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Teaching Ken Kesey's

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, published in 1962, is a classic work of the countercultural movement, containing themes of individuality, societal oppression, and the ambiguity of sanity and insanity. Author Ken Kesey was inspired by experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs like LSD, as well as by his time serving on the psychiatric ward of a veterans' hospital. However, although parts of the text were inspired by Kesey's life, the novel is, nonetheless, a work of fiction. McMurphy's development through the story and his ultimate sacrifice are archetypal themes found throughout literature. The novel also contains elements of contemporary tragedy: McMurphy emerges as a tragic hero due to his rebellious nature and ultimate demise. Despite his flaws, McMurphy has a redeeming influence on Chief Bromden and the other patients.

Chief Bromden's role as first-person narrator allows the reader a glimpse into the inner workings of the hospital in a way that a more traditional, sane narrator could never do. In the beginning of the novel, Bromden is undoubtedly depicted as insane, being prone to hallucinations and paranoid thoughts. His hallucinations are full of fantastic images of machinery, wires, and other devices that the nurse uses to control the patients on the ward. He also sees people literally change in size; as the nurse's power and influence grows, Bromden sees her grow physically as well. As the Chief develops into a more autonomous, sane character, he imagines himself growing from a diminutive size to a fully grown individual at the end of the novel. All of his hallucinations are presented as objective fact; however, the reader is aware that these things are not *literally* happening. Bromden's narration, even at its most psychotic, serves to illuminate the destructive effect of the ward on its patients.

One of the most ubiquitous symbols in the book is the Combine, which is an all-important concept to the Chief. The Chief's bizarre descriptions of the machinery present in the ward extend to the outside world as well. The Combine represents society as a whole, especially its civilizing, sterilizing aspects. Nurse Ratched and her staff on the ward are servants of the Combine. The tools they use to force conformity—from group therapy to electroshock treatment to lobotomy—all serve the ultimate goal of making patients fit for society again. The theme of the dehumanizing power of society is most developed within the symbol of the Combine. It is a machine rendering all those it touches into powerless, emasculated figures.

All of the patients on the ward are male. The only notable females present in the text are Nurse Ratched and the prostitutes. It is often argued that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is an anti-feminist work. Although there are women in positions of power—most importantly, Nurse Ratched—these women maintain control by intentionally emasculating the patients. Nurse Ratched is in her position of power not by virtue of her talents and skills as a woman, but because she represses her sexuality and uses the patients' sexuality against them. Her ultimate goal for the patients is castration because she knows that

Feminist Theory Applied to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Examining Women in Positions of Power

1. Divide the class into three groups. Assign each group one of the following characters and sections of the novel:
 - A. Nurse Ratched: the discussion of the “pecking party” in the second half of Chapter 5
 - B. Mrs. Harding: Mrs. Harding’s visit to her husband at the end of Chapter 22
 - C. Billy Bibbit’s mother: Billy’s interaction with his mother in Chapter 28
2. Have the groups list and analyze the ways that the women hold power over the male characters.
3. After each group has finished, have the class come together to share their lists of how the female characters maintain power.
4. Reconvene the class and have students answer the following questions:
 - Do the methods the female characters use to maintain power *help* or *hinder* the development of the men? Why?
 - Are the methods the women use ultimately helpful or harmful?

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining how Characters Function as Representations of the Subconscious

1. Review Freud's concepts of the id, ego, and superego with students. Emphasize that these are all parts of the *subconscious* mind.
2. Divide the class into three groups. Assign each group one of the following characters and parts of the mind:
 - A. McMurphy as the id
 - B. Nurse Ratched as the superego
 - C. Chief Bromden as the ego
3. Have each group search the text for evidence of how the assigned character behaves and how his or her actions relate to part of the subconscious mind.
4. As a class, have a representative from each group present their findings.
5. Have the class answer the following questions:
 - Which parts of the subconscious does the author seem to value most, based on how the characters are presented? Least?
 - Does Nurse Ratched (the superego) ultimately defeat McMurphy (the id)? Do the Chief's (the ego's) return to sanity and his escape defeat Nurse Ratched (the superego)?

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Identifying Archetypal Characters

1. Divide students into three groups or groups divisible by three.
2. Assign each group an archetypal character type:
 - A. HERO
 - B. SCAPEGOAT
 - C. LONER or OUTCAST
3. Allow each group to pick a character from the text that they feel best exemplifies the archetype that they are assigned.

NOTE: It is all right if two groups choose the same character, as long as they have textual evidence to support their selection. For example, the group assigned the hero and the group assigned the scapegoat might both choose McMurphy.

4. Have the groups compile evidence from the text that supports their selection, explaining why the character fits that archetype.
5. Once groups have had sufficient time, bring the class back together to discuss the characters. A representative from each group should present its findings.
6. Direct the discussion toward the following questions and ideas:
 - What are the characteristics of each archetype? How do the characters in the novel embody those characteristics? How do the characters deviate from them?
 - Do any of the characters fit more than one archetype?
 - Based on a character's association with an archetype, are there certain expectations for him or her? Are they fulfilled?
 - Are the characters flat or round? Does each character's association with an archetype make him or her predictable, or are his or her actions unpredictable?
 - How effective is Kesey's use of character archetypes in conveying the central theme or message of the novel? Explain your answer.