

Approved for use in English III

Summary of the Work:

“Tyrannical Nurse Ratched rules her ward in an Oregon State mental hospital with a strict and unbending routine, unopposed by her patients, who remain cowed by mind-numbing medication and the threat of electric shock therapy. But her regime is disrupted by the arrival of McMurphy – the swaggering, fun-loving trickster with a devilish grin who resolves to oppose her rules on behalf of his fellow inmates. His struggle is seen through the eyes of Chief Bromden, a seemingly mute half-Indian patient who understands McMurphy’s heroic attempt to do battle with the powers that keep them imprisoned. Ken Kesey’s extraordinary first novel is an exuberant, ribald and devastatingly honest portrayal of the boundaries between sanity and madness” (Goodreads.com).

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

“One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest is a modern morality play. It has a savior, McMurphy, who must be sacrificed before his gospel can be spread. It has a disciple, Chief Bromden, who is inspired by McMurphy to escape and spread that gospel. And it has a story in which good triumphs over evil and the forces of darkness, at least temporarily, are subdued and put to rout” (Whissen).

“The themes that take center stage in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* have resonated with generations of readers. In the early 1960s, the novel supplied a critique of an American society that had been portrayed in the 1950s as a lonely crowd of organization men who could achieve affluence only through strict conformity. The implications of this theme remained relevant to the mood of the 1970s and 1980s, specifically the notions of the modern technological world as necessarily divorced from nature; contemporary society as repressive; authority as mechanical and destructive; and contemporary man as weak, frightened, and sexless, a victim of rational but loveless forces beyond his control. The novel’s suggestion that people need to regain lost connections with the natural and physical world, to open doors of perception, to enjoy spontaneous sensuous experience, and to resist the manipulative forces of a technological society is commensurate with the perennial conflict between self-reliance and authority” (Hunter).

Rationale:

Ken Kesey worked in a mental institution prior to writing the novel. Based on his personal experience, Kesey, documents, within the novel, the vivid and detailed representation of what life is like in mental institutions. In fact, some of the abusive behavior Kesey depicts led to reforms in the hospitals across the nation. Additionally, this novel depicts themes of freedom, rebellion and conformity and what happens when an oppressive force restricts others’ personal liberties.

Noted Distinction:

- Won 5 major Academy Awards for the film version

Readability

- Lexile Score: 1110
- Readability Level:

Learning Resources Guidelines

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1](#)

Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey

(1962)

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

The symbolism of the fog and the machine is vital in understanding Kesey's view about conformity. The "cloudiness" prevents the patients from exhibiting good judgement, and therefore, the powers in charge can indoctrinate them to do whatever the authorities want. This behavior sets a dangerous precedent.

Connection to the Curriculum:

Students are required to produce argumentative writing several times per year. The content of the novel includes references to sex, drugs and profanity but coupled with themes of oppression and freedom, students are able to analyze the appropriateness of the novel within high school.

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)

Novel was adapted into a Broadway play in 1963 and a film in 1975. Ryan Murphy created a prequel series titled *Ratched* in 2020.