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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



One Flew Over
the Cuckoo's Nest
Ken Kesey

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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Background

1. Ken Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* while working part-time as a night attendant in the mental ward of a hospital. Some of the book was written while he was supposedly on the job, and most of the characters are based on patients with whom he held extensive conversations. (At the time, he was also a student at Stanford University.)

Acting as his supervisor, write a letter of reprimand telling him to concentrate on his work and stop his creative writing while at the hospital; list several reasons why he should follow your advice.

2. While at Stanford, before and during the writing of the novel, Kesey took part in experiments involving several hallucinogenic drugs, including LSD and mescaline (derived from the peyote cactus). Free write for fifteen minutes on the use and abuse of drugs in our society, keeping in mind that some mental patients have been hospitalized because of the effects of drugs on their brains. Do not neglect the positive uses of drugs, either. Try to write about both sides of the issue.

Part 1

3. The narrator of the novel, Chief Bromden, often writes as if he is insane or under the influence of a hallucinogenic drug. For example, near the beginning of the book, he says, "They start the fog machine again and it's snowing down cold and white all over me like skim milk, so thick I might even be able to hide in it if they didn't have a hold on me."

Explain to a fellow student what you think the imaginary fog represents, who "they" are, and what mental problems Bromden may have.

4. The Chief's narration begins in the present tense ("They're out there"), then he starts using mostly the past tense shortly after the start of part 2 ("The way the Big Nurse acted so confident . . . that worried me for a while"), but occasionally he narrates a scene in the present tense. In an entry in your journal, discuss the effect this shifting of tenses has on the reader. For example, do the scenes narrated in the present tense seem more (or less) exciting than the ones narrated in the past tense? Why do you think Kesey chose this shifting style of narration?
5. Write a short story in which you use an experimental narrative style of your choice. Try something different from what you have experienced in your readings. The story may come from your imagination or actual events in your life, and be prepared to share the story with the rest of the class if you choose to.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

13. One of the subtopics of the novel is the power that women can hold over men. Dr. Sigmund Freud famously asked, "What do women want?" and Geoffrey Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, has his Wife of Bath argue that women want "sovereignty" over men. In a journal entry, discuss this conflict as fully as possible and prepare to share your thoughts with classmates if you wish. You may or may not refer to Big Nurse and McMurphy. The objective of this assignment is for you to explore your feelings on the subject by providing details of how you feel and why you feel that way. Who has the most power in our society: men or women? What is that power based on? Is society better off this way, or should there be a shift in power to the other side? Why or why not? What would be some of the results of such a change in power?
14. One major conflict between McMurphy and Big Nurse concerns whether she is going to allow the men to watch the World Series on TV. At first the patients vote against the idea, hoping to win favor in the eyes of Nurse Ratched, but soon afterward they come around to McMurphy's side and vote to watch the Series. However, Big Nurse will not give in and shuts off the power to the TV.

Write a dialogue between you and someone in authority regarding a similar conflict you have had or are having. The conflict may or may not involve what you choose to watch on TV; it can be any conflict with authority. Prepare to present the dialogue to the class if you wish. Be sure not to include demeaning or blatantly offensive statements that could hurt the feelings of others or get you into trouble with your teacher, the school administration, or any other authority figures that could cause you serious problems. At the same time, try to make your dialogue realistic and convincing, taking both sides of an issue and presenting an interesting discussion.

Part 3

27. Chief Bromden has been pretending to be a deaf mute for many years, and no one in the hospital knows that he can hear and speak. However, he opens up to McMurphy and tells him about his childhood and about what happened to his father. “He finally just drank,” says the Chief, “and every time I see him put the bottle to his mouth he don’t suck out of it, it sucks out of him until he’s shrunk so wrinkled and yellow even the dogs don’t know him....”

In your opinion, why does the Chief choose to talk with McMurphy? What do the events he reveals say about the Chief himself? Write a paragraph or two in which you present and argue your points.

28. Have you or one of your friends ever felt the way the Chief did as a child, namely that no one was paying attention to you or your feelings, and that you may as well be a deaf mute for all your opinions mattered to the adults in your life? Compose an email to a friend or a trusted adult explaining how you feel about adults ignoring the thoughts and emotions of children as if they did not exist, as if they were deaf and could not speak.
29. Among other things, alcoholism destroyed the Chief’s father. Predict the actions of an alcoholic, perhaps based on someone you know who is or could be hooked on drinking. Try to imagine what he or she will do in the future and what effects those actions will have on the individual as age takes its toll along with the chemical damage done by consuming too much alcohol on a regular basis. Use your predictions as the starting point for a letter to the individual in which you ask him or her to stop or cut back on drinking so much so often.