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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



One Flew Over the
Cuckoo's Nest

by Ken Kesey

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. point out the significance of the following symbols in the story: the fog, the geese, McMurphy's underwear.
2. recognize the Christian images in the novel and discuss the question of whether or not McMurphy is a Christ-like character.
3. comment on the ways the author uses descriptions of the characters' hands to define personality.
4. define black comedy and cite examples of black comedy in this story.
5. discuss the extent to which the Chief is or is not a reliable narrator.
6. point out how the following words apply to the Chief's hallucinations:
 - combine
 - fog
 - time control.
7. show how McMurphy's presence in the hospital demonstrates the conflicts between the individual's needs and society's needs.
8. by citing comments or incidents from the novel, prove that the following are or are not themes:
 - women have the power to suppress a man's self worth.
 - laughter and comfort with one's sexuality are signs of strength and sanity.
 - people who do not conform to society's rules are sometimes judged to be insane.
 - sometimes rules need to be broken so a person can grow as an individual.
 - strength and courage come from being true to yourself.
9. define the following medical terms from the story: Therapeutic Community, EST, lobotomy, psychopath, Disturbed Ward, acutes, chronics, epilepsy.
10. point out the significance of the author's choice of character names in this story including: Ratched, Big Nurse, Chief Broom, Billy Bibbit.
11. cite incidents from the story which illustrate the abuses the patients in the story suffer at the hands of the staff.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Define Combine, the fog, and time control. Why does the Chief describe the hospital as a large machine?
2. Some qualities of heroes are courage, self-confidence, and a willingness to sacrifice themselves for others. Cite incidents from the story proving McMurphy has these qualities.
3. In what ways do the men change on the fishing trip? What change does the Chief observe in McMurphy on the way back to the hospital?
4. Find three examples of Christ-like images in this story. Speculate on whether or not McMurphy is intended to be a Christ-like character.
5. Why is Harding a patient at the hospital?
6. For what reasons do you think Kesey chose to tell this story from the Chief's point of view?
7. Define black comedy. Cite three examples of black comedy in this story.
8. Research the state of mental hospitals today. Do they still use EST, lobotomy, and the Therapeutic Community as ways to treat the mentally ill? If not, what therapies do they use instead? Are there instances of patient abuse in today's institutions? Are epileptics placed in mental institutions? How is their disease treated today?
9. Describe McMurphy from Nurse Ratched's point of view.
10. Why do McMurphy and the Chief believe Nurse Ratched is not totally responsible for the misery the men on her ward suffer?
11. Compare Candy Starr and Vera Harding. Why does McMurphy seem to like each of these women?
12. Compare Mrs. Bibbit and Mrs. Bromden. What is the Chief's opinion of these women? How do they hurt the men in their lives?
13. Why do Cheswick and Billy commit suicide?
14. Discuss the significance of the title of this novel and what geese may symbolize in this story.
15. What is the importance of laughter in this novel?
16. Comment on the ending to this story. How does it tie in with the overall theme - a man's right to be an individual versus society's need to make him conform?
17. Why would many people be offended by Kesey's black and female characters? Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.

Part 1

They're out there.

- 1. Why do the black hospital workers not "...bother not talking out loud about their hate secrets when." the Chief is around? In what ways does being half-Indian help the Chief?

- 2. What does the following description of Nurse Ratched suggest to the reader about her character?

"A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would of otherwise been a perfect work, and you can see how bitter she is about it."

Use the following passage from this section to answer the next three questions:

"(A blue tick hound bays out there in the fog, running scared and lost because he can't see. No tracks on the ground but the ones he's making, and he sniffs in every direction with his cold red-rubber nose and picks up no scent but his own fear, fear burning down into him like steam.) It's gonna burn me just that way, finally telling about all this, about the hospital, and her, and the guys - and about McMurphy....this is too awful to be the truth!...But it's the truth even if it didn't happen."

- 3. What relationship is the author suggesting between the blue tick hound and Chief Bromden?

There's a Monopoly game...

1. In this scene, McMurphy and the other acutes are playing a confusing monopoly game. Speculate on how the game might have been played if Nurse Ratched were running the game instead of McMurphy.

There's long spells...

1. McMurphy manages to hold his temper when faced with Nurse Ratched, the aides, and their infantile rules. What happens to finally make McMurphy lose control?

2. Briefly outline McMurphy's way to escape from the hospital. What bet does he make with the men? Despite McMurphy's inability to move the panel, why does he believe he still walks away the "winner"? How is this a type of climax for the first portion of the book?

I remember it was a Friday...

1. State a theme for this story based on the following conversation between McMurphy and Harding about electric shock therapy.

“If they were going to knock a man in the head, they needed to use something surer and more accurate than a hammer; they finally settled on electricity.” “Jesus, didn’t they think it might do some damage? Didn’t the public raise Cain about it?” “I don’t think you fully understand the public, my friend; in this country, when something is out of order, then the quickest way to get it fixed is the best way.”

2. What does Harding think is the root of all of their problems at the hospital? Why does McMurphy disagree with him?

3. How is the revelation that Harding and the others are in the hospital voluntarily an example of irony?

4. Find a reference to the belief that McMurphy is a Christ-like figure in this Chapter.

5. Why does McMurphy say that the other patients in the ward have “conned ol’ R. P. McMurphy”?
