

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 2012.

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.

Answer Key:

1. Freedom vs. Control

With McMurphy and Nurse Ratched. Kesey presents two ways of looking at the world. McM is the individual, the frontier hero who goes his own way no matter what society thinks. (Clint Eastwood). Nurse: a desire for efficiency, order, and control at all costs. Argument for each. Whose side is Kesey on? Combine, p. 165, Nurse, p. 171.

2. The Power of laughter

McM's strength is that he can laugh at himself and the world. He feels the best way to defeat his enemies is to laugh at them. The degree of sanity of most of the characters is related to their ability to laugh. No one laughs at the beginning. Chief returns to the world with a laugh. Everyone laughs on the boat. This is a powerful sign of the cure McM has on them. p. 16, "First laugh I've heard in years." p. 48. There's something strange about a place where the men won't let themselves loose and laugh. p. 59. Harding tries to laugh. A sound comes out of his mouth like a nail being crowbarred out of the plant of green pine. He can't stop it. But even this inferior laughter allows him to face how he feels about the nurse. p. 65. "The rest are even scared to laugh. That's the first thing that got me about this place, there wasn't anybody laughing—man when you lose your laugh, you lose your footing. A man goes around letting a woman whip him down till he can't laugh anymore and loses the biggest edges he's got."

3. The importance of Sexuality: Healthy people are not afraid of sex, particularly uninhibited sex, according to both Kesey and McM. Many of the patients are. Harding and Billy. Nurse represses and denies her patient's sexuality. Even her own. As evidenced by her heavy white uniform. She's a ball cutter. p. 63. p. 66. 1960's "The Sexual Revolution." Birth control.

4. The need to fight fear:

The enemy of the patients is their own fear that makes them easy victims. The enemy within, not the enemy without. How is this true for each of the patients. p. 157-158. Harding and wife. p. 167-168 Being volunteer.

5. The power of the matriarchy.

Most controversial theme of the book The combine is mainly women. Nurse, Mrs. Harding, Billy's mother, Chief's mother. They force men to obey society's rules and deny men's sexuality. However, he admits not all ball cutters are women. The black girl in the mill is also a victim of the Combine. The PR man literally becomes one in the chief's nightmare. p. 65-66. Combine, p. 165.

6. What is crazy? What is sane?

The patients in the ward have been decreed mentally ill by society and in some cases, by themselves. Certainly many of them show symptoms that cause us to label them crazy. But the diagnosis of McMurphy as psychotic makes us wonder about the validity of such labels, and when, at the staff meeting, Dr. Spivey and the residents display no more courage or rationality than do their patients, our doubts increase. Even nurse Ratched's devotion to rules above all else can be seen as a kind of illness, one she shares with much of society. Sometimes the line between the two is very fine.

7. Self-sacrifice. p. 68-9.

McMurphy starts out thinking only of himself. The chief too. That's how he has escaped the combine. Gradually McMurphy sees that he's a ward hero and he must act like one even at his own risk. There are several parallels in the book between McM and Jesus Christ, both sacrificed themselves for others. The Chief joins him.

Grading rubric
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest theme/symbols

Names _____
Theme/Symbol? _____

Part I: Theme

- Explains what theme means (5 pts.) _____
- Cites at least three examples/scenes/quotes of how theme is present in novel (5 pts.) _____
- Identifies which character and images are most closely associated with theme (5 pts.) _____
- Explains how theme can be extended to macrocosm of present or 1960's (5 pts.) _____

Part II: Symbol

- Discusses presence of symbolism or imagery and motif (5 pts.) _____

Part III: Attendance for presentation (5 pts.) _____

Total points earned _____ Grade _____

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