally castrate each and every one of the inmates--including Rawlins, who commits suicide by physical emasculation. McMurphy may perceive that the best way to free the other men is to expose Nurse Ratched as flesh and blood rather than an inevitable oppressor--someone with his own flaws and pains. McMurphy attempts to work within the Nurse's system, trying to outmanipulate and outfox his with his various schemes. But ultimately, the only way to change the acquiescence of her fellow inmates is to lead by example. she feels pressure to acquiesce and avoid pain, but she choose to follow his independent spirit, which explodes in brute force when she rips the Nurse's clothes open. This act prevents the rest of the inmates from ever seeing him as merely the robotic hand of authority. He has a body now, and they can no longer follow him blindly, understanding that he is just as mortal as they are. They are likely to continue choosing the institution to the outside world, but they will remain with a greater degree of independence than before.

Self-Interest vs. Altruism

McMurphy's character is worth considering in comparing the drives for altruism and self-interest. When McMurphy enters the hospital, she has the goal of causing chaos in order to disrupt Nurse Ratched's carefully designed schemes, which quash the inmates' spirits. At first it seems that she does so primarily for amusement, or in order to establish herself as Top Dog and ensure that she has the power in the ward. She also consistently fleeces the other inmates in gambling games. Over time, however, we suspect that money, power, and amusement are not—or are no longer—her primary motivation for taking on Ratched. She develops a sincere desire to resuscitate these fallen, empty, drained souls. In one of the most significant moments of the play, when she is frustrated that the men are not trying to get out, she throws all their money back at them, in a demonstration that she cares more about them than self-interest alone would dictate. Once McMurphy realizes that she might never get out, being involuntarily committed subject to Ratched's will, she for a while follows her self-interest. But this is temporary, for she ultimately sacrifices herself in order to allow the inmates to see their chance for escape from the ward in both body and soul.

Mind vs. Matter

Play elucidates some ways that people imprison themselves psychosomatically, using the mind to trap the body. In the case of Chief Bromden, for instance, the Indian has convinced others—maybe even himself—that he is deaf and dumb. This chosen handicap dictates the conditions of even the most mundane moments of his life. Meanwhile, for the rest of the inmates, in group therapy sessions Nurse Ratched uses the power of suggestion to expose their deepest insecurities. We see over and over that belief in a particular ailment seems to induce it. Specifically, in the case of electroshock therapy (EST), given to disturbed patients whenever they misbehave, most of them succumb and find themselves changed negatively by the experience. Chief Bromden, in particular, says that fighting EST was not an option: the fog simply envelops you and warps your brain. But McMurphy teaches him that fighting EST requires willpower, and through focus of mind it can be resisted like much else. Again and again, McMurphy uses her strength to fight the effect of EST, allowing Bromden to follow her and finally escape. There are natural limits—namely, nature itself—to the use of mind over matter. Some people have genuine medical conditions. As for McMurphy, she cannot withstand Ratched's final tool of punishment, the actual removal of part of her brain.

Fear vs. Experience

The inmates tend to be prisoners of their own fear. Kesey suggests that modern society, figured by Nurse Ratched's institution, preys on fear, that authoritarian, repressive regimes, whether in the government, the home, or the workplace, rely on fear to control individuals. Ratched's methods of manipulation include using public embarrassment to make the inmates turn on each other, then the power of suggestion to make the inmates afraid of her potential to expose each one of their unique flaws to the group. He uses a carrot-and-stick approach to make the inmates afraid of physical punishment for the slightest disobedience. What McMurphy finds upon entering the ward is a group of sniveling, whipped animals who have lost the sense of their own capacity for learning from everyday experience.

They have given up sex, alcohol, and even living voluntarily because of their fear of indulging in everyday life. Whatever fear of life brought most of them into the institution in the first place has been magnified many times by Ratched's regime, and McMurphy takes up the challenge of helping the others again want to experience more out of life.

Group Mentality vs. Individualism

Perhaps Nurse Ratched's most sinister tool is preying on the group mentality of the inmates to instill fear and self-loathing. He makes it very clear that the inmates are not allowed to be on their own; they must form groups of eight in order to request access to even the most mundane activity. There is method to this seeming draconian order. The Nurse knows that as long as the men can reflect, mirror, and expose each other's pain, they will have enough to occupy themselves with rather than rebelling against him. Only in the solitude of one's own room can one of them look inside and develop the strength of will and character to begin questioning his authority. Such questioning of the hospital, its leadership, the role of the hospital in their convalescence, or broadly questioning authority or society is a mark of individualism that Nurse Ratched will not allow. In a group of disturbed people, the group identity is going nowhere, and that is the way he wants it. He controls the inmates by controlling the questions asked, and as long as he prevents them from being alone for very long, he knows that he will have the upper hand.

SYMBOLISM, IMAGERY, ALLEGORY

A PECKING PARTY

McMurphy describes a „pecking party“ as a situation in which chickens see blood on another chicken and start pecking at it like crazy until they’re all bloody, pecking at each other in a frenzy, and end up killing each other. McMurphy points out that Nurse Ratched’s Therapeutic Community meetings are pecking parties. Nurse Ratched gets one of the men to reveal his weakness, and then all of the patients follow his lead, „pecking“ at the man. This starts off a chain reaction that hurts all of the men, sets them all against each other (instead of against Nurse Ratched), and keeps them all feeling weak (and emasculated). Thus the „therapeutic“ meetings aren’t a time when patients can provide each other with mutual and beneficial help, but a time when they end up hurting each other and making it all worse.

RABBITS AND THE WOLF

Harding explains to McMurphy that the world is divided into the weak and the strong. He, the doctor, and most of the patients are the weak—rabbits—and Nurse Ratched is the strong, a wolf. He hasn’t made them into rabbits—they’re in the asylum because they can’t adjust to being a rabbit in the outside world.

OUTSIDE

The world is divided into the inside of the insane asylum and „Outside,“ the world as it exists outside of the walls of the insane asylum. Outside has a grip on everybody’s imagination: to some, it’s a scary place; to others, it’s a seductive place; but everybody divides the world into this dichotomy.

GREEN SEEPAGE

Chief notices that whenever the staff congregates together for a meeting, there’s a green light that pours out of the room they’re in. Afterwards, there’s a green seepage that covers everything, which he has to clean off. He says you wouldn’t believe the poisons that ooze out of staff members’ skins. Because we are aware that Chief is mentally ill, we realize that his observations are not literal truths even though he sees it as a literal truth. Instead, he is observing a sort of spiritual residue that infects the entire ward because of the poisonous attitudes of the nurses and orderlies toward the patients. This further reinforces the idea that the asylum is not a place of healing, but of harming the patients.

THE COMBINE

This is Chief’s word to describe the machine-like nature of the asylum system. But it’s not just the asylum that’s governed by this machine—it’s the entire world. He can hear its hum in the walls. Often, Nurse Ratched represents the authority of the Combine; he is the public face of an inhumane system.

MOTIFS

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

INVISIBILITY

Many important elements in the novel are either hidden from view or invisible. For example, Bromden tries to be as invisible as possible. He has achieved this invisibility by pretending not to understand what is going on around him, so people notice him less and less. He keeps both his body and his mind hidden.

Bromden's hallucinations about hidden machines that control the patients call attention to the fact that the power over the patients is usually covert. He imagines that the patients are implanted with tiny machines that record and control their movements from the inside. The truth is that Nurse Ratched manages to rule by insinuation, without ever having to be explicit about his accusations and threats, so it seems as though the patients themselves have absorbed his influence—he becomes a sort of twisted conscience. When McMurphy smashes through the glass window of the Nurses' Station, her excuse is that the glass was so clean she could not see it. By smashing it, she reminds the patients that although they cannot always see Ratched's or society's manipulation, it still operates on them.

THE POWER OF LAUGHTER

The power of laughter resonates throughout the novel. McMurphy's laughter is the first genuine laughter heard on the ward in years. McMurphy's first inkling that things are strange among the patients is that none of them are able to laugh; they can only smile and snicker behind their hands. Bromden remembers a scene from his childhood when his father and relatives mocked some government officials, and she realizes how powerful their laughter was: "I forget sometimes what laughter can do." For McMurphy, laughter is a potent defense against society's insanity, and anyone who cannot laugh properly has no chance of surviving.

REAL VERSUS IMAGINED SIZE

Bromden describes people by their true size, not merely their physical size. Kesey implies that when people allow others, such as governments and institutions, to define their worth, they can end up far from their natural state. Nurse Ratched's true size, for example, is "big as a tractor," because he is powerful and unstoppable. Bromden, though he is tall, feels much smaller and weaker. He tells McMurphy, "I used to be big, but not no more." As for McMurphy, Bromden says he is "broad as Papa was tall," and his father was named The Pine That Stands Tallest on the Mountain. Bromden says his mother was twice the size of he and his father put together, because she belittled them both so much. With McMurphy's help, Bromden is gradually "blown back up to full size" as he regains his self-esteem, sexuality, and individuality.

THEMES & QUESTIONS

MADNESS

Although most of the characters in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are considered mentally ill, the plot of the novel suggests that there's a thin line between „normal“ and „abnormal.“ Much of the difference between the normal and the abnormal consists of fear. As one of the patients in the asylum suggests, he could live in the Outside world if only he had the guts. He doesn't have the guts, so he finds safety in being institutionalized and considered „crazy.“

Questions About Madness

1. Is McMurphy mentally ill or just a schemer who rebels against authority?
2. Which of the characters in the novel do you think have mental illnesses? Which ones don't? What's your definition of a mental illness anyway?
3. In what ways does this novel challenge you to reconsider your notion of who is and who isn't suffering from a mental illness?
4. How does society view mental illness in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? How does the medical establishment view it? Are there conflicting viewpoints expressed in the book and, if so, what are they?

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Though Chief Bromden is schizophrenic, it is possible to argue he is one of the sanest people in the book. Though Nurse Ratched is seen as normal and McMurphy is seen as mentally ill, the nurse is actually the psychopath.

FREEDOM AND CONFINEMENT

The novel's protagonist chafes at being locked up in a mental institution, but most of the patients are there voluntarily because they find freedom and safety in being confined. The world is divided into the world inside the asylum (confined) and the world Outside (freedom). But even the world inside the mental ward is divided into freedom and confinement. Though many of the men want to be in the mental institution, they still want to enjoy certain freedoms and they struggle with the way they're treated—how they can be sent to the Disturbed Ward or for electroshock therapy or to Seclusion simply for asking that they be allowed to keep their own cigarettes.

Questions About Freedom and Confinement

1. Is confinement literal or a state of mind in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?
2. Do any of the patients achieve freedom? Who achieves freedom and how do they accomplish it?
3. What does freedom mean for the patients? What does it mean for Nurse Ratched?
4. What are the consequences of confinement? What are the benefits?

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Although we typically think of murder as a crime worthy of punishment, Chief was actually freeing McMurphy from the prison of her body when he killed her.

Although McMurphy sees confinement as a curtailing of her freedom, most of the patients find safety and freedom in being locked up in the asylum ward.

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MANIPULATION

Nurse Ratched, the play's antagonist, maintains his power on the ward by manipulating the men's fears and desires. He uses shame to keep them submissive. He manipulates his staff through insinuation and by carefully stoking their hatred. When he is unable to get the protagonist, McMurphy, under control, he tries to manipulate the other patients to turn against her by suggesting that she is manipulative herself and has never helped the men without getting something (like money) in return.

Questions About Manipulation

1. Which characters manipulate other characters in this novel? How do they do it?
2. Is manipulation in the novel always a bad thing? Why or why not?
3. How does McMurphy respond to manipulation? How do the other patients respond to manipulation? How does Nurse Ratched respond to manipulation?
4. In what way does manipulation contribute to each character's sense of power or powerlessness?

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Even though Nurse Ratched is a master manipulator, he fails to convince the men that McMurphy herself is manipulating them for her own benefit.

POWER

Nurse Ratched, the antagonist, is drunk with his power until McMurphy arrives and upsets it. Much of his power lies in his ability to emasculate the male patients and maintain a sexless façade. When he is revealed as a man (McMurphy rips her uniform off, exposing her ample bosom), he loses much of his power.

Questions About Power

1. Which character is the most powerful in this novel? Which character is the most powerless? How do characters react to being powerful or powerless?
2. How is power gained in this novel? How is it lost? What are the consequences for gaining or losing power?
3. Are the characters in the novel inherently powerful (or powerless), or is power the result of a person's position in life (such as being a nurse versus being a patient)?
4. Does Kesey really argue that women are less powerful than men? Why is it that Nurse Ratched loses his power when McMurphy reveals his chests?

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Although men gain power through sex, according to McMurphy's view of the world, women lose their power through sex. By denying a man sex, a female can symbolically castrate him; by having sex with a woman, a man can weaken her. Power is thus intimately connected with gender in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

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LAWS AND ORDER

Nurse Ratched uses an extensive system of rules and regulations, as well as an ordered routine, to keep the asylum patients under control. Many of the rules Nurse Ratched has in place are petty; the only point of most rules is for Nurse Ratched to display his control over the patients' lives. Rules range from music constantly remaining on in the main hangout room, the staff members not being allowed to eat with patients, and the toothpaste being locked away as if it could be used as a weapon or a way of escaping the ward. In this play, rules are not in place to protect people, but to hold them down. The characters are freed by breaking the rules.

Questions About Laws and Order

1. Does law and order on the ward contribute to patients' sense of safety or frustration? Or both? Why?
2. When the men begin to stand up to Nurse Ratched about the rules, what's the reasoning behind their complaints? What's her response? Are their complaints legitimate? Is her response legitimate?
3. Are the rules on the ward determined democratically, as Nurse Ratched claims? If not, who does set the rules? If they are, what keeps the men from creating rules that make them happier?
4. Are there any examples of rules in this novel that actually are for a person's (or a patient's) own good?

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Although the order, routine, and rules on the ward give patients a certain sense of security, they also prevent the men from ever being „cured.“

Although Nurse Ratched and the patients pretend that the ward is run „democratically,“ with patients participating in the process of rule-making, he actually refuses to cede power to the democratic process.

REBELLION

McMurphy's rebellion against the paltry rules that govern the ward throws everybody into an uproar. Patients respond with warmth as they suddenly realize they've been dead all these years, lulled into a false sense of security by allowing others to control their every waking moment—and, well, their sleeping moments, too. Rebellion turns out not to be a lighthearted game, but a serious struggle in a life-or-death situation.

Questions About Rebellion

1. Which patient is the most rebellious?
2. What is the definition of rebellion, according to Nurse Ratched? Do you agree with his definition of rebellion or do you think another definition would work better? What definition would you suggest and why?
3. How does Nurse Ratched respond to rebellion? How do other nurses and Dr. Spivey respond to rebellion?
4. Why is rebellion such a threat to Nurse Ratched?

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Although Nurse Ratched argues that McMurphy's „rebellion“ is evidence of her insanity, rebellion against petty rules and regulations is actually a healthy response to tyranny.

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GLOSSARY

allotment – a plot of land rented by an individual for growing vegetables or flowers

to anoint – smear or rub with oil, typically as part of a religious ceremony

ball-cutter – someone who cut's or castrate's a male's testicles

brier – any of a number of prickly scrambling bushes, especially a wild rose.

to bug – *informal* to annoy or bother (someone)

bull goose loony – an oxymoron. A bull indicates masculine qualities while a goose indicates feminine. A loony, of course, is someone not entirely in control of their mental faculties and unable to discern whether they are a bull or a goose.

a burr up the butt – *informal* to irritate; a persistent source of irritation

buzzard – *North American* a vulture; a large bird of prey with the head and neck more or less bare of feathers

cog-wheel – a wheel or bar with a series of projections on its edge, which transfers motion by engaging with projections on another wheel or bar

Combine – a large mind- and environment-controlling mechanism concealed within the walls of the hospital

conductant – a conductant substance; helps transmit heat or electricity

defunct – no longer existing or functioningt

dinky – disappointingly small; insignificant

drudgery – hard menial or dull work

frigging – used for emphasis or to express anger, annoyance or surprise

gawking – staring openly and stupidly

gonna crawfish – to try and take back what you just said

to grin – grimace grotesquely so as to reveal the teeth

Grinders – *informal* the teeth

grub – *informal* food

a honkers – *Canadian* an informal name for Canada goose

Injun – *US dated or offensive* an American Indian

IOU – a promise to pay a debt, especially a signed paper stating the specific amount owed and often bearing the letters IOU (phonetically speaking: I owe you)

latrine – a toilet, especially a communal one in a camp or barracks

Lawrence Welk – (March 11, 1903 – May 17, 1992) was an American musician, accordionist, bandleader, and television impresario, who hosted the television program The Lawrence Welk Show from 1951 to 1982. His style came to be known to his large audience of radio, television, and live-performance fans as „champagne music“.

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padlock – a removable lock with a hinged link to be passed through a chain or eye

peckerheads – an aggressive, objectionable person

pecking – to peck means to strike with the beak

pecking party – a situation in which chickens see blood on another chicken and start pecking at it like crazy until they're all bloody, pecking at each other in a frenzy, and end up killing each other.

pinochle – any of a family of card games, usually for three or four persons and typically played with a 48-card deck made up of two of every card above the eight, including the ace.

rescind – revoke, cancel, or repeal

rigged up – manipulated, arranged fraudulently

ring toss – a ring toss is a game where rings are tossed around a stick

Rorschach test – a type of projective test used in psychoanalysis, in which a standard set of symmetrical ink blots of different shapes and colours is presented one by one to the subject, who is asked to describe what they suggest or resemble

scuffs – a mark made by scraping or grazing a surface or object

shebang – *informal* a matter, operation, or set of circumstances

Skilo – game similar to bingo where the player pays a fee and throws a small rubber ball into a container divided into numbered sections for the chance to win money.

Slosh – move irregularly with a splashing sound

smooches – a big wet sloppy kiss

stompedown dadgum – downright goddammit

tranquility – the quality or state of being tranquil; calm

twitch – a slang expression for a woman of easy virtue; a prostitute.

wager – more formal term for bet

well-endowed – *informal* (of a man) having large genitals

yaller – dialect spelling of yellow

zealous – passionate, devoted; committed

QUIZ

1. What animals does McMurphy compare the patients to?

- A Wolves
- B Chickens
- C Rabbits
- D Pigs

2. Which of the following symbolizes Bromden's insanity?

- A The flock of geese
- B The loud music
- C The monopoly board
- D The fog machine

3. What is McMurphy's first complaint to Nurse Ratched?

- A That the bathrooms are dirty
- B That the music is played too loudly
- C That he has no privacy
- D That he cannot smoke the cigarettes he bought

4. What is McMurphy's excuse for breaking through the glass of the Nurses' Station?

- A Voices in her head told him to
- B The patients bet her she would not do it
- C The glass was so clean she did not see it
- D She tripped

5. What punishment do McMurphy and Bromden receive for fighting with the aides?

- A They have to give up card games in the tub room
- B They have to clean the latrines
- C They are given lobotomies
- D They are given electroshock therapy

6. What does McMurphy do to Nurse Ratched after Billy commits suicide?

- A She punches him in the face
- B She rips open his shirt and strangles him
- C She rips off his clothes and rapes him
- D She calls him vulgar names to his face

7. How does Chief Bromden leave the hospital?

- A He leaves with Candy and Sandy through the window
- B He checks himself out
- C He makes Doctor Spivey drive him away
- D He breaks through a window and runs away

8. Who eventually kills McMurphy?

- A Nurse Ratched
- B McMurphy commits suicide
- C Doctor Spivey
- D Bromden

9. The mental patients are divided into two groups. What are these groups called?

- A Males and Females
- B Cured and Uncured
- C Acutes and Chronics
- D Shirts and Skins

10. Which two medical treatments are sometimes given to a patient if they rebels?

- A Hypnotherapy, trepanation
- B Electroshock, lobotomy
- C EEG, lobotomy
- D Electroshock, trepanation

11. How do the other patients describe Nurse Ratched to McMurphy?

- A As warm and welcoming
- B As weak
- C As all-powerful
- D As bureaucratic

12. Who is the narrator of One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest?

- A McMurphy
- B Billy Bibbit
- C Nurse Ratched
- D Chief Bromden

13. What is Chief Bromden's nickname in the hospital?

- A Chief Bromide
- B Chief Basketball
- C Chief Broom
- D Chief Brush

14. What does everyone in the hospital believe about Chief Bromden?

- A He is faking illness
- B He's strong and violent
- C He is small
- D He's deaf and dumb

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15. How does McMurphy describe the meeting in which Harding is verbally attacked by the other patients?

- A A pecking party
- B A pig pen
- C A punishment circle
- D A pain party

16. What does Nurse Ratched use to assert his power in the staff meeting?

- A Silence
- B Furious rants
- C Calm reasoning
- D Clever invective

17. After the success of the film adaptation, what actor became forever associated with McMurphy?

- A Robert Redford
- B Jack Nicolson
- C Al Pacino
- D Robert De Niro

18. What kind of party does McMurphy throw in the ward?

- A Pinata
- B Pajama
- C Prostitute
- D Poker

19. What bet does McMurphy make with the other patients?

- A That she can make Nurse Ratched lose his temper within a week
- B That she can get the patients out of their chores
- C That her favorite team will win the World Series
- D That she'll be able to escape from the hospital

20. What happens to Billy Bibbit?

- A He is released from the hospital
- B He is moved to the Disturbed Ward
- C His classification changes from Acute to Chronic
- D He dies in an apparent suicide

21. What does McMurphy arrange for Billy Bibbit?

- A Electroshock therapy
- B A date with Nurse Ratched
- C A date with a prostitute named Candy Starr
- D Swimming lessons

22. How is Doctor Spivey controlled by Nurse Ratched?

- A He and his wife are good friends.
- B He knows he is addicted to morphine and he is blackmailing him.
- C He provides him with sexual favors.
- D He provides him with morphine for his addiction.

23. What does Harding mean when she confesses to McMurphy that she is different?

- A She is a Republican.
- B She is homosexual.
- C She is insane.
- D She is psychic.

24. Why does Billy Bibbit commit suicide?

- A She discovers she is a Chronic
- B She discovers that Nurse Ratched won't sign her release
- C She feels betrayed by McMurphy's conformity
- D She has learned her husband is unfaithful

25. Why is Billy Bibbit in the hospital?

- A He has attempted suicide
- B He has threatened a doctor
- C He is afraid of the opposite sex
- D He thinks he is famous

26. Who is the author of the novel on which the film is based?

- A Ken Kesey
- B Agatha Christie
- C William Shakespeare
- D Jackie Collins

27. Chief Bromden is alleged to be:

- A Deaf and Mute
- B A Very Good Swimmer
- C Homosexual
- D Blind

28. What year did the film win the Academy Award?

- A 1968
- B 1972
- C 1982
- D 1975

29. Billy primarily suffers with problems surrounding:

- A Schizophrenia
- B Violence
- C Sexuality
- D Temper Tantrums

30. McMurphy gets herself committed to get out of her sentence on the prison work farm.
On what charge was she convicted?

- A Vagrancy
- B Statutory rape
- C Battery
- D Drunkenness

31. On her first morning, McMurphy does something simple that shocks the other patients. What?

- A She sings
- B She picks a fight with an aide
- C She sleeps in
- D She kisses Nurse Ratched

32. What was the name of the prostitute Billy considered ,his girl'?

- A Sandra
- B Candy
- C Cindy
- D Misty

33. What does the Chief call the huge conspiracy that controls everything?

- A The Man
- B The Conspiracy
- C The Black Iron Prison
- D The Combine

- | | | |
|------|------|------|
| 1 B | 12 D | 23 B |
| 2 D | 13 C | 24 C |
| 3 B | 14 D | 25 A |
| 4 C | 15 A | 26 A |
| 5 D | 16 A | 27 A |
| 6 B | 17 B | 28 D |
| 7 D | 18 D | 29 C |
| 8 D | 19 A | 30 C |
| 9 C | 20 D | 31 A |
| 10 B | 21 C | 32 B |
| 11 C | 22 B | 33 D |