

*Note: The word "criticism" in the following essay refers not to an attack on the novel, but rather to essays of evaluation and analysis written by literary critics, hence the word "criticism."*

### Understanding the Machine: Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, in his book *Parerga and Paralipomena*, wrote that "just as the largest library, badly arranged, is not so useful as a very moderate one that is well arranged, so the greatest amount of knowledge, if not elaborated by our own thoughts, is worth much less than a far smaller volume that has been abundantly and repeatedly thought over" (257).

Schopenhauer realized that simply having a great deal of knowledge really amounts to nothing unless that knowledge is studied, carefully examined, and applied to one's own life. If Schopenhauer's simple statement is applied to the critical study of literature, it takes on a whole new meaning. No longer does simply reading a book alone become that important or that beneficial. Now, a reader must carefully examine the book itself as well as other's opinions about that book before a reader can truly appreciate and understand its meaning. Even though this theory can and should be applied to all literature, its true effectiveness can most easily be seen when applied to Ken Kesey's most famous work. By carefully studying *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and by looking closely at the major criticism written about that novel, specifically in the areas of psychoanalytic, cultural, and New Criticism, one can find new meaning and a new understanding that may have previously been hidden.

Since being published in 1962 by Viking Press, Ken Kesey's most acclaimed and successful novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, has sold approximately eight million copies and has been so popular that, in 1975, it was turned into a movie starring Jack Nicholson, and later into an award-winning play by Dale Wasserman (Asher). The story is simple, and, partially for that reason, the press that the book received on its initial publication did not hint at its eventual popularity and success. Chief Bromden, the story's first-person narrator, is a deeply withdrawn inmate at a state mental asylum. The asylum is run under the firm grip of the head nurse, a Ms. Ratchet. The new inmate, a young man named McMurphy, joins the asylum to avoid being placed in jail. Through McMurphy's leadership, the inmates become able to escape their illnesses, the grasp of the diabolical nurse, and, eventually, the asylum itself.

One week after Kesey's novel was released, Martin Levin, a *New York Times* book critic, wrote that Kesey had "transformed the plight of a ward of inmates in a mental institution into a parable of good and evil" (32). Later in the same article, Levin stated that the novel was "without any literary merit" and even recommended that the readers choose one of the other books that he reviewed in that same issue rather than Kesey's (Levin 32). In the February 6, 1962 issue of *Time* magazine, Joseph Sletcher called the work "another in the long line of simplistic novels" (85). Luckily, less than a year after those two lackluster reviews, the novel began being recognized as the masterpiece that it is thought of now. First, dozens of critics began studying the novel through the eyes and merits of psychoanalytic criticism. Then, a new group of critics, with a background in cultural criticism, began examining the novel. Finally, more and more critics saw the merits of Kesey's work, and, using the tools of New Criticism, searched for a meaning that others had yet to find. But, unlike the *New York Times* or *Time* magazine reviews of a year earlier, the overwhelming majority of critics agreed with Don Kunz's statement: "*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* measures the entropic, closed society we fear becoming against the dynamic, open society we dream of being—an encompassing masterpiece that is sure to be thought-provoking for generations to come" (81).

The first major criticism of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* used psychoanalytic ideals as a method to understand Kesey's reasons for creating the novel. Psychoanalytic criticism relies heavily on the writings and ideas of Sigmund Freud, as well as, to a lesser extent, the work of Carl Jung, Northrop Frye, and Jacques Lacan. Even though its theories are numerous and rather involved, a few major tenants of the school can be extracted. At its most basic level, psychoanalytic criticism deals with the interaction of the conscious and subconscious and how those two parts of the mind fight to control our actions. Charles Bressler states, while discussing psychoanalytic criticism in his book *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, that it is "through the interaction of both the conscious and unconscious working together [. . .], that we shape ourselves and our world" (148). In addition to that interaction, a psychoanalytic critic also looks for the Oedipus or Electra complex in any of a novel's characters or situations, and studies the characters' quests to become adults. Finally, again according to Bressler, a psychoanalytic critic believes that a work of literature "is the external expression of the author's unconscious mind" and "must be treated like a dream [. . .] to uncover the author's hidden motivations and repressed desires" (153).

Even from a superficial view, this novel almost beckons for psychoanalytic criticism to be applied. Being set in a mental asylum and narrated through the eyes of a highly disturbed patient, the novel provides a crystal-clear view of the applied use of psychology. Both the doctors and patients externally perform many of the critical approaches' tenants, such as the quest to understand dreams and the power of the subconscious. For example, dozens of times throughout the novel, Bromden becomes engulfed by the personification of

power, anger, and fear, and enters a dream-like state where he relives events from his childhood. But, Ruth Sullivan, in her article "Kesey and Freud," jumps over this external look and focuses on the merits of the work from a deeply psychoanalytical view.

Sullivan states that:

Cuckoo's Nest defines the relations among its major characters in terms of Freud's Oedipus complex, in which a son acts out adult relationships with his parents as part of growing up. In Kesey's model, McMurphy is the father, Big Nurse [Ratchet] is the mother, and Chief Bromden and the other inmates are the sons. Kesey's use of such Freudian comparisons is ironic since the novel otherwise characterizes the psychoanalytical process as negative, dehumanizing, and without merit (92).

Twenty-three years before she wrote the quote above, she had already begun to find *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to be a great book for study using psychoanalytical criticism. In a 1975 journal article titled "Big Mama, Big Papa, and Little Sons," Sullivan wrote that "the sons witness encounters, often explicitly sexual, between the father [McMurphy] and the mother [Ratched] figures; and the crucial emotional issue for the sons is how to define their manliness" (34). From these two statements, it is rather easy to see that Sullivan equates the entire novel to a giant representation of the Oedipus complex. In both articles, she continues to use specific examples from the book to prove this to the reader. Interestingly, she also attempts to prove that Kesey was familiar with the Oedipus complex because he worked in a mental institution while writing the novel. Therefore, she concludes, his purpose in writing the novel was to exemplify psychoanalytic methods and distribute those findings to the masses.

Not all psychoanalytical critics dealt with the novel as a whole. In fact, most seemed to extract one section or aspect of the novel and use that selection to prove their thesis. For example, William Baurecht, in his article titled "Separation, Initiation, and Return: Schizophrenic Episode in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," focuses solely on the sexual oppression of Bromden portrayed through his dream-like sequences. According to Baurecht, the goal of Bromden is to find his sexual identity, which is hidden in his subconscious, and to express that newfound identity in his conscious state. Near the conclusion of the article, Baurecht writes, "Kesey's narrator self-defensively drifts off into his schizophrenic fog in order to preserve his fragile sanity and to find his manliness; he centers in the darkly terrifying space of the human mind, and he ultimately emerges a potential hero, profoundly changed, but willing to lead other men as, for the first time, a man" (292). Therefore, Baurecht considers the novel to be a story of resurrection and repressed sexual desires that lead to him classifying *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as, simply, a coming of age story.

After psychoanalytic criticism had taken a firm hold on Kesey's great work, a few critics began taking a look at the novel using the tenants of cultural criticism. Gradually, more and more critics started applying this school of thought to the novel, eventually usurping the psychoanalytic critics from their number one spot in the late 1970s. The beliefs and ideals of cultural criticism rely heavily on the writings of Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz. Followers of cultural criticism, also called New Historicism, believe that a reader must apply the happenings and culture of the time of the novel to the reading of the novel. Without doing this, they believe that the novel cannot be understood completely. As Bressler states in his discussion of cultural poetics, cultural critics "begin by challenging the long-held belief that a text is an autonomous work of art that contains all elements necessary to arrive at a supposedly correct interpretation" (241). Cultural critics believe that the reader must know the social times of the author and the historical and cultural times depicted in the work itself. For example, in the mind of a cultural critic, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* could not be understood without a careful study and interpretation of the position of surveyor at the Salem Custom House as well as an understanding of the Puritan customs, lifestyle, and religion.

In regards to the study of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, cultural critics seemed to mostly concentrate on the novel as a whole and apply the novel's setting and to a certain time period or cultural aspect. The prime example of this school of thought is found in the writings of Robert Rosenwein who wrote a book and about one dozen journal articles specifically discussing Kesey's masterpiece in terms of the culture of the 1950s and 1960s. In his article "Out of the '50s, into the '60s," Rosenwein writes that:

The attitudes and values portrayed in Cuckoo's Nest have their roots in the "beat" generation. The beats were intellectuals, writers, and artists who were alienated from and did not conform to the conventions of their days. Their vision of the 1950s America as a repressive, conformist society that persecuted the individual was taken up by Kesey in portraying society as a mental hospital that overpowers and controls its citizen-inmates (48).

Continuing in the article, Rosenwein defines the beats and their power and influence. He argues that the culture of America was portrayed through Kesey's stark, controlling, and oppressive mental institution. Only with the entrance of the Beats, or in Kesey's case of McMurphy, can society find redemption, and eventual freedom (50). Therefore, according to Rosenwein and any cultural critic, without an understanding of the culture and period in which the novel is set, one would not be able to understand the true meaning of the work nor its balance and parallel with the real world.

In another article by Rosenwein titled "A Place Apart: The Historical Context of Kesey's Asylum," the author narrows his focus from an entire twenty-year time period to a specific aspect of the culture—the history of the mental asylum and how that history allows the reader to understand Kesey's asylum. Rosenwein looks at the idea and practice of the mental institution in Europe, Asia, and in the United States and compares that to the graphic descriptions and the treatment of the patients in Kesey's novel. For example, one of the main purposes of a mental institution in the United States in the 1960s was to reform a patient morally as well as mentally so that the patient could re-enter society and be viewed as sane rather than insane. Therefore, the multiple group sessions in Kesey's work where the patients tell each other's problems and secrets was a way for the patients to learn how they measure up to each other to prevent being labeled insane upon their release (43-45). In concluding this article, Rosenwein gathers all of the presented history of asylums and makes a final statement as to how Kesey's work may cause a change: "In portraying the asylum as such an unpleasant kind of place, and one in which almost no curing of insanity is possible, Kesey may have contributed to the growing trend away from viewing insanity as a disease best treated by incarceration" (46).

Applying a certain aspect of history or of cultural history rather than applying an entire time period to a work of literature began to become more popular for cultural critics during the early 1980s. But, at the same time, the focus of the comparison changed from the obvious, such as Rosenwein's look at mental institutions, to significantly more obscure topics. An example of this change in focus is found in Stephen Tanner's article "The Western American Context of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*." In the article, Tanner argues that "Cuckoo's Nest is a product of the American West, specifically of two locations along the Pacific coast: the environs of Eugene, Oregon, and of San Francisco, California" (293). The first location was where Kesey was born and lived during the majority of his childhood, and the second was where he was educated--both in a university setting and through his employment. Tanner argues that without either location, Kesey's masterpiece would never have been written (305-318). Therefore, without a complete understanding of each city, one cannot truly appreciate the novel. Finally, he concludes that "Cuckoo's Nest [. . .] is a demonstration of how an author transmutes life into art" (320).

Interspersed throughout the plethora of criticism about *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are the works of several critics who looked at the novel and only the novel—not taking into account other supplementary or additional materials. Borrowing significantly from the writings of T.S. Eliot and Samuel Coleridge, these New Critics believed that a novel, or any work of art, should stand and be studied by itself, and they concentrated on such ideas as a novel's theme, symbolism, language, and style. As Bressler states in his study of New Criticism, "no library research, no studying of the author's life and times, and no other extraneous information is needed, for the poem itself contains all the necessary information to discover its meaning" (37). New Critics believe that a critic must look at, specifically, a work's title, etymological roots, word patterns and connotations, allusions, images, tone, and point of view (46-47).

The majority of New Criticism about Kesey's most famous work is varied. Critics seem to take one aspect of the novel, such as the point of view or the imagery, and talk solely about that aspect for their entire article. A great example of this is found in an article titled "Theme and Technique in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" by Barry Leeds. Leeds' association with New Criticism is obvious from his third sentence which reads "[Cuckoo's Nest] is well worth close critical analysis; and such study illuminates the depth of Kesey's technical mastery of such aspects of novelistic form as symbolism and structure" (35). Leeds begins by looking at each of the major character's names and the connotations of those names. For example, Bromden is nicknamed "Chief Broom" during the majority of the novel by both the nurses and Ratched. Leeds notes that this nickname defines Bromden as both an Indian and as solely an "object to the staff" (37). Leeds also talks about the imaginary and real aspects of Bromden's dreams. The critic ends with a look at how the novel itself is organized and how Bromden's first-person narrative becomes clearer and clearer the further into the novel one progresses (39). Nowhere in the entire article is anything outside of the novel mentioned.

Interestingly, in 1979, two critics used the ideals of New Criticism to look specifically at Kesey's use of the narrator. William Roberts, in an article titled "Narrative Technique in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," argues that the text creates a world where the narrator, Bromden, can escape reality through both flashbacks and images. This world inside the text is created through "a careful mixture of ambiguity, imagery, grammatical deviation and flashback," all specific elements of writing and all-inclusive within a text (Roberts 11). In "Sanity and Responsibility: Big Chief as Narrator and Executioner," Fred Madden takes Roberts' ideas one step further and argues that Bromden's escape from reality is what enables him to eventually kill McMurphy and escape the asylum. In his conclusion, Madden states that "as illustrated through a close study of the novel's narrative style and point-of-view, Bromden has traded his initial freedom from guilt, personified in the form of dreams, for a freedom from social control" (216). Without focusing on the psychological, the cultural, or the historical, Madden and other New Critics are able to have a clear view of the novel and, therefore, write a self-contained capsule that can provoke thought without requiring one to master a certain critical school.

Hundreds of critics have looked at Kesey's novel using dozens of critical perspectives, ideals, and tenants. Each article from each critic's viewpoint aids in a readers total understanding of the novel. Although simply reading a novel can provide insight and a sense of understanding, that understanding cannot be complete unless the reader also embarks upon a journey through the novel's supplementary texts—those of the critics. Each new viewpoint provides a new and different piece to the puzzle and to the goal of total understanding. For example, psychoanalytical criticism illuminates the hidden desires of the characters and of the author. Cultural criticism allows for a deeper understanding of the time, habits, associations, and events that relate and communicate directly with a work of art. Finally, New Criticism magnifies the work itself and provides a transparent view into the words, style, and images created by the language. Therefore, one cannot say that there is a single, correct way to look at a work of art. Rather, only through a careful study and review of this combination of views, attitudes, and beliefs, can a reader gain a complete, or as complete as possible understanding an appreciation for that work of art. And, only through this process can the reader discover his own opinions and fill his own library with thoughts, ideas, and creations.

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