

Group Assignments — One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Ken Kesey wrote a novel that, as a microcosm, is about a mental hospital and its patients, but one that can also be looked at as representative of the macrocosm, life in general. This is particularly true if one considers that time when the novel was written—1962.

Assignment: Each group of 2-3 students must select one of the sets of themes/symbols from the book and analyze it in the following ways. Note: The pairing of themes/symbols does not necessarily indicate, nor does it rule out, a relationship between the two. Prepare a presentation with visual aids in which you can “teach” this theme/symbol to your classmates. You will be graded on the thoroughness of your presentation, as well as the depth of your insights, and validity of your examples. Relate your interpretation also to relevant events and issues from the 1950s and 1960s that you learned from your Internet search of the era. You will also grade the participation of other members of your group as well. You may use ideas the essays posted on my website to support and add context and depth to your presentations.

Include in your responses interpretations from any of the three analytical approaches we have discussed: 1) psychoanalytical 2) cultural/historical 3) New Criticism

Sets of themes/symbols:

1. Theme: Freedom vs. Control. Symbol: Names/initials
2. Theme: The Power of Laughter. Symbol: Cartoons
3. Theme: The Importance of Sexuality. Symbol: Animals (all except geese, see below)
4. Theme: The Need to Fight Fear. Symbol: Machinery (all except Combine, see below)
5. Theme: The Power of the Matriarchy. Symbol: The Combine
6. Theme: What is crazy? What is sane? Symbol: Geese
7. Theme: Self-Sacrifice. [Note: Consider the role of hero here? Who, if anyone, is the “hero” of the novel. In what sense of the word?] Symbol: Religious images

Points to analyze: Answers should be THOROUGH! One-two sentence answers will be considered as "F" responses.

Theme:

1. Explain what the theme means within the context of Kesey's novel.
2. Cite at least five different scenes, examples, quotes, etc. that illustrate the presence of the theme in the novel. Explain how your examples illustrate the theme.
3. Which characters and images are most closely associated with this theme? Explain how they are related to the theme.
4. Explain how this theme could be extended to apply to the microcosm (mental health ward/hospital in novel), the macrocosm (American society 1950s and early 1960s), and to life in 2010.

Symbol:

1. These images develop into key themes of the novel. What does this image symbolize? Explain why.
2. Find 5 examples within the context of the book in which this image is used to develop a key symbol of the novel. Be sure to include an explanation of the relevance of the quotes.