

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest
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Kesey's brilliant work in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* is the by-product of many factors. Kesey uses the setting of the story as his most powerful weapon in establishing his viewpoints. At first, one might consider the story to simply be a fine piece of contemporary fiction, but in reality it is a bitter commentary on the condition of the American society. Obviously, it becomes evident that Kesey will convey many viewpoints throughout the course of the story, however, I strongly believe that a recurring theme can be singled out. The main theme behind *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* is that the society that we love so much is not as good as it is made out to be. Kesey establishes this theme through the brilliant manipulation of setting. Kesey uses the specific setting of a fictional mental asylum to represent the non-specific realities of the real world. The literary term for such a technique is the use of a "microcosm" - a small universe representative of a larger one. Kesey uses the environment of the mental asylum to demonstrate just how hypocritical society can be.

As aforementioned, Kesey utilizes many symbols that represent elements in the real world. The very fact that the story takes place in a mental asylum is in itself a commentary on society. In the asylum, it becomes highly evident that a great deal of oppression takes place. Although a considerable amount of abuse is in the physical form, most of it manifests itself in subtle psychological torture. The abuse that specifically takes place is the suppression of individualism. One cannot help but notice the same suppression of individualism to exist in society as well. Inside the hospital, the men are expected to not only act within strict guidelines, but to also suppress urges to express themselves. They are limited to doing repetitive, menial tasks and are never given the opportunity to choose their own pathways for intellectual, emotional or physical development. If they do attempt to act other than how they are expected to, they are punished not only by a barrage of physical abuse but psychological torture as well. In much the same way, this exists in society. Society forcefully encourages people to develop their potential only along certain accepted routes. The profession one chooses, their education, their lifestyle, their opinions, their economic status, their intentions in life - these are all variables in which society almost forces one into predetermined guidelines. If people deviate too far from the accepted norms, they can expect some form of retribution and punishment in return. Although we often believe that we exist in a truly free society, there are certain controls on that freedom which can be instituted at any time. As a result, Kesey's choice of the mental asylum for the setting clearly underlines the hypocrisies of society.

This fact also underlines why McMurphey is such a threat to the structure of the asylum. The suppression of the individual in the asylum is machine-like. The men are dehumanized as much as possible. McMurphey is detrimental to the hospital because he is the personification of all things fought in the asylum. He is passionate and violent, angry and happy, jovial and moody - all at the same time. He is the cauldron of emotions that is the human condition. As such, he is also the most viable weapon against the machine-like workings of the Asylum. Chief Bromden even goes as far to call this mechanization of life the "Combine". The impact that McMurphey has on the cold, lifeless operation of the asylum is visible right from his entrance into the story. Bromden remarks that he hears "the weight of his steps", implying that McMurphey walks with confidence and emotion. He also mentions that McMurphey's laughter "shakes the walls of the hospital". This is exactly why the conflict between Ratched and McMurphey is so pronounced - his passionate and emotional nature is a threat to the mechanistic network she has created.

The influence of the mental asylum upon the characters is underlined when they go on a fishing trip. Symbolically, the fishing trip is a radical departure from their normal lives. They are alone in the water, devoid of outside influences. With intuition and judgment as their only tools, they are free from the control of the asylum, Ratched and society. The men slowly emerge from the cocoons of weakness that once suffocated them, and learn to take control of their own destiny. The boat even goes out of control during the trip. The patients obviously become frightened - as for the first time in their lives they are forced to fend for themselves. One of the men takes control of the helm and guides the boat back to safety. The magnitude of this event lies in the fact that the man who did this was previously looked down upon as being weak. The emergence of their collective strength could only develop in the uninhibited freedom of the boat trip. This underlines just how influential the mental asylum was upon the men. The difference in setting allowed the men to stand up for themselves- something that would have been impossible within the confines of the hospital.

Along the same lines, Kesey also uses contrast in another situation to effectively underline his theme of hypocrisy. It becomes evident that the story takes place in Oregon. It is important to note that Oregon is associated with the days of the "Wild West" - when men lead uninhibited lives, where the pistol ruled more than reason. The characteristics of independence, courage and strength are all associated with the image of the "Cowboy". As a result, it is quite ironic to see the men personify the traits completely opposite to that of the Cowboy. The asylum turns them into weak-willed shadows of real men. This second use of contrast helps underline the amount of oppression in the world.

The control panel in Nurse Ratched's office was another important symbol in the setting. It gave her control over the entire ward. She could control what the patients saw on TV, the lighting, etc. In many ways, this parallels the "control panels" present in the real world. The media is moderated by certain people - censors, editors, media executives, etc. All of these people influence what we think and what we believe by controlling what we perceive to be reality. In the same way, Ratched uses the control panels to moderate what the men can perceive and see. She even turns off a baseball game in an attempt to punish their desire for freedom and happiness. An important symbolic event involving the control panel takes place at the end of the story. When Chief Bromden escapes to freedom - he does so by ripping the control panel from Ratched's office and throwing it through a window. His new found freedom is not only represented by his escape into the real world but also in the obliteration of the very object which helped limit his life.

Several other symbolic aspects of the setting help underline the true evil that resides in the asylum. It is clearly visible that Kesey borrows elements from the Bible to support the struggle between good versus evil. McMurphy is consistently displayed as a Christ figure - a man who must lead others to salvation against oppression, and in the process of doing so must also sacrifice himself. It is also interesting that the image of the Cross appears in several instances of the story. The first of these instances is when the patient Ellis is described to the reader. His manner of restraint is peculiar - he is fixed to the wall, with his arms outstretched and his legs bound. Obviously, this mimics the position of Christ when He was crucified. When Bromden and McMurphy are being punished in the shock therapy room, the machines they are placed on are described as "cross-like tables". The halo of electrodes through which the electricity is administered parallels the painful crown of thorns that Christ was forced to wear. The elements of evil in the story are defined through symbols in the setting.

It is clearly evident that the setting plays a crucial role in the effective communication of Kesey's viewpoints. The presence of the horrifying forces from the story in the real world leaves the reader with a critical decision. One cannot look at society in the same way after having read this story and understanding the

commentary that Kesey makes on society. A blind eye is not so easily turned to such pressing issues, so that leaves the reader with two choices. They can become very cynical and angry towards society, attempting to undermine it at every opportunity. This is a difficult battle. If they do not choose to do this, they can use the relationships they now know of to their benefit. They can make sure that they never allow themselves to fall into the traps that society has created. They can be sure to never suppress another person's rights and freedoms. Quite frankly, I believe that the second road is the more attractive of the two, and after having read Kesey's book, I am quite inclined to follow it.