

Teaching Literature and Medicine: Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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There's a special kind of writing that relates medical history and scientific issues in a captivating way. It's called *literature and medicine*, an interdisciplinary field of study established thirty years ago. Of course medical issues have appeared in literature since the time of Homer, and two well-known novels, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), are frequently taught works. Each of these authors wrote engaging stories that placed characters in situations beyond the realm of what was known. They also show how literature explores issues that science has not yet anticipated.

More recent examples in this genre, which used to be called *medicine in literature*, are Charlotte Gilman Perkin's late-nineteenth-century autobiographical story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," which is her riveting account of descending into madness; and David Feldshuh's late-twentieth-century play *Miss Evers' Boys*, which describes the unconscionable forty-year Tuskegee Syphilis Study conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service. With weighty medical issues and scientific topics in the daily headlines, teachers feel the classroom is the right place to explore important social matters. Most recently, Albert Camus' *The Plague* prompts discussions on the global spread of infectious diseases such as a probable swine flu pandemic.

Harvard University recognizes its duty to educate students to be responsible and informed citizens, instituting its new interdisciplinary core curriculum. It believes that English students can learn science and science students can understand English literature. Harvard's program is good

pedagogy because the brain loves diversity. Whether an English student or a science student, studying scientific issues situated in literature helps the developing mind understand the human character and condition. Teachers recognize that this dual literature-and-medicine facility helps their students deal with twenty-first century cutting-edge issues. Harvard's "skills across the curriculum" approach to teaching is sweeping American colleges.

One very accessible work taught in the literature and medicine genre is Kesey's popular *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). It's helpful for students studying the novel to first get a fundamental understanding of America's long and arduous history in learning to identify and to treat mental disorders. Before we had psychoanalysis and mental institutions, the mentally ill (who were not distinguished from the retarded and nonconformists) roamed the streets, were confined by relatives, or were thrown into prisons with criminals. When demonic causation ("The devil made me do it") could no longer explain aberrant behavior, moral movements to control the environment were tried. In the late nineteenth century so called "rest cures" became popular with the rich to cure their nervous disorders, and in the early twentieth century, during the Eugenics Movement, individuals were forcibly sterilized for feeble-mindedness and many types of unacceptable behaviors such as alcoholism, promiscuity, criminal acts, epilepsy, and even as punishment for running away from home. It was all done, of course, "for the greater good."

Then in the 1930s a neuropsychiatrist from Washington, D.C., Dr. Walter Freeman, pioneered his drastic ice-pick psychosurgery, also known as lobotomy. Anxious and fearful patients underwent this surgery to change their antisocial behavior. The surgery involved partially destroying one of the brain's frontal lobes, causing great disfiguration. Often it

relieved them of their psychological suffering so they could go back to the environment in which the disorder developed, Freeman said, "without the long, painful process of developing insight in the patients" (Robinson et al 15). Of course Freud had something to say about this. What the treatment did was change the patient's undesirable personalities to others, which were often described as slothful, irritable, and angry. Nonetheless, in *A History of Psychiatry* Edward Shorter points out, "The idea of operating on the brain to cure madness does not seem intrinsically unreasonable. Physicians have always intuited that a physical intervention in the brain, perhaps cutting some tract causing compulsive behavior or removing a center producing some malignant protein, might put an end to a pattern of psychosis" (225).

Finally, in 1946 the National Institute of Mental Health was created, recognizing the need to diagnose and to help the mentally ill. This brought about mental institutions in which patients were studied and treated. *Cuckoo's Nest* is set into such a mental institution where a power struggle exists between the staff and patients afflicted by many types of mental illnesses. The period is the rebellious, psychedelic sixties, a prosperous time following World War II. Drugs were rampant, and the counterculture challenged authority. It is a classic description of mental illnesses and encapsulates Kesey's own experimentation with alternative forms of perception. After taking graduate writing classes at Stanford University, Kesey took a night shift job as a Veteran's Administration psychiatric ward orderly. He observed the patients. Many of them weren't crazy, he believed, but rather they were just nonconformists in a sterile environment. While drug-induced, Kesey hallucinated about an Indian sweeping the floors. He became "Chief Broom," his schizophrenic narrator who had developed a bicultural schism, fitting neither into the white nor

the American Indian world. The novel was an immediate success. But it is a myth that Kesey wrote all of it in a drug-induced state.

When *Cuckoo's Nest* and the 1975 movie starring Jack Nicholson as its misfit antihero "Mack" McMurphy and Louise Fletcher as the authoritarian Nurse Ratched, first came out, shocked readers and viewers were repulsed by the graphic depictions of mental patients in an institution and the many kinds of barbaric treatments administered to them. The horrific idea of lobotomy and electroshock therapy (EST) took many people out of their comfort zones. But the scientific inspiration for EST is a marvel of science. In 1938 two Italian scientists observed schizophrenics to be symptom-free following seizures, and EST as an efficient way to manage uncontrollable patients was born.

Today, a severely depressed patient receiving EST, administered in a series of treatments, has an IV-relaxant administered and a mouth guard inserted before an anesthetic renders him unconscious. The airway is protected, and electrodes are connected to conducting jelly on the temples. Electric current comparable to a 60-watt bulb shoots through the brain causing a 20-second grand-mal seizure. The patient wakes about 30-minutes later, confused and disoriented, with a headache and short-term memory loss. In essence, EST helps disturbed patients regain the control necessary to enter into a therapeutic relationship. Short-term impaired memory follows; complications from possible fractures and dislocations caused by muscle contractions are a thing of the past.

For generations *Cuckoo's Nest* inflamed the public consciousness by depicting EST as a means to punish misbehaving patients, easily associating it with electrocution. The movie's graphic portrayal of treatments administered to unforgettable characters changed the course of medical history: electroshock treatment was replaced by talk therapy

and drugs like Prozac. But it also went underground. Over the years attempts to pass state laws banning EST have failed. As horrific as it sounds, some neuropsychiatrists still find EST to be an effective treatment for severely depressed and suicidal patients, especially after psychotherapy and slow-acting, cyclical drug regimens fail.

But the subjects in *Cuckoo's Nest* are not all graphic, grotesque violence, like watching a CSI autopsy television show. English students of all ages will enjoy reading how humor heals and will come to understand that sexuality is also a part of institutional behavior. There are many types of mentally ill people depicted in *Cuckoo's Nest*: schizophrenics, psychopaths, obsessive-compulsives, depressives, and passive-aggressives. Sometimes the line between sanity and insanity is blurred, as is the case with this black satire's protagonist, Mack McMurphy. But what Mack, who has actually conned his way into the mental institution to escape prison work detail, proves is not that laughter has the power to heal but, rather, that it can lift a spirit desperately in need of healing. Mack takes the inmates on a therapeutic fishing trip that reads like fun road literature, and their laughter at fishing mishaps rings out over the lake. It is contagious and therapeutic. More importantly, it gave them a hopeful spirit as it activated endorphins and enhanced respiration, becoming an antidote to apprehension and panic.

Sexuality is also a part of life—even in an institution. Mack arranges for Billy Bibbit, thirty-one but mentally an adolescent controlled by his mother, to lose his virginity to a smuggled-in prostitute during a drunken evening on the ward. Mack's attempt to restore an independence in the men may release some from psychosomatic illness; however, for Billy, things are not that simple. Nurse Ratched, in her zeal to keep things under control, shames him into extreme guilt. Fearful of his mother, he commits

suicide. *Cuckoo Nest* is filled with rich literary references to Melville's *Moby Dick* (good versus evil overtones) and suggests *Billy Budd's* stuttering, innocent protagonist. Christ-like images can also be tracked throughout the novel.

Of the many questions posed in *Cuckoo's Nest*, first and foremost is, who among us is completely sane? And how important are experiencing laughter and maintaining self-respect for the institutionalized? Ethical queries include, would electroshock therapy and lobotomy administered as therapy or punishment be ethical now; and is extreme nonconformity (sometimes manifest as an immigrant's cultural schism) a mental illness? One of the most intriguing parts of the novel is tracing Mack's influence on the Chief's passage out of the fog of schizophrenia.

Cuckoo's Nest is as relevant today as it was in the sixties when it horrified readers. It is arguably the most influential novel of its time and continues to influence twenty-first century medical issues and ethics. As the students read the classic novel, they become immersed in its rich characterization and setting and explore its ideas, helping them to think critically about important issues. Its themes, such as showing how mental illness derives from culture as well as from disease, are important to all of us because we are all patients. Its significance stems from showing how literature has the power to change our society because modern concerns can be anticipated and addressed to varying degrees in literary works. And its lesson is, we have much to learn from the past, which literature encapsulates, and we can never know what the future holds.

The merging of literature and medicine, which William James described in a letter to his brother Henry as two distinct languages and cultures, now gives teachers a fearless way to show their students how they can understand pertinent medical and bioethical issues. Use more

literature and medicine stories in your interdisciplinary classroom. There are many to choose from.

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- For a complete analysis of this story, along with suggested questions for discussion, see:
<http://medicalhumanities.net/chapter.html>
[scroll down to Chapter 4: Illness and Culture.]