One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest
Reading Guide

As you read, please answer the following questions on paper or use a Google Doc.
* If you use a Google Doc, send to amanda.sharp2@knoxschools.org by Aug. 9th. Otherwise, bring the hard copy to class on Aug. 9th.
* You can purchase the book on Amazon for about $9.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest: pages 3-26
Everyone at the mental hospital believes that the narrator, Chief Bromden, has two handicaps. What are they?

Evidently, it is a difficult task for the orderlies to perform what act of hygiene on Bromden?

McMurphy declares, almost as soon as he enters the dayroom that is a fool for what? He states that he is a fool for a certain vice, a certain type of risky behavior. What is that vice?

Who, according to Bromden’s narration, is more sick, the acutes or the chronics? Which group is essentially beyond treatment?

When McMurphy asks “who’s the bull goose loony here? What is he actually asking? Note: he’s not asking who’s the craziest.

What part of McMurphy’s body has a long, wine-colored scar?

Analysis
What purpose might it serve Kesey to have his narrator pretend to be deaf and mute?

Why might there be so much machine-imagery in Bromden’s narration. It's clear that there are not actually cogs and wheels in the nurse’s bag, there are not actually “substitute machines among the razors, there are not fog machines in the mental health ward—so what are we to make of this imagery motif?
Bromden refers several times to the combine. What might he mean by the combine?

Bromden ends the first chapter with “But it’s the truth even if it didn’t happen.” What might he mean?

What do we think about the fact that the nurse leaves a log book out and encourages the patients to write information about one another? Does this seem like good medical practice or something else? Either way, fully explain and support your answer.

What is Bromden describing with the word installation; he discusses the case of Ruckly, who had an installation a while back and is a failure. Bromden then goes on to say that they do the installations better now, they go in through the eyes?

Consider how oppressed and sterile the ward has been described before McMurphy arrives. Then consider how McMurphy is described. Make a prediction now about what is going to happen as a result of this combination.
What is the primary characteristic, according to Bromden, does the nurse look for when she is hiring orderlies (the African American men, in this book)?

What Acute refuses to take the pills given to him and is brutally drugged and taken from the ward by technicians for possible “brain work”? McMurphy, Bromden, Harding, Taber, Bibbit, Cheswick, Scanlon or Ruckly??

What is the name, or term, that Bromden uses for the man who gives tours of the ward to school teachers?

Evidently, Nurse Ratched feels slightly threatened by members of what occupation? She uses her sterile cold personality to drive most of them away and finely settles on one named Spivey.

What kind of group, or organization, is Bromden part of when he, in a flashback, visits California?

Analysis

Based on the Bromden's flashbacks, what elements from his history do we know? List at least four things.

What are some connotations or ideas implied by Bromden's repeated references and flashbacks including haze, fog, or mist?

Based on all the details in Bromden's description, how might we characterize, in detail, nurse Ratched's style, goals, motivations, and philosophy?

So far, what are some themes presented in the text?

What crime has McMurphy been accused, but not convicted because the victim would not testify?

What did he win a medal for in the war?

Pete Bancini interrupts the meeting both in the present and in a flashback with what statement. He repeats the same statement over and over.

Who, evidently, is the center of analysis and criticism during the group meeting? Which patient takes the most psychological abuse from the other patients? McMurphy, Bromden, Harding, Taber, Bibbit, Cheswick, Scanlon, Martini, or Ruckly?
After the group meeting, McMurphy makes an analogy between the behavior of the patients during the meeting and the behavior of an animal during an event that might kill all the animals in the group. What animal does he use in this analogy?

Who keeps calling McMurphy McMurry?

Analysis

Cuckoo’s Nest was first published in 1962. Consider the dynamic between Nurse Ratched and her patients. What ideas, relevant to 1962, are implied or symbolized by the dynamic between this nurse and her patients?

What does the reason for his medal suggest about this story?

What do you think about the therapy? Is it helpful or not? Explain your answer with some specific examples of what the therapy might cause to happen—either good or bad.

Here’s a quote about the therapy session: “…The group can help the guy by showing him where he’s out of place; how society is what decides who’s sane and who isn’t, so you got to measure up” (48).

Is this true? Does society decide who is sane and who isn’t? Support your answer with some specific examples.

What’s Kesey suggesting about Harding by repeatedly describing his hands as pretty, or dove-like, on page 58, among other places?

Why do you think Harding argues with McMurphy when McMurphy suggests that the therapy is not helpful? Fully explain you answer.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest: pages 61-75

What, according to Harding, might the Nurse call her friend the supervisor and accuse a doctor of? What, in Harding's scenario, would she suggest about a doctor she didn't like?

According to Harding, the nurse has known the hospital supervisor since the 1930s. Where, according to this story, did they meet?

According to Harding, he, and many of the other men in the ward are really what kind of animal?
Also, according to Harding, while he and most of the men on the ward may be one kind of animal (rabbits), McMurphy might very well be a different kind of animal. What kind of animal does Harding theorize McMurphy to be?

What is EST, according to Harding?

What wager does McMurphy make with the other patients?

**Analysis**

What prediction can we make about how the wager will turn out? Explain your answer.

How do we view McMurphy now? We know he has a criminal history and that he has been convicted of statutory rape. Are we offended by him? Do we want him to win or lose the wager? If we want him to win, if we are, for the most part, on his side, why? What elements of characterization has Kesey used to endear McMurphy to us?

Is McMurphy smart? Fully explain your answer.

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**One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest: pages 76-91**

This passage opens up with a flashback. In the flashback a famous person visits the ward and is captured and kept there for six years. Who is this visitor?

What, specifically, do the acutes do with the TV to get a better picture?

McMurphy becomes upset about the noise in the ward and had a discussion with Harding about it, which ends in Harding reminding McMurphy of the bet. What is the noise in question?

When the swing-shift nurse pulls her crucifix out, something is thrown into the air and caught by McMurphy. What is it?

What kind of animal is printed all over McMurphy’s underwear? He says it was given to him by a girl at Oregon State—a literary major.

According to Bromden, this is the first time in a long time that he has gone to sleep without what?
Analysis

What ideas are evoked, or brought to the surface, in Bromden's terrible dream? What, evidently, are some things that he fears? List as many as possible.

While Bromden has had a nightmare that includes Blastic being torn apart, Blastic has actually died. What does this tell us about Bromden's hallucinations?

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest: pages 91-101

Who is the chief surprised to find awake so early?

What is locked in the cabinet that McMurphy wants?

What does McMurphy use to brush his teeth?

What does McMurphy claim was stolen from him?

What kind of animal is on McMurphy's underwear?

Does the nurse get angry in front of the patients? Does McMurphy seem to win the bet?

Analysis

What new information do we learn about Bromden's past?

Is McMurphy smart to toy with the nurse and the orderlies as he does in this section?

Now that we've seen a little more of McMurphy, do we think he's only out to help himself, or is he interested in the wellbeing of others?

How about the nurse? Do we think she is most concerned with the wellbeing of the patients? Explain your answer.
One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest: pages 102-116

McMurphy tells a fantastical story about how he and another patient of the ward went out once, met and romanced some young women. Who, according to this fictional story, is that other patient from the ward? Bromden, Harding, Taber, Bibbit, Cheswick, Scanlon, Martini, or Ruckly?

McMurphy offers to steal some food for an employee of the ward. What kind of food does he offer to steal?

McMurphy places a wager on whether or not he can hit a clock with what kind of projectile? Specifically, what does he try to hit the clock with?

What reason does the nurse give that the music must be kept very loud?

We know that McMurphy actually came up with the idea that the acutes should use the tub room during the day, but who proposes the idea during group meeting?

What board-game were they playing in the day room for 3 days?

Analysis

What does it tell us that McMurphy gets the doctor to propose his idea during the group meeting? What traits is Kesey giving McMurphy here?

It’s clear that McMurphy has learned how to make others do what he wants—he, himself, notes that he learned to alter his own personality to meet the needs of the customers as a carnival worker. Is this ability to get others to do what he wants a good thing or a bad thing—at least as far as Kesey is presenting it? Explain your answer.

Has McMurphy won the bet? Has he succeeded in making the nurse lose her composure? Explain your answer.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest: pages 117-129

According to Bromden, at the beginning of this passage, McMurphy only gets mad once. What does he get mad about?

Only one other patient joins McMurphy in voting for the World Series. Who is it? McMurphy, Bromden, Harding,
Taber, Bibbit, Cheswick, Scanlon, Martini, or Ruckly?

What did McMurphy want to take a vote on in the meeting?

What act of strength do they bet on?

Who wins the bet?

What does McMurphy’s hands look like after the bet?

Why does McMurphy feel superior to the others, even after he fails? What does he say to the men angrily in his own defense?

**Analysis**

When McMurphy wagers that he can lift the panel does he actually believe he can do it? Explain your answer.

What might the metaphor be in McMurphy's lifting the control panel?

Then why does he attempt to do it? Explain your answer.

What does it tell us about McMurphy that he places a bet when he pretty much knows he will lose—that he is willing to lose all of his past winnings just to make a point?

Based on the events in this chapter, what predictions can we make about the rest of the novel?

What significance is there to “Old Rawler” castrating himself on page 129? How does this action work with the sequence of events around it?

**One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest: pages 130-145 (end part one)**

According to Bromden’s memory of arriving in Europe for the war, how did soldiers orient themselves when they got off the plane while the fog machines were running? In other words, how did soldiers know which direction to go as they got off the plane?

Sometimes, according to Bromden’s memory of arriving in Europe during the war, you would be walking around in the fog and suddenly encounter something that was so clear, so vivid that you would look away. What does he describe encountering in the fog?

She tells the doctor on the phone that she would like to have a staff meeting. What does she want to discuss at the staff meeting?
Why, according to Billy Bibbit, did he quit college and the ROTC?

Name any of the things that Colonel Matterson equates with America in his lecture to Bromden in the fog.

Scanlon backs up McMurphy in the meeting and seconds his request for a vote on the world series. The nurse notes that Scanlon will miss something that he really likes to watch. What does he really like to watch?

Which person makes the 21st vote for the world series election—who is the tie-breaker that is not counted by the nurse?

Analysis

Based on his extended flashbacks in this passage, what new elements of Bromden's past can we add to what we know?

Now that we've read a few more chapters, what might we say this book is really about?

Does McMurphy win or lose the wager over whether or not he can cause Nurse Ratched to lose her composure?

What emotions does Kesey want the reader to experience when McMurphy causes the nurse to lose her composure?

Now that we are finished with section/book one of the novel, how do we like the book? Good book?

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest: pages 149-166

Which patient ends up in the staff room while the staff is discussing McMurphy?

One of the residents suggests something in the meeting that is met with disdain by the other residents. What unpopular thing does this resident suggest?

Eventually, what do all the participants in the staff meeting—except the nurse—agree to do with McMurphy?

When the nurse posts work assignments after the meeting, what is McMurphy's job?

McMurphy writes the nurse a message in backwards text. Where does he put it for her to read?

What kind of animal does Bromden watch out the window of the ward one night?

Analysis

What seems to be Kesey's message in the dynamic between the residents, the doctor, and the nurse during the staff meeting?

What element of dramatic irony (when the reader knows something one of the characters does not know) has
Kesey included? What thing do we, the readers, now know that a character in the text, McMurphy, does not know?

How long does McMurphy think he has to be in the hospital?

what purpose might Kesey have in including the closing passage of this section? The passage is Bromden's assumption that the nurse with the birth mark tries to clean herself of the birthmark each night and rubs her crucifix on it and prays each night in hopes the birthmark with disappear, but it doesn't.

Follow up—what other marks can we find on the characters that make them stand out in a way that society-the combine-does not accept?

What inference can we make about the way the nurse allows all the psychologists to theorize about how McMurphy should be sent do the disturbed ward and then after everyone else has spoken what they think she wants to hear, she states that she disagrees with all of them and that McMurphy should stay where he is? What advantage might this move give her down the road?

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One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest: pages 167-181

What has the nurse confiscated from the men that becomes the subject of argument during the group meeting?

What bad news does McMurphy get from the lifeguard at the pool—what thing did he not know about that has a big impact on him?

Why does McMurphy stop confronting the nurse in this section of the novel?

Who is taken to the disturbed ward due to an emotional outburst during the meeting?

According to Fredrickson, what is the negative side effect of the “Dilantin he is told to take for epilepsy?”

What part of his body does Sefelt lose as a result of a seizure?

How does Cheswick Die?

Analysis

What is the significance of McMurphy's stepping over the man with Hydrocephalus at the swimming pool. McMurphy says, “Let him lay...Maybe he don't like deep water” (172). Explain your answer.

What inference can we make about the way the nurse allows all the psychologists to theorize about how McMurphy should be sent do the disturbed ward and then after everyone else has spoken what they think she wants to hear, she states that she disagrees with all of them and that McMurphy should stay where he is? What advantage might this move give her down the road?

Is Cheswick a suicide, or is his death accidental? If so, what whose fault is his suicide? Why has he committed suicide? Explain your answer.

Now that we've seen a few meetings, can we find some sort of analogy between the meetings and some institution or scenario in the real world? Is Kesey offering a metaphor here?
To whom does McMurphy, but not Harding, lend a cigarette?

What technical detail is McMurphy shocked and dismayed to find out about Harding, Bibbit, and a number of the other acutes?

What, according to the nurse, is the punishment for the behavior of the acutes immediately before the staff meeting three weeks earlier?

What does McMurphy break with his hand?

Why does he do what he does with his hand?

Analysis

Is the nurse genuine at the top of page 200, is it likely that the illness of the acutes was caused by the lenience of their parents and, is it likely that more discipline will help them? Explain your answer.

What does is say about McMurphy that he explicitly stated that he now understood he has to behave because he is committed, but then breaks the window?

Make an inference as to why does Kesey include the scene where McMurphy buys three cartons of cigarettes?

Did McMurphy plan, far in advance, to break the window? Explain your answer.

Bromden's narrative states that he was just about to talk to McMurphy when McMurphy went into the canteen to buy cigarettes. Is the Chief going to eventually talk, and if so, what would that do to the narrative?

What is the purpose of the ringing in Bromden's ears? The ringing starts when he sees McMurphy struggling between his instinct to confront power and to conform to authority, and stops when McMurphy breaks the window.
Who do the patients on the ward have a basketball game with?

How does the window get broken a third time?

What kind of trip does McMurphy propose, and get approval for, for the men on the ward?

What is the subject of the newspaper articles that the nurse starts posting to the bulletin board?

In the Chief's flashback, what kind of animal are the men in his tribe spearing?

What does the aid clean off the chief's bed in the middle of the night?

What are Bromden's first spoken words in the novel?

Who, during the night, does McMurphy ask to come on the fishing trip?

The Chief and McMurphy strike a deal. The chief will lift up the control panel in the tub room for McMurphy. What will McMurphy do for the Chief?

Analysis

What is the purpose of Bromden's flashback in this section?

So, what more do we now know about Bromden's past?

What does it mean that McMurphy is going to blow the chief back up to full size?

Will this be good for Bromden, or is McMurphy being reckless with Bromden?

Is Bromden right when he says that the combine—society—starts breaking a man down as soon as it sees that the man is strong?

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest: pages 225-258

End Part Three

When Candy shows up what is the problem? In other words, why can't the guys go fishing with only Candy?

Who, from the staff, does McMurphy convince to go with them?
McMurphy tells a man on the way that the men are dangerous and on their way to San Quentin. At what kind of business are they when he says this?

Why does the boat's captain/owner not go on the trip?

What is the captain worried about? Why won't he let anyone board the ship?

What's significant about the house the men visit on their way back to the asylum?

How does McMurphy appear to the chief at the end of the chapter?

**Analysis**

What effect on the men does the boat trip have? Explain your answer.

McMurphy takes the men on a risky boat trip—a trip that includes stealing the boat. Some might argue that this is too big a risk for men with mental and health problems. Is it? How much risk is acceptable in life? When is danger not worth the risk and risk not worth the rewards?

What seems to be Kesey's dominant message in the boat passage?

Why is a boat a good device for this passage? In other words, what themes or ideas can Kesey suggest with a boat that might be more difficult to suggest with another kind of adventure?

Bromden has taken to describing himself and others as being blown up or deflated. What exactly does he mean? Fully expand on your answer.

How does the nurse's practices affect the patients within Bromden's Blown up/Deflated metric? And, is her tactic healthy?

Is there something to Bromden's idea? Is it true that society tries, to some extend, to keep individuals from becoming overly "large?"

How might the fishing trip be seen as religious symbolism? Explain your answer.

How might the fact that McMurphy's friends are prostitutes be seen as religious symbolism?

**One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest: pages 261-275**

What big bet does McMurphy win in this passage?

Why does the chief almost cry?
Who is traumatized by the soap in the shower?

Who does McMurphy fight in the shower?

Who eventually helps McMurphy?

**Analysis**

What might the relevance be that Bromden describes McMurphy as tired at the end of the previous section, and then again describes him as tired when McMurphy intervenes in George’s behalf during the de-lousing episode? What inferences can we make about McMurphy’s characterization and character development here?

What is the relevance of Bromden’s observation that the cigarette burns on Billy's hands have all healed up? Note: this observation takes place just as the men discuss whether or not McMurphy is acting purely on self interest or not.

How likely is it that the men actually developed a lice infestation while on the fishing trip?

If not, then why de-lice them? Explain your answer.

McMurphy taunts Washington with racist language. Does it appear that McMurphy is openly racist or he is merely trying to initiate a fight? Explain your answer.

**One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest: pages 276-288**

The nurse in disturbed gives a cigarette to McMurphy. What does she give to Bromden?

Not long after arriving at the disturbed ward, both McMurphy and Bromden are offered something that they refuse. What do they refuse?

McMurphy is given an option between electroshock therapy and something else. What is the other option? What thing can he do to avoid shock therapy?

Who is it that tells Bromden the rhyme that includes “One flew over the cuckoo’s nest?” His father; his mother; his uncle; his grandmother; his grandfather; the woman who lives with the neighbors?
Bromden states that he comes out of the post-electroshock therapy more rapidly than ever before because he does something that he has never done before. What does he do this time that makes him come out of the haze and fog more rapidly?

Analysis

What purpose does it serve in the novel that Bromden and McMurphy go to the disturbed ward? Further, what purpose does it serve to see that the people on the disturbed ward are in fact, quite mentally ill?

What purpose does it serve in the novel that the small, Japanese nurse is so kind to McMurphy and Bromden?

What is the relevance of McMurphy’s having been in a Chinese prison camp during the Korean War?

What Symbolism do we see in the passage?

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest: pages 289-309

Where do all of the men hide (initially, including Turkle) when the supervisor comes onto the ward to investigate the lights?

What notable thing happens to Sefelt while the acutes and the two girls are drinking? This is very shocking to one of the girls.

Who goes into the seclusion room and stays there until the morning shift arrives at the ward?

What do the men mix with the liquor and wine the girls bring?

Why don’t McMurphy and the girls leave before the morning orderlies and the Big Nurse arrive?

Analysis

What does it mean that McMurphy offers to or tries to bring everyone when he leaves? Does this mean he has their best interest in mind or that he has his own self interest in mind?
In the context of the novel, is this night a healthy thing for the acutes, or not?

**One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest: pages 310-325 (End of Novel)**

What happens to Sefelt and Fredrickson in the couple of weeks after McMurphy attacks the nurse?

What does the Nurse threaten to do that terrifies Bibbit?

What staff member seems to catch the blame for the events that lead to Billy's death?

Specifically, how does Bromden leave the hospital?

Bromden hitches a ride going north and tells the driver that he does what for a living?

**Analysis**

As the men return from the fishing trip, Bromden notes that McMurphy looks tired, and then several times after that, right up to the morning that Billy dies, Bromden repeats this. What purpose does Kesey have in including this idea that McMurphy is becoming exhausted?

While Bromden waits for McMurphy to react to the news of Billy's death and to the Nurse's accusations that McMurphy is at fault, Bromden notes that “we couldn’t make him stop because we were the one who were making him do it.” Is that true? Is McMurphy acting in response to the needs of the patients? Explain your answer and offer some concrete examples to support your answer.

What does it mean that the three orderlies don't intervene when McMurphy attacks the nurse?

What purpose does it serve that Bromden makes an analogy of the sound a hunted raccoon, cougar, or lynx makes just before they die to the sound McMurphy makes when he is pulled from the nurse?

What message is there in the fact that the doctor does not resign when asked, but instead tells the hospital that they will have to fire him if they want him to go?

Why does Bromden smother McMurphy?

Note the use of language as Bromden smothers McMurphy: “The big, hard body had a tough grip on life. It fought a long time against having it taken away…” (322). Why not call McMurphy by name?

What it the right thing for Bromden to do—to smother McMurphy? Explain your answer.

When he leaves the institute, is Bromden cured? Is a sane man heading home?

If he is cured, then what is the ultimate message in the book? Explain your answer.

On balance, is this a sad story or happy story, or is it something else? Explain your answer.