Mental Illness in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

*Dedria Bryfonski, Book Editor*
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Chapter 1: Background on Ken Kesey

1. The Life of Ken Kesey
   **Stephen L. Tanner and Laura M. Zaidman**
   A transitional figure between the Beat and Hippie movements, Kesey was the leader of the Merry Pranksters, a sixties countercultural group who advocated the use of psychedelic drugs and confrontations with conventional society. His works celebrate the mythic hero who engages in a transcendental quest for freedom, spontaneity, and individuality while battling a rigid, technocratic society.

2. Kesey Clarifies the Role Drugs Played in the Creation of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*
   **Robert Faggen and Ken Kesey**
   Kesey says that the drugs he took while working in a mental hospital gave him an altered perspective on the patients—he came to believe that the patients were more normal than their environment, a perspective reflected in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Drugs, however, did not create his narrative, they were simply a tool to get it written.

3. Kesey Was the Seminal Author of the Psychedelic Era
   **Christopher Lehmann-Haupt**
   There were two Ken Keseys—the public and the private. The public was the leader of a lively band of counterculture figures. The private authored two notable books—*Sometimes a Great Notion* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*—and in his middle years lived a secluded life on an Oregon farm.
4. Defying Terror Was a Kesey Hallmark  

*Douglas Brinkley*

Throughout his life and writings, Kesey warned readers of the likelihood of global catastrophe and the responsibility of the individual to meet disaster with courage and fortitude. He lived to see the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and took the unpopular, but personally consistent, view that it would be immoral to declare war as retaliation against the attacks.

**Chapter 2: *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and Mental Illness**

1. Kesey’s Realistic View of the World of the Insane  

*Janet R. Sutherland*

*One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is not obscene, racist, or immoral. Rather, it uses obscenities and racist language and describes immoral behavior to make the point that society’s treatment of minorities and those it deems different can cause mental imbalance.

2. McMurphy Helps Chief Bromden Regain His Sanity  

*Barry H. Leeds*

In the novel, Randle McMurphy functions as a psychiatrist to Chief Bromden. Prompted by McMurphy, Bromden dredges up and deals with traumatic memories from his past. With McMurphy’s example of emotional health, Bromden is able to confront his demons and recover his manhood.

3. The Patients in *Cuckoo’s Nest* Regain Their Manhood by Banding Together  

*Terence Martin*

McMurphy enters the matriarchal world of the mental hospital and brings a sense of freedom and possibility to the patients. He breaks down the walls that isolate the men and forges a supportive community that enables some to regain their manhood.
4. McMurphy Is a Psychopath, Not a Hero

Robert Forrey

Critics like Terence Martin who praise McMurphy's heroism are ignoring the fact he is a psychopath who struggles with latent homosexuality.

5. Chief Bromden Conquers His Fears and Becomes a Hero

Annette Benert

As narrator of *Cuckoo's Nest*, Chief Bromden lives in a nightmare world where he fears women, blacks, and machines; however, the novel is not antiwoman, antiblack, or antimachinery. The real problem is within Bromden and the other inmates who give up their own power because of their fears.

6. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* Questions the Meaning of Sanity

Ellen Herrenkohl

The mental institution in *Cuckoo's Nest* is portrayed as dehumanizing—depriving the patients of their individuality. Kesey sees the patients as complicit in their own lack of power—they are refusing to exert their power to make choices. Sanity is regained when Chief Bromden asserts his own identity.

7. The Insane Are More Rational than the Sane

Barbara Tepa Lupack

Making a schizophrenic, mute Native American his narrator in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* was a stroke of genius on Kesey's part. The first-person narration of Chief Bromden with its hallucinatory, nightmarish overtones gives the novel a powerful emotional force.

8. Kesey Creates an Oedipal Triangle in *Cuckoo's Nest*

Ruth Sullivan

Kesey dramatizes the Oedipal conflict in *Cuckoo's Nest*. Nurse Ratched is the mother who emasculates her sons; McMurphy is the father who shows his sons how to be a man. The battle that takes place is ultimately in the minds of the sons, who ultimately need to take responsibility for their own fates.
9. Mixed Ethnicity and Gender Issues Present Challenges to Manhood

Robert P. Waxler

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest offers a uniquely western twist on the Oedipal theme. Kesey explores issues of gender and ethnicity in this first novel but ultimately fails to address the primary cause of the conflict—a society that judges a minority male to be inferior to a white female.

10. Kesey Critiques a Society That Uses Fear and Conformity to Emasculate Men

Michael Meloy

Although Kesey wrote Cuckoo's Nest as a critique against the post–World War II society that he believed emasculated men by forcing them to conform, his message remains relevant in a twenty-first-century society of increased surveillance, violations of civil liberties, and the loss of individuality.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Perspectives on Mental Illness

1. People with Severe Mental Illness Can Live Productively in Society

Kate Sheppard

Community-based programs for people with mental illnesses have proven effective in getting patients out of homeless shelters and mental hospitals and back into society.

2. Psychosurgery Raises Ethical Issues

Lauren Slater

Although neural implants have provided relief to psychiatric patients, their use raises ethical questions. Among these is the absolute control over the patient that it puts in the hands of the physician and the danger of that control being misused.
3. Brain Surgeries Banned Elsewhere Are Performed in China

Nicholas Zamiska

Chinese neurosurgeons are using brain surgery as a treatment for a number of mental conditions, including schizophrenia, a use banned in the United States and other countries. The bonus system in China plays a role in the excessive number of psychosurgeries performed there, as the brain center in the hospital has become a profit center.

4. Electroshock Therapy Can Help Cure Depression

Mind, Mood & Memory

Although electroshock therapy—as used in One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest—has a reputation as a primitive and brutal treatment for mental illness, modern methods have made it a more viable option for patients whose depression is not helped by drugs or psychotherapy.

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