

KEN KESEY AND COUNTERCULTURAL AMERICAN LITERATURE

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*Abstract: The 1950s 'Beat Generation' and the 1960s 'Hippies' as countercultures, expressed dissatisfaction with societal restraints. A link between the two, Ken Kesey was a countercultural figure himself, who explored in his works the negative impacts of this society on the individual. The mental hospital from *A Fly over a Cuckoo's Nest* is a microcosm of this American totalitarian world Kesey is rebelling against. It is a place meant to fix people who do not conform. The paper presents the individual's relationships to the controlling state and society, the society's destruction of an individual's natural impulses and the fight to retain individuality and diversity and bring them to others as well.*

Keywords: counterculture, totalitarianism, repression, individuality, diversity.

Introduction

Ken Kesey immersed into San Francisco counterculture while he was a student at Stanford University of Oregon. His novel *One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest* draws on his personal drug experience and work in a mental institution exploring "madness, institutionalization, and rebellion, reflecting a broader critique of the social restrictions placed on the individual in that time. The success of the 1975 film adaptation of the novel, starring Jack Nicholson as hero R.P. Murphy, only helped to confirm the novel's status as a canonical antiauthoritarian tract of the US counterculture." (Baugess 344).

The novel *One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest* was written in the 1950s and was published in 1962. The age starting in the 50s was the first TV generation, when American people's brains were wired to watch rather than do. Also, the 1950s was a time when people outside the mainstream were often viewed with suspicion due to the diplomatic Cold War between the USA's democratic ideology and the USSR's communist ideology. The fear of communism led to a counterculture through which, young people in particular, began questioning authority. Their dissatisfaction with societal constraints led to the foundation of the 50's 'beat generation' (The Beatniks) and the 60's counterculture 'hippies', which found expression in art, writing, dress and nonviolent action.

The country's ever-growing consumer culture almost required an increased sense of individuality and its own *counterculture*. Figuring as a link between these two countercultures, Ken Kesey explored the negative impacts of this American society on the individual. The setting of the novel is a mental hospital, a microcosm of the world these countercultures are rebelling against. The LSD, a most common hallucinogen, was a good thing as a scientist experiment; it helped hippies to explore their own mind and expand their horizons.

The mental hospital allows for this exploration. Kesey chooses this setting as a place meant to fix people who do not conform. He presents the patients' relationships to the controlling state and society, the oppression of the individual in a totalitarian system, represented by the Nurse, the societal destruction of natural impulses and the fight to retain

individuality, freedom and diversity in this mechanized world. This struggle for power and control as the central idea is made evident in the novel through symbolic representations (such as the fog machine, the white whales on McMurphy's boxer shorts, the electroshock therapy table, or the biblical imagery), as well as through recurrent motifs (such as invisibility, laughter or reality vs. imagery). Thus, the lesson that Kesey is trying to teach his readers is about individuality and rebellion against conformity, the state as a controlling machine, the importance of expressing sexuality and the false diagnosis of insanity.

Martinez challenges Kesey's message to his readers: "In his novel, the threat to the individual comes from the institution [...] Kesey places the individual at the mercy of systemic institutionalization" that transforms him into a machine, a 'Combine'. Moreover, Kesey's vision of the institution is a site where the male individual is castrated and "the masculine is sapped" by a controlling matriarchy. Only lone and not communal action, as Chief Bromden ("characterized by ethnicity and mental state") does, can be successful in this institutionalized immobility, symbolized by the mental hospital. (113)

The patients receive medical treatment (lobotomy and electroconvulsive therapy) for their severe mental illness. They are oppressed by the Big Nurse, who tries to destroy their identity and sense of dignity, while McMurphy, the embodiment of democracy, comes to save the situation. Nurse Ratched is the head of the ward. Middle-aged, former army nurse, she is very strict and expects total submission on the part of the staff and the patients, too. She controls them through threats: "*everyone*...must follow the rules" (Kesey 24, italics mine). The methods she and her staff use are the ones used by the Government. Nicknamed "Big Nurse" by the patients, it is a clear allusion to George Orwell's "Big Brother" (1984), where the totalitarian, all-knowing authority watched every move one could make, and if somebody disobeyed the rules, the consequences were drastic: "Big Brother is watching you" (Orwell 2).

A huge turning-point in the lives of these suppressed individuals occurs when Chief Bromden, the narrator, who has paranoia and hallucinations, introduces R. P. McMurphy as different from them. Randle is thirty-five years old, red-haired, with a scar on his face and tattoos on his body. His physical description is a clue to his outgoing and uninhibited character as well. Diagnosed as a psychopath, but not really insane, he brings life into the mental institution. He embodies sexuality, masculinity, confidence and especially freedom. His loud voice and confident walk stuns everybody as an oddity. His laughter is also something they admire, as Chief Bromden describes him: "Nobody can tell exactly why he laughs; there's nothing funny going on. But it's not the way that Public Relation laughs, it's free and loud.(...) This sounds real. I realize all of a sudden it's the first laugh I've heard in years" (Kesey 11). A rigid and depressive mood changes into laughter gradually after McMurphy's arrival.

The power of laughter to join so different identities and to heal lasts, however, until the Big Nurse, representative of the oppressive mechanization and cold stability of modern society reassigns them to the Shock Shop (electrotherapy) to remind them of their need to fit into the rules of that society. And she succeeds to literally brainwash them. Moreover, "brainwashing succeeds even better if people are rendered incapable of critical thought, for instance, by distraction, lack of sleep, or physical suffering". (Gilbert qtd. in Baumeister 235)

This is valid for Dale Harding, a college-educated patient, later president of the Patients' Council, who voluntarily entered the mental institution, due to his sexual orientation. He wanted to escape people's judgments and tried to get rid of people's prejudices by marrying a very attractive woman, whom he could not satisfy. At one moment in the plot unfolding, he checks himself out of the ward.

Another volunteer is the thirty-one years old, stuttering Billy Bibbit, whose major problem is the fear of his mother, who controls all his life, especially his love affairs. Immature, shy and impressionable, he comes to take shelter in the hospital from his tyrannical mother, only to face another tyrant, Nurse Ratched. He looks up to McMurphy who brings him a sexual partner to rebuild confidence in him, but, when the Nurse finds out, she asks him what his mother would say if she found out. Fearful, he commits suicide.

Chief "Broom" Bromden, the son of the chief of the Columbia Indians and of a white woman, is the oldest patient in the ward; he has been there for ten years. He uses the first person to tell the story as a flashback after his escape from the mental hospital. He pretends to be deaf and dumb in order to distract attention. He has paranoia and hallucinations, and he is treated like a cleaning-machine. Though he is tall, strong and muscular, he acts like a little child, is unconscious of his own forces, because the Big Nurse makes him feel inferior; consequently, he becomes a quiet listener and conformer. He becomes "a big deaf Indian" (Kesey 26), who represents the traditional values of society.

McMurphy brings a wind of change into this rational and stable world. He makes everybody feel well and alike, unlike the hospital rules that categorize the patients as Acute, Chronic, Disturbed, and Vegetables. Chief Bromden reiterates that "Nobody like him's ever been on the ward before. They're [the patients] asking him where he's from and what his business is in a way I've never seen them before. He says he's a dedicated man (...) plays poker and stays single and lives where and how he wants to, if people would let him, he says, << but you know how society persecutes a dedicated man >>" (Kesey 20). McMurphy himself admits the fact that not even a strong and dedicated man like him can resist the oppression of the government. The rules are just too strict to be broken, so, a totally sane man like him ends up in a mental institution.

McMurphy accepts that he has deceived the system, and has chosen to be interned in the institution in order to escape jail, because he became involved in quite a lot of unclean business, including rape. He is the embodiment of freedom and democracy in comparison to the totalitarian tyrant, Nurse Ratched. He acts like an alarm clock on their dead brains. The patients start rebelling against Nurse Ratched. Cheswick Charles is the first to support such a rebellion. His punishment for daring to rebel has to come. He drowns in the pool as a possible suicide to pay for his disobedience. Democratic acts start taking place since McMurphy's arrival: they vote to watch the baseball match, although they have no permission from the Nurse. He symbolizes everything that modern society has forgotten. He is the cool, cow-boy-like guy, who embodies masculinity, sexuality, confidence and, most of all, he is not afraid to express his thoughts and feelings.

Although the Nurse represents imperial, masculine power, the Combine [the Government], she has hard time destroying their sense of dignity. She organizes group therapy sessions where they discuss the problems publicly by making them confess things they have not done and hence she induces in them insecurity and vulnerability.

McMurphy is the only one apparently escaping her malefic procedures to annihilate will and disobedience: "He hadn't let what he looked like run his life one way or the other, anymore than he'd let the Combine [the Government] mill him into fitting where they wanted him to fit...He's not gonna let them twist him and manufacture him" (Kesey 153). On the contrary, even the other patients become aware of the importance of expressing sexuality and recovering their sense of masculinity: they organize a basketball team, and even if they lose the game, they have the feeling of having accomplished something important. They finally feel alive. McMurphy replaces Nurse Ratched as their mentor. He becomes the symbol of the unique individual, altruistic, who wants to fight to retain this individuality and bring it to others as well. The society with Big Nurse, as an active member of the system, destroyed the

patients' natural impulses, reducing them to mere mechanical toys easily manipulative and controllable.

McMurphy adds color to the grey walls of the institution. He takes them fishing, shows them that life can be beautiful, and they can be treated as humans. Just like Jesus, he sacrifices his life in order to save others' lives. The change is evident. Cheswick finally takes an attitude, demanding his cigarettes. Harding, the homosexual, forgets all the prejudices and leaves the ward proud of himself. Chief Bromden finally speaks. He gets out of the fog machine and realizes he is not small and weak. Similarly, Billy manages to have a sexual intercourse with a woman.

Unfortunately, what McMurphy did to others turned against him. The Shock Shop and Nurse Ratched manage to transform him into a brainless vegetable. But not for long, as Chief releases him when "there's nothing in the face. Just one of those store dummies" (Kesey 278). He kills McMurphy: "I watched and tried to figure out what he [McMurphy] would have done. I was sure of one thing: he wouldn't have left something like that sit there in the day room with his name tacked on it for twenty or thirty years so the Big Nurse could use it as an example of what can happen if you buck the system." (Kesey 278) McMurphy was really against the system and paid with the price of his life. Still, the end of the book is not pessimistic. We can see Chief Bromden getting out of the mental institution. Freedom has won, the system has lost its power.

Conclusion

The individual will always face social problems in a tyrannical system but leaders cannot control free minds, hence uniqueness and individuality are the most powerful weapons against tyranny and totalitarianism.

In the story, McMurphy is punished for challenging authority. First he is crucified with electro-shock therapy, and then martyred with a lobotomy. Ken Kesey's purpose is to show people who have good lives how life is for people with mental problems. Being crazy is painful, irrespective of reasons that can be connected to drug addiction or to American way of life (Kesey qtd in Noah). Further on, Dr. Robert Faggen in "Social Aspects of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest*" wonders whether you can function in a society based on a conflict between freedom or authority. The answer Kesey gives through McMurphy and Chief Bromden is ambivalent and ambiguous at the same time. A cultural ring between two countercultures, Kesey seems to leave the reader to opt for an adequate answer. While McMurphy is a visible loss for the American society, Chief Bromden is a gain. Both are schizophrenic. However, the outcome of the plot is somehow paradoxical. While McMurphy, white, not drug-addicted, and apparently a good American worker, is unable to discover the right tools to fight this totalitarian system in the short period of time spent in the mental hospital and ends up as a vegetable, Chief Bromden, who is mixed-blooded (half Indian, half white), the oldest patient, manages to solve this conflict and hence to leave the hospital willingly after regaining his speaking powers. Would that possibly indicate a race issue needed to be excluded in an increasingly multicultural America? I think the answer is ambivalent and, therefore, we can speak about the power of Ken Kesey's message in *A Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest* not only in American culture but in any culture.

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