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LAYERS OF IMPLICATION IN KEN KESEY'S ONE FLEW OVER
THE CUCKOO'S NEST

After the Second World War American society, the nation's social and cultural climate and literature, just like many other things, changed. In the 1950s, labelled as the 'silent decade', society grew passive, as well as indifferent, as the cohesion and the culture's community-building potential showed a spectacular decline. The confusion of values increased, the sense of community diminished.

The 1960s heralded a sudden rearrangement of priorities and the beginning of an age from which the nation moved to cultural multiplicity, from rationalism to anarchy. For the moderns the world was still knowable and accessible. The post-moderns, the representatives of this new age, which was named post-modern as it followed in the wake of modernism, were confronted with a chronic confusion of values. For them the assured and reassuring definitions, fixed categories were gone. For the moderns it was clear what they were alienated from, but by this time the former central questions became meaningless. The real question for the post-modern writer is this: What do we know about the world and how do we know what we know?

The polarities of the moderns or of any other previous group no longer make sense for the post-modern writer. As a result, he moves beyond the thesis-antithesis-synthesis pattern. He thinks that a synthesis is no longer possible, the world is no longer analogous with the thesis and antithesis pattern of conceptualization, but with chaos. What you get is differences, there is no sum total.

A vocal group in the 1960s of American novelists felt that it was no longer possible to grasp reality, control broke down, the world became an ethical quick-sand. As the traditional approach to reality did not work and reality shocked with new things, a new conception of reality came to be created. This reality becomes totally unrealistic. One of the first writers to put this complex feeling brilliantly was Philip Roth. 'In "Writing American Fiction", an article which appeared in the March 1961 issue of *Commentary*, Philip Roth stated that 'the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality.' Roth thinks that this reality is 'even a kind of embarrassment to one's on meager imagination.'¹ Philip Roth adds that the other

problem the intellectuals of this age must face is that actuality is continually outdoing one's talents, and that culture tosses up figures that are the envy of any novelist.

So fact is becoming more and more fictional. The only way to get out of this situation is to return to the values that can be still preserved for posterity. This world-view does not believe in man as it was so often disillusioned in him. Post-modern literature regards man as a helpless puppet, a clown who is confused in his own sense of identity. The persona of this fiction has one important goal: to survive it all, to wait it out.

Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published in 1962, was at the time one of the most representative novels of post-modern literature. One basic dilemma of the novel is the borderline between sanity and insanity. The distinction between the state of madness (or irrationality) and the state of sanity (rationality) was important not only to Kesey but to a great many intellectuals during the Sixties and Seventies.² On the other hand Kesey has always been interested in human consciousness widened by drugs, in the way the mind works. He has first-hand experience as he worked in a mental institution where he persuaded one doctor to give electroshock therapy to him so that he could describe what McMurphy felt. The story itself takes place in a mental asylum which is a perfect model for the wider social reality. The Combine, which exists only in the mind of the Indian, is the embodiment of an alien power, the aim of which is to fix up mistakes in the patients's mind and to produce 'sane' persons for the outer world.

Kesey, who knows psychopathology very well, is interested in disturbed personalities. The reason why he studied these figures was that he could view society through these characters, and could show the way the combine destroyed personalities. On the other hand the madness (or otherness) of the patients is symptomatic of several problems. In this manner Kesey could attack certain things in American society rather than the entire society itself. Kesey's novel is illustrative of two well-known psychiatric trends. The first is traditional psychiatry, which claims that mental diseases are caused by a malfunction of the brain. These problems are treated with drugs. The second is a new school of humanistic psychiatry, which appeared in the 1950s and 1960s. The representatives of this school claim that a lot of these diseases are of social genesis, so drugs only paralyse patients.

Kesey emphasizes the harm that social problems caused to the members of the asylum, who are best characterized by ontological insecurity, loss of identity, absence of assurance. They have the feeling of being valueless, they are afraid of being related to anybody or anything. The atmosphere of the institution can be characterized by

isolation, sterility, alienation, greyness, de-personalization and de-humanization. The symbology of the novel increasingly reinforces this effect.

Thus the fog-machine, besides being a perfect image, is in integral part of the novel's symbology. On the one hand it is physically expressive of the heavy medication, on the other hand it is the symbol of isolation and escape. Patients think they are lost from view, they can hide. It also shows the effectiveness of McMurphy's work: as the fight between him and Big Nurse proceeds the fog clears in Bromden's head. Lobotomy, the other 'therapy' reminded me of Nazi experiments in brain-washing. The Combine's aim with these kinds of treatment is to destroy personality, as the Institution does not need thinking individuals, but a standardized crowd.

The best representation of the Combine, the embodiment of its ideology is Big Nurse. Her chief methods are group therapy, rules and persecutions on the one hand, and electroshock treatment and lobotomy on the other. As Miles Donald wrote it in his book on *The American Novel*, 'She and her trio of cruel and themselves disturbed - black helpers have reduced the patients to a state of abject subservience. A combination of the petty ... and the great ... keeps the patients as Big Nurse's toys.'³ Her patients become more and more vulnerable as she makes them show up their weakest side and as she takes away their self-confidence. She, being a woman, should be the symbol of life, but she stands for sterility rather than fertility. Her white uniform reinforces this image.

Into this world comes Randle Patrick McMurphy, who at the beginning of the novel is full of vitality, ideas, representing outer life, which is totally different from the one inside. He brings an absolutely new atmosphere to the asylum. His laugh, as Bromden remembers, is "free and loud", and it has been the first laugh the Indian has heard in years. McMurphy, as one critic has observed is aggressively masculine and formidably independent, and as such he wants to reestablish the masculinity and individuality of which the patients of the ward are robbed.⁴ This makes him superior to the others and free from the rules of society. His first actions show his self-interest, but as the story proceeds McMurphy realizes his responsibility for the others. Although his leadership and humor veil the real confrontation, we can feel the impending disaster and the inevitable clash between him and Big Nurse, or Good and Evil.

McMurphy is by nature a born doctor, though his methods are questionable, he gives his mates confidence. He cures Billy Bibbit's Oedipus complex, but Big Nurse pushes the boy back to his complex and Billy commits suicide. At this point it is inevitable that the clash between the two opposing forces, Big Nurse and McMurphy, can only end in the destruction of one of them which is in this case McMurphy.

This is one of the possible layers of implication in the novel. But if we reach down to deeper levels, we find strong and frequent allusions to Christian mythology. The question that might rise here is this: why did Kesey introduce these mythological elements into his novel, in an ostensibly de-mythologizing age, set for anything but myth? We might find several possible answers to this question. First of all, myth always bears an element of nostalgia, yearning for a lost past. It is always a way to escape from an unstable present, in this case from the anarchy of the twentieth century. Myth can offer stability and serve as a unitive strategy in the face of cultural disintegration.

Another reason why Kesey used these symbols is that through them he could create another dimension of his novel which points to classical myths. These ancient myths, as for example, the Bible, are part of the "cultural codes: they are part of the body of knowledge that we must bring to bear in order to understand the works."⁵ The reader who is aware of the 'story' behind the novel understands the parallels, the symbolic correspondences, these all help the receiver to get a more comprehensive understanding of the novel.

Kesey employs Biblical correspondences for various reasons. He sometimes uses direct references to the Bible, but he also employs word-by-word quotations. In some cases he wants to reinforce certain parts of the novel by relating them to a well-known cultural document. A good example for this is the fishing expedition. Kesey just hints at a number of things that gain their meaning when we put the missing pieces together from the Bible. In this case he echoes a story in the New Testament, i.e. Luke 5. Christ and his disciples go fishing. Simon and John do not catch anything, but when Christ joins them the nets are filled with fish. Here McMurphy, just like Christ, is not fishing. He is shown as a Messiah, his fellows are the disciples. Kesey refers to them as "McMurphy and his dozen people". This complex picture is intervoven with the symbology of water. Against the sterility of modern life water is a life-giving element, fish living in water are a symbol of fertility and life. In this case this incident prefigures later events, and it is suggested to the reader who is familiar with the ending of the original story, that something similar will happen here. This feeling is reinforced even more by other remarks of McMurphy, as for example, 'It is my cross', 'anointest my head with ointment', 'do I get a crown of thorn?'. These references bear several meanings. On the one hand they foreshadow McMurphy's impending tragedy, on the other hand they help Kesey to create a comic, almost grotesque atmosphere. Although McMurphy is aware of his fate, he is joking about it, he despises the black helpers with his behaviour. He plays the comic role of a clown and the more serious one of the Messiah at the same time.

There are examples for the demythologization of the original story as well. The aim of the writer with these is to use mythology as an ironical device and to show the preposterous quality of our lives. A very good example for this demythologization is the description of the Last Supper scene as an orgy, lacking all the elements one would expect. Yet another interesting device is the evoking of prefigurations in the reader which may or may not be fulfilled later. A very good example for this is the picture of Ellis crucified overloaded with electricity, echoing Christ on the cross. Although one might expect it is not Ellis who is crucified at the end of the novel, but McMurphy. A further example of unfulfilled expectations is the lobotomy of McMurphy. Everything points towards his death. If one follows the original story, he must be killed. But the Combine cannot kill him, because they cannot afford to produce a martyr, they have to show their strength by ruining McMurphy's personality. In this case the myth is weakened by the novelist's version.

Kesey employs a controlled system of references to mythological figures all through the novel. Harding, who becomes the leader after McMurphy, is a Peter figure, while Chief Bromden, who sleeps in the neighbouring bed is a John figure. From a WASP point of view Bromden is born with a flaw: he is an Indian. But McMurphy teaches him that being an Indian is not a fault. In a larger sense Bromden is the person who is to be redeemed, who is saved in the end, and who, as the best disciple, may preserve and hand down the teachings of his Master. From another point of view Bromden's figure is the adaptation of American national myths. He represents the stereotyped figure of enslaved strength⁶, whose victory is the victory of the natural man. Billy is a Judas figure, the Last Supper is followed by his suicide. He is McMurphy's favourite disciple, who in the end betrays his master. His example shows that this world turns people into as many Judases. Even these random instances convincingly prove that there is a strictly controlled correspondence between the elements of the novel and some Biblical prefigurations.

McMurphy's victory over Big Nurse is total. She is exposed to other people as just another person. She is reminded that she is just a human being, and hereby she realizes that she cannot manipulate the patients any longer. This is something no one would have believed at the beginning of the novel. As Bromden describes their meeting shortly after McMurphy's arrival, 'She is too big to be beaten She's lost a little battle here today, but it's a minor battle in a big war that she's been winning and that she'll go on winning She'll go on winning, just like the Combine, because she has all the power of the Combine behind her.'⁷ But McMurphy wins battle after battle and for defending her power the only solution for Big Nurse is his destruction. Although he is physically

defeated by the Combine, he is a potential Savior to his fellows. This is a typical situation in which neither side can win completely. McMurphy in a sense is a winner: he has managed to create the spirit of resistance in the others, although the help he has given the inmates destroys him. And Big Nurse is a winner, too, although hers is not the kind of victory she wanted.

Through McMurphy's help Bromden becomes his own self again, he is cured. Before this would happen Bromden represents the social and historical paranoia of the Indian race's persecution complex. His deaf-and-dumbness is a social symbol for being an Indian. Towards the end of the novel, as Bromden's head begins to clear, the fog-machine stops. Momentarily he escapes the Combine, he flees to Canada. He manages to break out of the cuckoo's nest, and while McMurphy is crucified, Bromden, the best disciple is redeemed.

But Kesey takes away the optimism of the novel. The Combine is the whole world, and just as the organization in Kafka's *The Trial*, it can reach after you. The novel was said to be the follower of several traditions in American literature. It was called the 'new American Gothic novel', Big Nurse being a monster from Frankenstein. It was called a new Western as well as a parody of the Western, McMurphy being an anti-intellectual against an over-intellectualized technocratic world.

But I think that this novel is written mostly in the Huck Finn tradition, McMurphy being the son of nature, "the" non-conformist who is escaping corruption.

NOTES

1. Irving Malin, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" in: Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest : Text and Criticism*. Edited by John C. Pratt. New York: The Viking Press, 1976. p. 429.
2. Abádi Nagy Zoltán: "An Interview with Raymond Federman". *Modern Fiction Studies*. Vol. 34, No. 2, (Summer 1988) p. 165.
3. Miles Donald, *The American Novel in the Twentieth Century*, Barnes and Noble, 1981. p. 129.
4. Ibid., p. 130.
5. John C. White, "Mythological Fiction and the Reading Process" in: *Literary Criticism and Myth*. (Yearbook of Comparative Criticism) edited by Joseph P. Strelka. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980. p. 84.
6. Miles Donald, op. cit. p. 131.
7. John C. Pratt, ed., op. cit. p. 109.