# Allegories of Freedom: Individual Liberty and Social Conformity in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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## Summary

This article examines Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), not as a straightforward allegory, but as a complex series of allegories of freedom. These allegories are seen as exploring and articulating the cardinal democratic principle of individual liberty – and testing its limits – in the face of the restrictive demands of social and moral authority and conformity. The article demonstrates how the novel draws on numerous sources from the fields of politics, psychology, mythology and religion as background theories, or symbolic frameworks, or inter-textual narratives, in order to clarify and amplify its central thematic preoccupations. These sources include liberal democratic political philosophy; the humanist psychological paradigm, the psychological theories of Freud and Jung; the myth of the waste land and the legend of the Fisher King; and the story of Christ. They serve in a mutually reinforcing way not only to broaden the narrative perspective but also to affirm the validity of the book's fundamental vision and message.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek Ken Kesey se roman *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), nie as 'n onomwonde allegorie nie, maar as 'n komplekse reeks allegorieë van vryheid. Hierdie allegorieë word beskou as dat hulle die kardinale demokratiese beginsel van individuele vryheid – ten spyte van beperkende eise van sosiale en morele outoriteit en konformiteit – eksploreer en die limiete daarvan toets. Die artikel demonstreer hoe die roman put uit vele bronne uit die politiek, die psigologie, die mitologie en die godsdiens as agtergrondteorieë, of as simboliese raamwerke, of as intertekstuele narratiewe, om sodoende sy sentrale tematiese preokkupasies te verklaar en uit te brei. Hierdie bronne sluit in die liberale demokratiese politieke filosofie; die mite van die woesteny en die legende van die Fisher King; en die verhaal van Christus. Hulle dien op 'n wederkerig-versterkende manier om nie alleen die narratiewe perspektief uit te brei nie, maar ook om die geldigheid van die boek se fundamentele visie en boodskap te bevestig.

## Introduction

The concept of individual liberty is of such cardinal importance to democracy that it occupies a position of absolute centrality and primacy in democratic



*JLS/TLW 17(1/2), Jun. 2001 ISSN 0256-4718*

theory. Indeed, it might well be regarded as the defining characteristic of the democratic state. Yet, almost endemically, the very notion of individual liberty carries with it implications of dangerous unpredictability, diversity, personal autonomy, deviation from the norm, all of which potentially threatens to undermine and even subvert social order and control. As a result, it is frequently viewed with suspicion and mistrust, even in the most democratic of societies. This is especially common in new, emergent democracies such as South Africa, where, despite its highly liberal constitution, the full meaning and significance of individual liberty does not seem to have been generally assimilated or appreciated.

It may thus be timely and appropriate to examine in some detail one of the most powerful explorations and articulations of individual liberty in recent literature, Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Sometimes considered as quintessentially, and even exclusively, a work of the 1960s, the novel, as this article will argue, has outlasted its immediate historical context, and continues to afford crucially relevant insights into the fraught relationship between individual liberty and social conformity in the modern world.

A further reason for offering a reading of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* lies in the fact of the recent death in November 2001 of Ken Kesey, whose personal fame as an iconic countercultural figure of the 1960s tended to colour, for good or ill, the reputation of this, his first published novel (see, inter alia, Pratt 1973; Strelow 1977; Klinkowitz 1980; McClure 1994; Brown 1999; Reed 2001).[1] His passing provides the space as well as the impetus perhaps for a considered reassessment of the novel as a work of literature in its own right.

## Background

The role of America in the establishment of democracy is often underestimated. While debate around the notion of democracy had been current in European Enlightenment circles for some time – shaped particularly by the thought of John Locke – it is nevertheless true that democracy as a political reality in the world is to be traced back to the formation of the United States of America as an independent nation. In 1776, more than a decade before the French Revolution, Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers produced a Declaration of Independence, and later a Constitution and Bill of Rights, which laid the basis for the world's first liberal democratic state, and which, with a few minor amendments, continues to serve as the definitive model for

contemporary democracies, including that of South Africa.

It is worth reflecting on just how far-reaching and radical the central tenets of the Declaration of Independence are:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – that to secure these rights governments are instituted among them, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed ….

The fundamental purport of such assertions is to guarantee to the individual the right to the maximum amount of freedom possible, subject only to the like freedom of other individuals. As never before in political history, individual human beings were accorded the right to devise and pursue their own unique concept of the good life, free from any authoritarian sanction or interference, whether political, social or religious.

It is highly ironic, therefore, that in the decades following the Second World War, which had been fought over the very concept of freedom, American society should itself have become so repressive of individual liberty. As the Cold War intensified, and the dogma of the communist threat took hold, so America began to resemble a totalitarian state in a number of ways. The so-called "Communist witch-hunts" propagated by Senator Joseph McCarthy's committee on "unAmerican activities" may have represented the most visible manifestation of such authoritarian nationalism, but America in general had become a highly intolerant society, ostracising and excoriating all those whose pursuit of happiness had led them to express themselves in ways different from the overwhelmingly dominant moral discourse of the time. Not least of such victims were writers, including William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and most notoriously of all perhaps, Allen Ginsberg, whose 1956 poem, *Howl*, became the subject of a protracted obscenity trial. By the time that Ken Kesey began his career as a novelist in the early 1960s, then, American society was in the grip of a stultifying moral conformism that threatened to destroy altogether the values of liberty and individuality upon which American democracy had been founded. As Kesey himself (quoted by Brown 1999: 6; cf also Kesey 1973) noted, America was suffering from a "viral condition":

> a hardening of the heart which finally spreads to render the victim's perceptive senses paralysed, so that the only sights, sounds and ideas that can be accepted by the person are those already prescreened and marked permissible .... Conformity, fear, violence – that was the cancer in the heart of society.
>
> (Kesey quoted by Brown 1999: 6)

Kesey was initially working on a quite different novel, *Zoo*, about the bohemian community of North Beach, California. To make money while writing, a psychologist friend of Kesey's, Vic Lovell, to whom *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is dedicated, suggested he take a job as a night attendant in the psychiatric section of the Veteran's Hospital in Menlo Park. There, as Tom Wolfe relates in his celebrated documentary account of Kesey, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*,

> Kesey got absorbed in the life of the psychiatric ward. The whole system – if they set out to invent the perfect Anti-cure for what ailed the men on this ward, they couldn't have done it better. Keep them cowed and docile. Play on the weakness that drove them nuts in the first place. Stupefy the bastards with tranquillizers and if they still get out of line haul them up to the "shock shop" and punish them.
>
> (Wolfe 1968: 43)

Kesey's novelistic interest thus shifted to the mental hospital as subject matter, which he realised he could use as a controlling metaphor for the insanity of enforced conformity and obedience characterising American society as a whole. Kesey already had the idea of the character of McMurphy as the hero who would challenge the system, but he struggled with the form of the novel, and particularly the question of narrative perspective. The answer came from an unexpected source. Kesey had also begun taking LSD regularly, a drug he had discovered by chance as a paid volunteer for experiments with "psychomimetic" drugs at Menlo Park. On one hallucinogenic trip, as Wolfe recounts, Kesey visualised out of the blue the schizophrenic Native American who would become the narrator of the story:

> He knows nothing about Indians and has never met an Indian, but suddenly here is a full-blown Indian – Chief Broom – the solution, the whole mothering key, to the novel …. From the point of view of craft, Chief Broom was his great inspiration. If he had told the story through McMurphy's eyes, he would have had to end up with the big bruiser delivering a lot of homilies about his down-home theory of mental therapy. Instead, he told the story through the Indian. This way he could present a schizophrenic state the way the schizophrenic

> himself, Chief Broom, feels it and at the same time report the McMurphy method more subtly.
>
> (Wolfe 1968: 42-43)

In the setting of the mental hospital, Kesey found a perfect means of giving concrete expression to his central thematic preoccupation of the undermining of individual liberty by authoritarian control. As Marc Chénetier puts it,

> Ken Kesey adopts [the image of America as an insane asylum] in order to denounce what Ginsberg had earlier called "the syndrome of shutdown" that seemed, in the eyes of numerous marginal citizens, to threaten anew the individual in the United States.
>
> (Chénetier 1996: 141)

But though the action of the novel is set almost entirely in the hospital, the novel's range of vision moves far beyond the asylum walls. Incorporating allusions, symbols, stories, theories, drawn from sources as varied as politics, psychology, mythology and religion, the novel explores many different aspects of its main theme from a multiplicity of different perspectives. The task of the body of this article, then, is to elucidate the multidimensional nature of the text, and to demonstrate how this structural complexity serves not only to clarify, but also to extend and shape the fundamental message of the book.

## Allegories of Freedom

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is concerned with the idea of the liberation of the individual from the deadening constraints imposed upon him or her by his or her society or community, and even, at times, by himself or herself. It tells the tale of a psychiatric ward in an Oregon mental hospital in which the patients have fallen totally under the destructive control of the Big Nurse, Miss Ratched, the ward's "evil martinet matron" (Reed 2001: 5). Onto the ward comes Randle Patrick McMurphy, a charismatic if unconventional rebel hero who challenges her and her system, thereby inspiring the men to stand up for themselves and to free themselves from the ward and all it represents. In particular, the narrator, Chief Bromden, finds the courage and the strength of will to break out of the hospital and return to his people.

Even so brief an adumbration as this suggests the allegorical nature of the work, but, as will be seen, the actual allegorical method employed here is

neither simple nor straightforward.[2] A conventional allegory, as M.H. Abrams reminds us, is

> a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived so as to make coherent sense on the "literal" or primary level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events.
>
> (Abrams 1988: 4)

In this case, however, there are not merely two correlated levels of signification, but rather a large number of such levels inviting a plurality of allegorical readings. In one sense, as has already been noted, the mental hospital functions as a correlative for American society at large. But Kesey has also included a diversity of other levels of signification which relate the main narrative not only to American society in the early 1960s but to a much wider frame of reference. Together these function as a series of background theories or symbolic frameworks or intertextual narratives which enable Kesey to throw light on various aspects of his general concept of individual liberty, to approach it from several angles, to show how it pertains to a number of divergent contexts. It might be said that the novel is made up of a variety of different strands of meaning which are woven together to produce the overall pattern of the work. For this reason, the novel cannot be regarded reductively as "an allegory of freedom" but rather, and hence the title of this article, as several "allegories of freedom". Four main allegorical strands may be identified: the political, the psychological, the mythological, the religious. The intention is to examine each of these strands separately, but then also to show how they combine in a mutually reinforcing way to create the final meaning of the novel as a whole.

## Politics

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* functions most obviously as an allegory of freedom in the sphere of politics, both specific American *realpolitik*, as well as general political philosophy. The concept of individual liberty in this political sense is explored through the central dramatic conflict that develops between the two main antagonists, Nurse Ratched and McMurphy, who are presented as highly individuated persons in their own right, but also in an allegorical mode of characterisation as representative figures.

On the one hand, Nurse Ratched represents authoritarianism, totalitarian control, social conformity. Throughout she is associated with machines, tools,

artificial objects and synthetic materials, and her goal is to "adjust" the individual to fit in with the group. Significantly, her very name suggests an instrument of control, a "ratchet", which the Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines as "a set of teeth on the edge of a bar or wheel in which a device engages to ensure motion *in one direction only*" (my italics). Thus she insists on duty, routine, ward policy, discipline and obedience, which she enforces through psychological torture, drugs, physical punishment (ranging from electric shocks to frontal lobotomies), and, as in classic state terror tactics, through her hand-picked nursing aides, the "black boys", who function as her de facto security police. Although the Big Nurse (a close cousin of Orwell's Big Brother) disguises her intentions behind a carefully constructed facade of sympathetic concern for the men's well-being, Chief Bromden perceives "her hideous real self" (p. 5),[3] and realises furthermore that she is actually "a high-ranking official" (p. 178) of something much larger and more widespread, which he terms the "Combine":

> a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as the Inside …. The ward is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighbourhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is.
>
> (Kesey 1962: 25-26, 37)

The ward and the Combine work in concert and share the same aim, acerbically articulated by Tony Tanner (1971: 376): "all individual distinctions and differences erased and nature's variety brought down to the deadly uniformity of a mechanically repeated pattern". It must have been both shocking and alarming for a contemporaneous American readership to recognise that this critique of totalitarian rule was directed, in an allegorical sense, not so much at the Soviet Union or Communist China, but at America itself which, the novel asserts, was becoming every bit as authoritarian and illiberal as its Cold War counterparts.

McMurphy, on the other hand, is portrayed as the diametric antithesis of the nurse, representing a radicalised and extreme form of individualism and freedom. He is associated with nature, physicality, sensuality (as in his forename, Randy) and vitality (the R. P. M. of his initials implying the energy rather than the mechanical nature of a high-powered engine). His developing purpose, as the novel progresses, is to help the men to be free, to be themselves, to be unafraid of being different or not fitting in to some predetermined social identity or role. He stands in instinctive opposition to all those "who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow the rules, to live like they want you to" (p. 56), and thus it is inevitable that he should come to challenge the nurse's authoritarianism and attempt to subvert her

system of control. It is no accident of narratorial detail that McMurphy was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in Korea "for leading an escape from a Communist prison camp" (p. 41) or that he maintains that "those Chinese Commies could have learned a few things" from the Big Nurse (p. 267; cf also pp. 62-63).

It is a further irony that the convicted felon, McMurphy, is more in touch with the spirit of democracy than the supposed pillars of the community. The pet subject of Doctor Spivey, the ward psychiatrist, is the "theory of the Therapeutic Community" whose goal "is a democratic ward, run completely by the patients and their votes, working toward making worthwhile citizens to turn back Outside onto the street", and whose methodology "is to make this as much like your own democratic, free neighbourhoods as possible – a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside that you will one day be taking your place in again" (p. 46). But of course, as McMurphy comes to realise, the nurse simply works "this democratic bullshit" (p. 132) to her own ends, for Doctor Spivey is "her doctor" (p. 27), a weak puppet of the nurse, and she merely exploits the intended democratic model as yet one more means of ensuring her total control of the ward. By contrast, it is McMurphy who gets the men to recognise and to exercise their democratic rights: deciding to change the old tub room into a game room; voting to change ward policy in order to watch the World Series on television; signing up for and going on the fishing expedition; and eventually either transferring to another ward or checking themselves out of the hospital altogether.

And yet McMurphy is not to be regarded simplistically as an exemplary apologist for the liberal democratic principle of the rule of law. His rather more complex ideological position apropos the nurse is made clear in a brief verbal exchange quite early in the novel. On the occasion of McMurphy's admission, the nurse, appraising him of the need to obey ward policy, tells him, "you do understand: *everyone* ... must follow the rules". To which McMurphy replies, "ya know – that is the ex-*act* thing somebody *always* tells me about the rules … just when they figure I'm about to do the dead opposite" (p. 24). On the one hand, the nurse's emphasis on "the rules" is in reality a further attempt to impose "her rule" on the men. But on the other hand, McMurphy's rejoinder suggests in fact an attitude of libertarian anarchism, a careless flouting of all rules, which has the potential to be just as destructive as the nurse's authoritarianism.

As such, it needs to be made clear that McMurphy does not necessarily embody the political values of the novel. That role falls instead to Chief Bromden, who is after all the central controlling consciousness of the text. As

Ronald Wallace argues, the novel "creates in McMurphy an extremity of total freedom as a balance to the nurse's extremity of total control, in an effort to locate the mean" (1979: 113). And Wallace goes on to point out that Bromden, far from being a "reincarnation" of McMurphy, "never adopts McMurphy's attitude towards violence and sex, nor does he reflect the machismo values of his hero" and that "if Bromden has learned anything from his experience, it is to be himself, to refuse to let others remake him in their image" (1979: 113).

By the end of the novel, Chief Bromden literally and figuratively leaves McMurphy behind. The great lesson he has learned from McMurphy is that individual liberty can only be achieved when one finds the courage to be oneself rather than what others want one to be: what makes McMurphy "something extraordinary" is precisely that "he's what he is, that's it. Maybe that's what makes him strong enough, being what he is" (pp. 150-151). At the same time, however, Bromden comes to understand that individual liberty is not necessarily incompatible with membership of a community. One of the saddest features of McMurphy's profile is that he seems such a rootless personality, so cut off from any sense of cultural or communal history – a fact revealed in his brief moment of nostalgia on the way back from the fishing trip for his "misspent youth's humble abode" (p. 241), now derelict and abandoned. By contrast, Chief Bromden recognises that part of what constitutes his unique identity is his family background and tribal heritage. His personal liberation is symbolised by his physical escape from the asylum, but it is significant that he chooses to exercise that new-found freedom by returning to his people and attempting to reconstruct a coherent tribal community. He has learned the crucial difference between submitting to an enforced social conformity imposed upon one by others and voluntarily deciding to participate in the life of a community on one's own individual terms.

The officially sanctioned destabilisation of the Chief's tribal identity introduces a further aspect of the concept of political freedom in the novel, namely, the state's discrimination against minorities, a phenomenon all the more ironic in a country putatively founded upon the premise that "all men are created equal". Evident throughout in the racial tensions between the mainly white patients and the "black boys", it is more thoroughly examined in the case of the chief himself. The half-breed offspring of a Columbia River Indian chief and a white woman, he stands at the symbolic intersection of the two cultures, and yet, at the outset of the novel at least, he belongs to neither. His own tribe has been bought out by rapacious industrial developers and has become eviscerated and deracinated. The state, meanwhile, has abandoned him as an indigent mental patient after sending him off to a war which has

left him a shell-shocked schizophrenic. More subtly, having been ignored into silence by the white man since he was a young boy, he has now adopted the persona of a deaf-and-dumb shadow person, a literal drug-store Indian, or, as fellow-patient Harding puts it, the very personification of "your Vanishing American" (p. 66 and cf Fiedler 1968: 182-183). Under McMurphy's guidance, however, he slowly begins to remember and thus reclaim his tribal heritage, and to express his bitterness at how "the government tried to buy [our] right to be Indians" (p. 309). As Jack Hicks points out, "paramount among [McMurphy's] influences on Bromden is the recovery of memory …. Kesey suggests repeatedly that memory, knowing one's individual and collective pasts, is a key to any sense of present or future" (1981: 173). The Chief's intention to return to his people is perhaps more symbolic than certain, and the novel ends before he does so. Nevertheless, the point is made that a secure sense of cultural integrity is often an important underlying factor in the attainment of individual liberty, and that society has as little right to undermine one's own authentic cultural identity as it has to force an alien culture upon one.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* provides a detailed and informed exploration of the concept of individual liberty within the context of democratic theory and practice, testing its limits while at the same time highlighting the dangers involved in its arbitrary curtailment. Beyond this specifically political focus, however, an equally important aspect of individual liberty which the novel addresses is found in the field of psychology, or, more accurately, several conflicting theories of psychology.

## Psychology

On at least one level, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* functions not allegorically but as a literal depiction and denunciation of the continuing inhumanity of the conditions and methods of treatment in mental hospitals at the time (cf Faggen 2002: xi-xii). Thus, the Public Relation man's endeavours to persuade some visitors that "mental hospitals have eliminated all the old-fashioned cruelty" (Kesey 1962: 9) ends up having the opposite effect as his catalogue of supposedly bygone horrors unintentionally describes his own institution: "Oh, when I think back on the old days, on the filth, the bad food, even, yes, brutality ..." (p. 9). Simultaneously, however, the novel exploits the setting of the asylum in an allegorical form to examine notions of individual liberty and oppression from the perspective of a variety of psychological theories and paradigms.

The main theoretical conflict treated by the novel is that centred around the opposition between behaviourism and humanistic psychology. Behaviourism, as its name suggests, is concerned exclusively with observable and measurable human behaviour and repudiates introspective psychology with its concern for such vague and intangible concepts as consciousness, thoughts and feelings. As John B. Watson, the founding figure of American behaviourism, (in)famously explained, the behaviourist

> wants to control man's reactions as physical scientists want to control and manipulate other natural phenomena. It is the business of behavioristic psychology to be able to predict and to control human activity.
>
> (Watson 1924: 11)

The notion of individual liberty is inconsistent with, and irrelevant to, the aims of behaviourism, which are to set up and define acceptable standards of behaviour and then to induce the individual to conform to them by such externally controlled methods as stimulus-response conditioning, aversion therapy and the like.

Humanistic psychology, conversely, acknowledges the reality of consciousness and is vitally concerned with the thoughts, feelings and desires of individual human beings. The purpose of humanistic psychology is not to compel the individual to adhere to some predetermined set of behaviours but rather to encourage individuals to work out independently what their life goals are, and then to enable them to achieve these goals in a process of "self-actualisation" (a term coined by Kurt Goldstein (1940) and popularised by prominent humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow). As Rogers (1951: 487-488) averred, the basic force motivating human beings is "a tendency toward fulfilment, toward actualisation, toward the maintenance and enhancement of the organism" (cf also Maslow 1962).

The conflict between the behaviourist and humanist psychological paradigms can clearly be correlated with the ideological opposition between authoritarianism and liberal democracy outlined earlier. Significantly, behaviourism had, largely through the work of Watson's protégé, B.F. Skinner (cf Skinner 1938, for example), become the dominant school of psychology in America in the 1940s and 1950s. Humanistic psychology had begun to take hold in the course of the 1950s and 1960s, partly as a reaction to behaviourism, and more widely as one strand of the general cultural counteraction to the prevailing conservatism and conformism in American society at the time.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, then, the Big Nurse represents not only authoritarianism but also behaviourism. For all her apparent

commitment to democratic, humanistic psychiatric methods – the Patients Council, group sessions, peer discussions, individual self-assessments – the Nurse in actuality practises behaviourism in its most callous form. Her goal, far from helping the patients to achieve self-fulfilment, is rather to get them to conform to *her* system, to "fix" them, to get them "adjusted to surroundings" (pp. 25, 37-38). She uses the patients' logbook and group discussions not for therapy but as a tool of psychological humiliation to keep the men intimidated and submissive. Failing that, she is able to resort to shock treatment and crude surgery in the form of the frontal lobotomy as much more severe and efficacious methods of punishment and control. And her methods, as Harding explains to McMurphy, are perfectly consonant with the ethos of American society of the period: "in this country, when something is out of order, the quickest way to get it fixed is the best way" (p. 176).

It is once again ironic that McMurphy, the libertine convict who knows nothing about psychological theory or theorists, turns out to be the true therapist for the men. Admitting to having never been in "a Institute of Psychology" (p. 10) before, McMurphy is able intuitively to cut through the obfuscatory psychological jargon and see things for what they are. In typical fashion, he subverts the psychiatric label attached to him: "Now they tell me a psychopath's a guy fights too much and fucks too much, but that ain't wholly right; do you think? I mean, whoever heard tell of a man gettin' too much poozle?" (p. 13) Similarly, he recognises and gets the men to acknowledge the destructive cruelty of the Nurse's methods. And, most importantly, he gets the men to talk about themselves and their problems, offering an empathetic and receptive ear to the long suppressed confessions of weakness, fear and shame of Harding, Billy Bibbit, Cheswick, Scanlon, Fredrickson, Sefelt, and, eventually, Chief Bromden himself. By so doing, and by his own example as well, he gives the men the courage and the capacity to face up to their difficulties, to construct a renewed sense of self, and begin the vital process of actualisation. It is he who enables the men to take their places in the outside world again, not as "adjusted components" of the Combine, (p. 37) but as free individuals, as autonomous agents of their own destinies. As such, he exemplifies the true spirit of both liberal democracy and humanistic psychology, that true happiness and fullness of life can be meaningfully pursued only under conditions of genuine individual liberty.[4]

A further dimension of the antagonism between McMurphy and the Big Nurse at this level of psychology centres on the issue of sexuality, and particularly the idea of sexuality as an affirmation of the life force, as an expression of self-identity, and thus as a key ingredient in mental health. This

conceptualisation of sexuality was primarily developed and systematically theorised by Sigmund Freud, much of whose work rests on the basic premise that the repression of normal sexual instincts gives rise to a diversity of morbid psychological symptoms. As Tom Wolfe notes, Kesey had been deeply impressed by Freud's "system of thought … the richest, most complex metaphor of life ever devised" (1968: 36), and much of the novel's perspective is informed by Freudian thinking. One important contention in the novel is that the widespread, enforced moral conformism in American society had produced a high degree of sexual repression and intolerance and, consequently, contributed to a variety of individual psychological problems. It is significant that many of the men have come to the ward for mental disturbances which are sexual in origin: Harding's feelings of inadequacy and his shame at being "different" (pp. 171, 293); Billy Bibbit's intense inhibition as a result of a form of Oedipal complex; Fredrickson and Sefelt's closet homosexuality. More symbolically, there are the terrible figures of Ruckly, whose whole sexual identity has been reduced to one agonised exclamation of "Ffffff*uck da wife*!" (p. 16) and Rawler the Squawler whose inarticulate sexual horror meant that he finally "cut both nuts off and bled to death" (p. 121). The patients' sexual dysfunctionality serves as one particular focus of an entire society gone wrong.

The Big Nurse, far from attempting to help the men deal with their sexual problems, actively preys upon their vulnerabilities and insecurities as an essential part of her control mechanism. She is, indeed, as McMurphy gets the men to acknowledge, "a ball-cutter" (p. 57). At the same time, she herself remains, in a richly loaded term, "impregnable", (pp. 69, 70) not only because she is fifty years old but because she cultivates a deliberately sexless demeanour, spoiled only by her enormous womanly breasts, about which she is "bitter", (p. 6) and which she does her best to conceal. McMurphy realises intuitively that a key defence strategy against the Nurse's repressiveness is to challenge her sexually, and so he continually harps on about her breasts; he mischievously boasts about his arrest for statutory rape; he celebrates his status as a psychopath; and in front of the Nurse he exposes if not himself then his shorts with white sperm whales printed on them, given to him by a literature student who said he was a "symbol" (p. 79). Finally, in the climactic moment of their conflict, after she has driven Billy to suicide by threatening to tell his mother of his sexual encounter, McMurphy attacks her, tears open her uniform and exposes her breasts – "the two nippled circles started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever even imagined, warm and pink in the light" (p. 303) – thereby destroying forever the (a)sexual power she has wielded over the men.

The novel makes clear, however, that the Nurse is not an isolated case but part instead of an entire social syndrome. The Nurse's power on the ward, even over the doctor, is in no small measure due to the fact that the hospital supervisor is an old friend of hers from their days as Army nurses together in the 1930s (p. 59). Billy's mother, moreover, another old friend of the nurse's, is the hospital receptionist. Nor is this syndrome confined to the hospital. The Chief recalls how his father had resisted the Combine "till my mother made him too little to fight any more and he gave up" (p. 206) and he remembers that of the whites who came to negotiate away their tribal land, the guileful brains behind the scheme was "an old white-haired woman in an outfit so stiff and heavy it must be armour plate" (p. 198). As the insightful Harding observes, "man has but *one* truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy" (p. 67), and that is sexuality, not phallocentric power in a misogynistic sense, but rather the free, uninhibited, joyful assertion of human sexuality in general terms. Thus, an important agent in the mood of liberating release on the fishing trip is the sexual presence of McMurphy's prostitute friend, Candy, which causes apparatus all over the hospital to burn out "like machines committing suicide" (p. 217). Similarly, it is the shamelessly open sexuality of Candy and her friend Sandy at the orgiastic party intended to celebrate McMurphy's going away "square in the centre of the Combine's most powerful stronghold" that at last convinces Chief Bromden that the Combine might not be "all-powerful" after all (p. 290).[5]

The point that the novel is making, in Freudian terms, is that individuals cannot be regarded as free if their behaviour is determined by a repressed or distorted sexuality of which they themselves may not even be aware. The basis of a healthy mind, and therefore of the capacity for autonomous action, lies at least partly in the conscious liberation of the individual's natural sexual expression from the artificial moralistic constraints imposed by conservative society.

This is not to say, however, that Kesey is advocating a complete abrogation of all moral responsibility, and it is important to remember that it is not McMurphy but the Chief who embodies the novel's underlying values. In fact, the novel accepts the necessity of a balanced and responsible morality as the basis of an integrated personality. One intriguing way in which this idea is developed comes through another Freudian allegory, namely, Freud's theory of the unconscious. In this reading, the central narrative becomes an allegory for an unconscious mind – that of the Chief – striving for reintegration and balance.[6] The novel opens at a time when an over-dominant superego in the form of the Nurse has suppressed both the id (the Chief is impotent and afraid) and the ego (he lacks any real sense of identity or rational

perspective). But then the id, now represented by McMurphy, begins to reassert itself and to challenge the superego through sexuality, physicality and even violence. As a result, the Chief's potency, and his proper sense of his full size and strength, are restored, and he begins to speak, to remember his identity, and to express himself again. In a final confrontation, the id and the superego all but neutralise each other. The Chief now considers allowing the id to become dominant by emulating McMurphy's excesses, but he resists the temptation, suffocating McMurphy and escaping from the hospital as his own man. As such, the equilibrium of the three components of the unconscious mind, which forms the basis of a mentally healthy person, is restored. The instinctual drives of the id are reactivated, while the superego is reduced to its proper proportions and can therefore act as a positive and responsible moderating influence. Finally, the ego itself is restored to normalcy, and the Chief is able to return to his people as himself, Chief Bromden. In this reading, the entire story literally takes place inside the Chief's head as a drama of the restoration to health of an individual unconscious mind, and may provide some explanation of the Chief's cryptic comment about his tale: "it's the truth even if it didn't happen" (p. 8).

Such an interpretation of the novel may seem to reduce the characters to mere representational figures. Yet a very deliberate part of Kesey's characterological technique is to present the main protagonists as complexly individual persons in their own right and, simultaneously, as simplified representatives of various types and concepts. The text itself makes clear how Kesey has utilised the caricatural methods of the comic strip or animated cartoon (cf Sherwood 1971: 97). The Nurse, for instance, demands that the world appear to her in "that clean, orderly movement of a cartoon comedy", (p. 33) whereas to the Chief that same world seems to be populated by "cartoon men" who act like "mechanical puppets" in a horrifically violent Punch and Judy act: (p. 34).

> Like a cartoon world, where the figures are flat and outlined in black, jerking through some kind of goofy story that might be real funny if it weren't for the cartoon figures being real guys ….
>
> (Kesey 1962: 30)

In a sense, the presentational methodology of contemporary popular culture is entirely appropriate for a modern world in which, as Kesey maintains, "the comic-book Superheroes [are] the honest American myths" (Kesey quoted by Wolfe 1968: 35). McMurphy himself, for instance, reads only comic books and much of his persona seems to be made of the stuff of popular culture's image of the hero: the swaggering cowboy; the fearless gambler; the rambling

lover; the leather-jacketed motorcycle rebel; and, especially, some superhero like Captain Marvel, a figure developed more fully in the character of Hank Stamper in Kesey's second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964)(cf also his final novel, *Sailor Song* (1992)).

All these figures, however, derive from a common and much deeper source, to understand which it is necessary to take into account yet another psychological paradigm deployed in the novel, that of Carl Jung. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* draws clearly on Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, and particularly his notion of archetypes. In this reading, for instance, McMurphy is based on the archetypal heroic individual, found in ubiquity and antiquity, who triumphs through personal courage and integrity, whereas the Nurse seems to be a deliberate inversion of the archetypal mother-figure, the characteristic life-giving and nurturing love transmuted into a destructive and paralysing oppressiveness. More significantly, however, the novel also utilises the idea of archetypal narratives, which recur across cultures and eras, and which thus embody universal human truths. Indeed, the novel as a whole is modelled on the fundamental narrative of the hero who comes from afar to save a people from some great evil which has descended upon them. It is a narrative which has over time taken many forms, but two particular versions stand out as crucial intertextual exemplars which serve to deepen and clarify the central concerns of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: the legend of the Fisher King and the story of Christ.

## Mythology

It was the critic, Raymond M. Olderman, in his book *Beyond the Waste Land* (1972), who first demonstrated in detail Kesey's utilisation in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* of the related mythological narratives of the waste land and the legend of the Fisher King. Olderman's analysis at times stretches the parallels too far and generally ignores other strands of meaning in the novel, but does nevertheless help to illuminate one important dimension of the novel's allegorical structure. Just as T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* had used the legend of the Fisher King as part of his "mythic method" to reveal the spiritual sterility and cultural stagnation of post World War I Europe, so Kesey adopts and adapts the legend to register the condition of America in the early 1960s as a waste land of social conformity and oppression. In the most common form of the legend, briefly, a king who is associated with fishing has been maimed and rendered impotent. As a direct consequence of that his land has become infertile and his people have suffered spiritual and

emotional debilitation and a loss of hope and meaning. The king awaits the arrival of a stranger (sometimes associated with the questing grail knight) who will ask certain ritual questions and undergo a number of ordeals in order to heal the king, restore his potency and regenerate the land and the people.

Quite clearly a number of the narrative details of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* fit directly into this allegorical pattern. Chief Bromden is an authentic chief of a tribe of Columbia River "fish Injuns" which has become defunct and scattered. He himself has been maimed, psychologically, first by World War II and then by the hospital which keeps him in a state of paranoid psychosis, even to the extent that he is afraid of water – as in the showers and the swimming pool. And he has been made impotent by the malign influence of the Nurse, so that his broom functions as a pathetic reminder of his lost potency, as a cruel linguistic corruption of his name and identity, and as a travesty of the quondam symbols of his royal sceptre, or lance, or even perhaps fishing spear. McMurphy then arrives as the stranger or questing knight, constantly asking questions, forcing the men to confront their problems and to heal themselves, and undergoing a series of ordeals on their behalf. Most significantly, he sees through the Chief's deaf-and-dumb act and begins to ask him a number of questions about himself which enables him to rediscover his cultural heritage and resolve to recongregate his dispersed people. McMurphy also restores the Chief's potency:

> In the dark there he went on, spinning his tale about how it would be, with all the men scared and all the beautiful young girls panting after me ...
>
> "Oh, man I tell you, I tell you, you'll have women trippin' you and beatin' you to the floor."
>
> And all of a sudden his hand shot out and with a swing of his arm untied my sheet, cleared my bed covers, and left me lying there naked.
>
> "Look there, Chief. Haw. What'd I tell ya? You growed a half a foot already."
>
> (Kesey 1962: 210)

He also gets the Chief fishing again by persuading him to sign on for the fishing expedition.[7] In this crucial episode McMurphy leads a number of the men (as well as Candy and Doctor Spivey) outside the hospital, to the edge of the land and out onto the sea, the source of life itself. In the course of the trip, he makes significant progress in restoring the men's confidence and self-belief, lending "power" to the weak, (p. 224) giving them "calmness" (p. 230), and, most notably, getting them to laugh properly again with all which that means in terms of psychological health and life affirmation:

> While McMurphy laughs. Rocking farther and farther backward against the cabin top, spreading his laugh out across the water – laughing at the girl, at the guys, at George, at me sucking my bleeding thumb, at the captain back at the pier and the bicycle rider and the service-station guys and the five thousand houses and the Big Nurse and all of it. Because he knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy. He knows there's a painful side; he knows my thumb smarts and his girl friend has a bruised breast and the doctor is losing his glasses, but he won't let the pain blot out the humour no more'n he'll let the humour blot out the pain.
>
> I notice Harding is collapsed beside McMurphy and is laughing too. And Scanlon from the bottom of the boat. At their own selves as well as at the rest of us. And the girl, with her eyes still smarting as she looks from her white breast to her red one, she starts laughing. And Sefelt and the doctor, and all.
>
> It started slow and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger. I watched, part of them, laughing with them – and somehow not with them. I was off the boat, blown up off the water and skating the wind with those black birds, high above myself, and I could look down and see myself and the rest of the guys, see the boat rocking there in the middle of those diving birds, see McMurphy surrounded by his dozen people, and watch them, us, swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave.
>
> (Kesey 1962: 235-236)

On the boat, the Chief not only overcomes his fear of "death by water" but also catches a fair-sized fish, as a further indication of his reincarnation as the Fisher King of the legend. Following the fishing trip, the Chief finds himself "getting so's I could see some good in the life around me. McMurphy was teaching me" (p. 241). He no longer needs the protective fog, he physically resists the black boys, and he becomes a genuine "*Wild*man" again (p. 275). In fact, virtually all the men who go on the fishing trip (with the exception of McMurphy and Billy, of course) are liberated in one way or the other. Harding, Sefelt and Fredrickson sign themselves out of the hospital, George transfers to another ward, and the doctor at last stands up to the Nurse and refuses to resign over the scandal of the party. The Chief, who cannot leave voluntarily, learns from McMurphy's example and emancipates himself by hurling the control panel through the barred window, the glass splashing out "like a bright cold water" (p. 309) of purification and rebirth. Although the novel ends at this moment of celebratory liberation, and does not follow the Chief into his new life, it is significant that his intention is to return to the Columbia River, the location of his lost chiefdom, and to contribute to the

restoration of his own particular waste land, a process which, it seems, has already started:

> I'd like to check around Portland and Hood River and The Dalles to see if there's any of the guys I used to know back in the village who haven't drunk themselves goofy. I'd like to see what they've been doing since the government tried to buy their right to be Indians. I've even heard that some of the tribe have took to building their old ramshackle wood scaffolding all over that big million-dollar hydroelectric dam, and are spearing salmon in the spillway.
>
> (Kesey 1962: 309-310)

The mythological dimension of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* functions in two very important ways, together with several of the other background theories or symbolic frameworks, to reinforce and deepen the meaning of the novel. Firstly, it underlines just how sterile and life-denying American society of the time had become, and how spiritually enervated Americans themselves were. Secondly, it contends that the key to the restoration of the waste land lies in the principle of individual liberty. The message which McMurphy as the stranger or the grail knight brings, and the example which he himself sets, is that true freedom lies in refusing to accept the deadening uniformity of the system, in asserting one's individuality, and in actively forging one's own destiny.[8] It is a lesson which was certainly applicable to America at the time of the novel's publication, but the very universality of the underlying mythological narrative suggests that it is equally relevant to any context in which the demands of social conformity and compulsory allegiance to the group threaten to undermine and destroy the very freedom which makes life meaningful and worthwhile.

## Religion

The second archetypal narrative that Kesey deploys in a sustained allegorical fashion throughout the novel is that of the salvation of the world, and, more precisely, the story of the redemption effected by Jesus in the Christian tradition. McMurphy may at first appear to be a rather unlikely religious martyr or Christ-like figure. He is after all a violent, promiscuous braggart, feigning mental illness to get out of serving time on a prison work farm, and habitually cheating and stealing to enrich himself. As Harding, not altogether cynically remarks, McMurphy is, quite openly, "a good old red, white and blue hundred-percent American con man" (p. 252). And yet the novel makes

clear that for all his apparent amorality McMurphy is in essence a good man, a teacher and a healer, who does ultimately lay down his life for his friends.

Conversely, the Big Nurse, who presents herself as "an Angel of Mercy" (pp. 57, 179, 252, 297), is actually associated with the forces of evil which McMurphy resists. The challenge which McMurphy will mount in this modern version of the struggle between good and evil is presaged early in the novel in a small but telling image of McMurphy flicking an ornamental Halloween bat on his arrival on the Nurse's ward (p. 10).[9] The Nurse is referred to as "some old fiend of a nurse" (p. 57), she is likened to the devil in a black comedy puppet show (p. 34) and even linked perhaps with a witch through the broomstick she forces the Chief to use. McMurphy in turn is repeatedly associated in the diction and imagery of the text with the forces of good. When McMurphy first shakes hands with him, the Chief feels as if McMurphy "was transmitting his own blood" into the Chief's arm which rings with "power" (p. 23) and later he wants to touch McMurphy (p. 208) just as the woman with the haemorrhaging disease wanted to touch Christ's cloak to be healed (Matthew 9: 20-22; Mark 5: 25-34; Luke 8: 43-48). McMurphy is referred to at various points as a "saint" (p. 250), a "martyr" (pp. 147, 250), a "teacher" (p. 241). When he temporarily suspends his rebellion against the Nurse's system, he rebukes the men by saying that they "were coming to me like I was some kind of saviour" (p. 179). Of course, that is precisely what he has come to be for the men: as the Chief puts it, "I still had my own notions – how McMurphy was a giant come out of the sky to save us from the Combine" (p. 253). Indeed, it is when McMurphy's rebellion is in abeyance that Charles Cheswick drowns, in a way as Peter almost did when he lost faith in Jesus walking on the water (pp. 163-164). Appropriately, the idea of water as a positive symbol of life signals the resumption of McMurphy's mission when he runs his hand through the window of the Nurses' Station to retrieve his rationed cigarettes and the "glass came apart like water splashing" (p. 186). And it reaches its fruition when he gathers his disciples as fishermen to go on the purifying and liberating fishing expedition: "as McMurphy led the twelve of us towards the ocean" (p. 225).

More generally, the world of the hospital carries constant reminders of the destructive evil that holds sway. The patients, the majority of whom are free to leave whenever they wish, seem to be held in thrall by some kind of wicked spell which the Nurse has cast over them. As a warning to any who would challenge her, she keeps Ellis – an earlier rebel – nailed to the wall in a permanent state of crucifixion, a failed Christ whose suffering brought no redemption (p. 14). When Santa Claus enters the hospital "one Christmas at midnight on the button", he is all but destroyed: "They kept him with us six

years before they discharged him, clean-shaven and skinny as a pole" (pp. 71-72). And the patients themselves have become "rabbits", inverted symbols of Easter, just as the admission showers serve as a dark parody of baptism.

At this level of interpretation, there is a sense of religious ineluctability about a figure like McMurphy accepting and fulfilling the role of saviour to the men. What begins as an idle bet to get a rise out of the nurse, later turns into a question of honour, and finally a matter of necessity, pursued through pain and suffering. Increasingly, the Chief comes to recognise the inevitability of McMurphy's sacrifice.[10] Partly this lies in the fact that McMurphy is literally giving his life to his fellows; they take the life-force from him and it vitalises them even as it drains him, as the Chief glimpses on the way back from the fishing trip:

> Then – as he was talking – a set of tail-lights going past lit up McMurphy's face, and the windshield reflected an expression that was allowed only because he figured it'd be too dark for anybody in the car to see, dreadfully tired and strained and *frantic*, like there wasn't enough time left for something he had to do …
>
> While his relaxed, good-natured voice doled out his life for us to live, a rollicking past full of kid fun and drinking buddies and loving women and barroom battles over meagre honours – for all of us to dream ourselves into.
>
> (Kesey 1962: 243)

More pointedly, as Harding puts it, "it is us" (p. 293) who drive strong men like McMurphy to destruction, just as it is the "need" of the men which "makes" McMurphy rise up one last time and assault the Nurse in a final cataclysmic confrontation (p. 303).

McMurphy's last days, in fact, closely resemble the last days of Christ. He is, for example, scourged in the fight with the black boys, then half-crucified on the cross-shaped table of the shock room where the conductant sparkles like "a crown of thorns" (p. 269). Then he is "tried" by the Nurse, refusing to admit his guilt any more than Christ did to Pontius Pilate, whose words are eerily echoed by a man up on the Disturbed Ward, telling anyone who cares to listen, "I wash my hands of the whole deal" (p. 262). McMurphy even arranges his own version of a Last Supper, a bacchanalian feast of drink, drugs, sex and laughter, which the participants later recount to the other patients, swearing that "it's every word gospel" (p. 295). But after the party, when they are discovered in the morning, the Nurse forces Billy Bibbit to betray McMurphy like Judas, which in turn leads to his suicide. With grotesque injustice, the Nurse tries to blame McMurphy for the death in suitably allusive terms: "I hope you're finally satisfied. Playing with human

lives – gambling with human lives – as if you thought yourself to be a *God*!" (p. 302). It is then that McMurphy finally attacks her, throttling her and tearing open her dress before being dragged off by the supervisors, doctors and nurses (the black boys, interestingly, deliberately do nothing to help her).

As a result, McMurphy is taken away and lobotomised. For a few days the Chief and the others hear only rumours of him, but then one day his inert post-operative body is returned to the ward. The Chief realises that the Nurse wishes to use this incomplete resurrection as her final weapon, and so that night the Chief takes it upon himself to lay McMurphy's body to rest by suffocating him. Scanlon, witnessing the act of mercy, asks, appositely, "Is it finished?" and when the Chief replies in the affirmative, he mutters, "Christ", and tells the Chief to liberate himself as McMurphy had showed him (p. 308). The Chief's escape brings to completion the salvation offered by McMurphy, through whose sacrifice his followers are set free and given life.

As was the case with the legend of the Fisher King, so the story of Christ enables Kesey to add further texture and substance to the novel's perspective on individual liberty. Let it be remembered that Christianity is, in the first instance, a religion founded upon the promise of individual salvation, and whose great and novel attractiveness to the ancient world lay in its guarantee of personal posthumous survival. In the same way, the salvation which McMurphy offers the men is a personal one, the liberation of the individual from the destructive evil of collective tyranny. It is a point that was made powerfully, if a little too bluntly perhaps, by an early critic of the novel, Bruce E. Wallis, in an article provocatively entitled, "Christ in the Cuckoo's Nest: or the Gospel According to Ken Kesey":

> the novel is expressly formulated as nothing less than the bible for a twentieth century religion of self-assertive action, with a message of salvation modulated to the needs of repressed individuals in a constrictively conformist society.
>
> (Wallis 1972: 52)

## The Goose and the Cuckoo's Nest

The closing paragraphs of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are filled with an exultant mood of liberation and renewal. The concomitant sense of finality and organic completion, however, is achieved very largely through the intricate pattern of imagery and symbolism which Kesey has carefully woven into the fabric of the text, and it is useful in conclusion to offer some analysis of this symbolic patterning.

It is ironically appropriate that the Chief should use a "control panel" to crash through the barred windows of the ward and thus break free from the authoritarian control of the Nurse and her system. In so doing, he is metaphorically born again as the splintering glass resembles "water baptizing the sleeping earth" (p. 309), an image which recalls McMurphy defiantly smashing the glass partition of the Nurses' Station. Running across the grounds, the Chief feels as if he is "flying" and he realises ecstatically that he is indeed "free" (p. 309). The direction he takes is the one he remembers seeing a mongrel dog follow in an earlier episode in the novel whose pertinence now becomes clear. In that episode, the Chief, under McMurphy's inspiration, finally gains the courage to look out of the window of the hospital one night. What he sees, apart from the dog, when he looks up is a flock of Canadian geese:

> The honking came closer and closer till it seemed like they must be flying right through the dorm, right over my head. Then they crossed the moon – a black, weaving necklace, drawn into a V by that lead goose. For an instant that lead goose was right in the centre of that circle, bigger than the others, a black cross opening and closing, then he pulled his V out of sight into the sky once more.
>
> (Kesey 1962: 154)

This seemingly unimportant passage in fact carries a weight of symbolic significance which sharpens and helps to define the focus of the text. In the first place, the moon represents the Nurse as negative female symbol, cold, destructive, deathly, while her immense power is symbolised by the "circle of light ruled by the giant moon" which blots out the surrounding stars (p. 153). It is the same moonlight, incidentally, into which the glass of the broken window splashes out as the Chief escapes at the end. On the other hand, the lead goose is unmistakably McMurphy, guiding his followers out of the ward, the black cross of the wings implying his role as saviour and the V not implausibly suggesting his victory over the Nurse. The image of the goose in fact recurs in a number of thematically related places in the text. It brings to mind, for instance, the idea of McMurphy merrily taking over the role of "bull goose loony" (p. 19) at the opening of the novel. It summons up the Chief's memory from World War II of the camouflaging fog deployed to obscure the airfield from attack, and the referee's horn used by the lieutenant to guide the soldiers, which "sounded like a goose honking" (p. 122). That in turn is linked to the Chief's mental picture of McMurphy "trying to pull people out of the fog" (pp. 130, 140) of paranoia and anxiety in the ward. Even more richly, the image of the goose later also reminds the Chief of a happy memory from his childhood in the tribal village as the scattered shards of his life begin to

resume coherent shape at last. The memory is of a game he enjoyed with his grandmother about a "goose flying over the cuckoo's nest" (p. 271) and plucking out a trapped hen, played by counting syllables on the fingers:

> Ting. Tingle, tingle, tremble toes, she's a good fisherman, catches hens, puts 'em inna pens …wire blier, limber lock, three geese inna flock … one flew east, one flew west, one flew over the cuckoo's nest … O-U-T spells out … goose swoops down and plucks *you* out.
>
> (Kesey 1962: 271)

Quite clearly, McMurphy has acted as the goose who has swooped down and plucked out the Chief from his entrapment by the Nurse. He has shown the Chief how to liberate himself from the "cuckoo's nest", the insanely evil system of oppression and enforced conformity which characterises not only the mental hospital itself, but by extension any social institution of authoritarian control which seeks to undermine and destroy the concept of individual liberty.

This complex image pattern of the goose and the cuckoo's nest, firstly, forms part of the Chief's reintegration of tribal past and liberated present, and so serves as an important index of his restored mental health, cultural identity, and sense of individuated self. The imagery also brings together and harmonises the various other background theories and symbolic frameworks which make up the underlying structure of the story: Jesus coming down to offer his followers personal salvation and new life; the grail knight arriving to show the Fisher King how to heal himself and his people; the emancipation and actualisation of self made available to individuals through the humanist psychological paradigm; and the key political concept of individual liberty guaranteed in liberal democracy as opposed to the compulsory social conformity demanded by authoritarian ideology. Cumulatively and severally, these "allegories of freedom" in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* provide persuasive evidence for the absolute primacy of individual liberty in the pursuit of the good life and, obversely, the very real dangers of suppressing such liberty in the supposed name of social necessity.

However, although the novel ends on a note of hope and liberation, it is not one of naive or undiluted optimism. The Nurse has been defeated, but only in the context of these particular men and at this particular time. Other patients will come, she will regain her voice and her authority, and the whole sequence of repression and cruelty will repeat itself, just as it is doubtlessly recurring at this very moment in numerous other places and contexts. The final lesson of the novel, perhaps, is that the struggle for individual freedom against the

forces of social authoritarianism is never over. The Chief himself comes to realise this by the end of the novel:

> I looked at McMurphy out of the corner of my eye, trying not to be obvious about it. He was in his chair in the corner, resting a second before he came out for the next round – in a long line of next rounds. The thing he was fighting, you couldn't whip it for good. All you could do was keep on whipping it, till you couldn't come out any more and somebody else had to take your place.
>
> (Kesey 1962: 301)

It is a lesson which has had to be learned over and over in human history, and one which will no doubt continue to have to be learned in the indefinite future. As the French *philosophes* of the revolutionary period soon realised, "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance". More directly, as Benjamin Franklin, a founding father of American democracy, trenchantly observed, "they that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety".

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* reminds us of these simple yet profoundly important truths.

## Notes

1. For a detailed bibliography of fugitive works by and on Kesey, see *Ken Kesey – Literary Kicks* (compiled by Martin Blank) at www.charm.net/~brooklyn/Biblio/KeseyBiblio.html.

2. For an interesting and important discussion of how a number of authors at the time (though not Kesey specifically) had come to find the allegorical mode congenial to their vision of modern society, see Robert Scholes's *The Fabulators* in which he suggests, for example, that "allegory is often used to refer not to transcendental truth but to the invisible world of the unconscious or to the invisible world of mysterious powers that resemble conspiracy more than destiny" (1967: 23). See also Malcolm Bradbury (1983: 157ff).

3. Clear references to the text of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* will be given by page number only.

4. Though there is no scope for a full discussion here, it is worth noting in passing some of the political implications of the contemporary postmodernist tendency to destabilise and dissolve the notion of individual identity. Far from being radically progressive, such tendencies are actually deeply conservative and reactionary as they serve to undercut the political discourse of human

rights and thus leave the way open for any number of potential abuses against individual human beings.

5. It is not altogether fair to accuse Kesey of stereotyping women as either evil old matriarchs or golden-hearted whores, as "witches" or "twitches", as one critic puts it (Karl 1983: 61). Though he certainly plays with that stereotype quite consciously, there are a number of important if minor characters in the novel who serve as a counterpoint to it. Most notably, the young Japanese nurse on the Disturbed Ward treats McMurphy and the Chief with genuine compassion, and maintains that "it's not all like her ward .... A lot of it is but not all. Army nurses, trying to run an Army hospital. They are a little sick themselves" (pp. 218-219). And the Chief recalls his paternal grandmother as a wise and kind old woman who had managed to retain a lively and coherent sense of cultural identity.

6. In dealing with these familiar concepts, one must bear in mind the evolution of Freud's theory from, say, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) to *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

7. One of the great flaws of Milos Forman's 1976 film version (and one of the reasons Kesey distanced himself from it) is that it so completely misses the allegorical symbolism of the novel. It displaces the Chief from the centre of the novel in favour of McMurphy and even has the Chief miss the fishing trip, so that virtually the whole metaphorical point of the episode is lost.

8. This teaching lies at the heart of Carl Jung's work, which in fact emphasises the importance of "individuation", a process whereby each person moves as best as he or she can towards his or her particular destiny, or personal integration, or wholeness (cf, for example, Jung 1961: 352).

9. The chronology of the novel thus begins in autumn, 31 October to be precise, moves through the dark of winter, and ends some months later in the spring and, by implication, Easter.

10. A subtle indication of his own precognition of his unavoidable fate lies in the tattoo on his arm of "aces and eights" (pp. 79-80, 208), traditionally known as "the dead man's hand" in poker, for it was the cards held by Wild Bill Hickock (another maverick hero) when he was gunned down in the back.

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