

## One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

### Discussion Questions

#### Part 1 9-128

##### 1.1

- A. Does the author emphasize subjectivity or objectivity from the beginning of the novel? How so? What is the effect? Consider the line: "But it's the truth, even if it didn't happen (13).
- B. Consider the narrative POV: what is the narrator like? What is he paranoid about? Is he even paranoid? How else might we characterize him and his biases?
- C. What is the meaning of 'black boys' within the context of the novel? How does or doesn't race factor into their role in the novel and the psychiatric hospital?
- D. What is the relationship between the narrator's internal and external?
- E. What do you make of the hunting metaphor at the end of the first chapter?

##### 1.2

- F. What is the relationship between behavior and drugs at the opening of chapter 2?
- G. What do you make of McMurphy's first impression? What does Chief Bromden think of McMurphy, or how does he view him?

##### 1.3

- H. What kind of culture is established in the ward? Between the Acutes and the Chronics? What about the log book at the nurse's station?
- I. What do you think of Chief Bromden's explanation regarding why the Acutes and the Chronics don't mix? (bottom of page 21)
- J. What do you make of Chief Bromden's explanation of 'machines,' 'combines,' etc.? Is he crazy? Does this make him sound crazy? Why? What is not 'crazy'?
- K. How is Harding characterized? What do you think of him, especially compared to McMurphy? What about their first interaction?
- L. McMurphy says "...But you know how society persecutes a dedicated man" (24). What do you make of this statement? How is 'society' a theme in this novel?
- M. What do you make of McMurphy's and Chief Bromden's first interaction?
- N. What does the dialogue at the close of this chapter between McMurphy and Chief Bromden reveal? About the setting? About their characters? Society?

##### 1.4

- O. How is the nurse characterized at the beginning of this chapter? Consider the following dialogue from her: "...that is exactly what the new patient is planning: to take over. He is what we call a 'manipulator,' Miss Flinn, a man who will use everyone and everything to his own ends" (29).
- P. Chief Bromden elaborates more on the 'combine' and the 'machines.' What do you make of it here? (Page 30)
- Q. Consider the descriptions of the 'black boys' in this chapter (~page 32). What do you make of it? How does race factor into these descriptions? Is our narrator racist?
- R. Consider the mechanization and order the narrator describes in this chapter. What is he attempting to communicate? That's what it 'says,' what does it 'mean'?
- S. What do you make of the 'order' on page 34? Where everyone's tics and compulsions are ordered by the machines/combine (according to the narrator)?
- T. How is kindness used as a form of manipulation in this chapter? (page 35?)
- U. How does the nurse react to younger residents? Why? (page 37)
- V. What do you make of that whole cotton mill episode in this chapter? What racial context should we remember when reading sections like this?
- W. What do you make of the whole Max Taber story toward the end of this chapter? Why does Bromden connect the Cotton Mill to the psychiatric hospital?

##### 1.5

- X. This is the first meeting that we witness in this novel. What do you make of it? How does Nurse Ratched run it? How does McMurphy approach this first meeting?

- Y. What do you think about the idea of 'therapeutic community' as a reflection of society? (page 48)
- Z. How does shame factor into these meetings? How is it used and by whom?
- AA. What do you make of Pete's backstory? What about his 'born dead' speech? What does his speech and his whole situation suggest about society, conformity, etc.?
- BB. What do you make of the 'pecking party' analogy? (page 55)
- CC. Consider this quote on page 57: "If you're up against a guy who wants to win by making you weaker instead of making himself stronger, then watch for his knee, he's gonna go for your vitals"?
- DD. Why does Harding so staunchly defend Nurse Ratched's methods even though he was the target of them? Why does he change his mind on the next page? (page 58-59)
- EE. What do you think of Harding's claim that Dr. Spivey is "exactly like the rest of us" (59)?
- FF. What do you think of Harding's claim that "We are victims of a matriarchy here" (59)?
- GG. Consider the extended rabbit analogy. What do you make of Harding's quote: "we'd be rabbits wherever we were -- we're all in here because we can't *adjust* to our rabbithood... I simply need the nurse to make me *happy* with my role" (61)?
- HH. What does the procedure for obedience (essentially) on pages 64-65 suggest about the reality of the psychiatric hospital?
- II. Weird line: "There's your Vanishing American, a six-foot-eight sweeping machine, scared of its own shadow" (65). What do you make of it?
- JJ. How is sex seen from the eyes of McMurphy, Harding, and seemingly the other men? Pay special attention to pages 66-67, or how they talk about having sex with Nurse Ratched.

#### 1.6

- KK. What the hell is Santa doing in this dang book?!
- LL. Bromden occasionally goes into spurts of narration explaining his own subjective experiences, especially with the drugs and sleep. Consider the descriptions on page 71, regarding the plastic air and more. What do you make of it? Consider what he says. Now tell me what he MEANS?
- MM. What does the cigarette card game in this chapter suggest about McMurphy's character? What is he doing to the men's confidence? Is it illusion or reality? Does it matter? (page 75).
- NN. How does the nurse with the birthmark react to McMurphy? Why? What does this suggest about the relationship between men and women?
- OO. Bromden finally reacts to his environment at the end of this chapter. Why?

#### 1.7

- PP. So this chapter is... an adventure. Try to pull something out of it and tell me what it means, the best you can.
- QQ. How does this chapter mold the reader's perception of Bromden? How does that perception then mold the rest of the narrative?
- RR. Consider the last line of the hallucination: "But if they don't exist, how can a man see them?" (82). What does this line suggest about reality, truth, subjectivity, and more? How does this all factor in with individuality, sanity, and other key themes in this novel?

#### 1.8

- SS. How does McMurphy's singing challenge the Nurse's power? Why?
- TT. What does Chief Bromden's flashback regarding the geese suggest about the nature of change and institutions?
- UU. At the end of this chapter, why is it important (is it even important?) that McMurphy's body is "manly"?
- VV. What happens to Chief Bromden's senses at the end of this chapter?

#### 1.9

- WW. What do you make of the 'penis' and masculinity jokes at the beginning of this chapter?
- XX. How does the nurse use 'selfishness' and 'sharing' and community to undermine

McMurphy?

YY. How does McMurphy challenge the Nurse using the doctor in this chapter? What was the nurse prepared to do?

ZZ. Consider the following line at the close of this chapter: "I know there's no real losing for me [the Nurse]" (101). What do you make of it?

AAA. What does the 'fog' represent or mean outside of Bromden's reality?

**1.10**

BBB. What is the purpose of the monopoly game? How does McMurphy play it?

**1.11**

CCC. How do the other Acutes react to McMurphy's call to watch the World Series? Why? Why is Billy stuck believing in the futility of their actions?

DDD. How does McMurphy treat Fredrickson in this chapter and what does this reveal about his character?

EEE. What do you make of McMurphy attempting to lift the large console at the end of this chapter? What does this action symbolize or represent?

**1.12**

FFF. Another one of Bromden's hallucinations. What do you make of it? The painting?

**1.13 & 1.14**

GGG. What is the association between safety and submission?

HHH. The motif of castration has a strong connection to the theme of masculinity. Explain.

**1.15**

III. More fog. What does this mean? How are people behaving and why?

JJJ. Bromden seems to connect with Colonel Matterson in this chapter. He says "You're making sense, old man, a sense of your own" (120). What do you make of this?

KKK. What is Billy Bibbit's mother like?

LLL. What is the relationship between the past and the present for Bromden?

MMM. What does the voting incident suggest about the Nurse? About institutions?

NNN. How might democracy and laws be a form of tyranny?

OOO. Why does Chief Bromden lift his arm? How might this be a risky or dangerous move?

PPP. Why do all the men join McMurphy at the closing of this chapter? Why is this the climax of this part?

## Part 2 129-173

**2.1**

A. How do the doctors attempt to one-up each other? How do they, in a way, control each other?

B. Why does the Nurse refuse to put McMurphy into disturbed? How does she simultaneously argue that he is insane and that he is not insane? How does she view men, in general?

**2.2**

C. Consider the lines regarding the Nurse's breasts in the opening of this chapter: "nature had tagged her with those outsized badges of femininity, just like she was above him, and sex, and everything else that's weak and of the flesh." What do these lines suggest about the Nurse's perspective on sexuality? Sin? Vice? Human behavior?

D. How does McMurphy counter his appearance in terms of behavior? What does this suggest about masculinity?

E. How does Bromden become more conscious of his surroundings? Why?

F. How and why does Bromden describe a dog in this chapter? (at night)

G. What do you make of the birthmarked nurse?

**2.3**

H. What does the opening dialogue regarding being alone (between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy) suggest about society?

I. How does McMurphy's interaction with the lifeguard influence and change him? What does the lifeguard's story suggest about society?

J. Does Cheswick's death mean anything?

**2.4**

K. How would you describe the description of Sefelt's seizure at the opening of this chapter? How might this be a reality check for the reader and McMurphy?

**2.5 & 2.6**

L. What do you think of Harding's wife? How about how Harding talks to her?

M. How does McMurphy challenge Harding?

N. What do you make of the line (from McMurphy): "All I know is this: nobody's very big in the first place, and it looks to me like everybody spends their whole life tearing everybody else down" (159).

**2.7**

O. Why is EST considered a 'cure' or a treatment to begin with? Under what conditions is it an 'effective' treatment? What does this suggest about society?

P. What is the relationship between society and the Nurse? How and why does society empower the Nurse?

Q. How does Harding's experience with EST explain Bromden's narrative style?

R. What do you make of McMurphy's claims regarding the Nurse and how she is not the primary problem of the institution?

S. What do you think of the conflict brewing between McMurphy and Harding? Is Harding (along with the other Acutes) using McMurphy?

T. Why do so many of the Acutes voluntarily stay?

**2.8**

U. What do you think of Bromden's descriptions of McMurphy toward the middle of this chapter? (the calm before the storm, so to speak)

V. Why and how does McMurphy snap? What does this suggest about his mindset? What has McMurphy realized and how do you think he attends to approach the situation?

### Part 3 174-218

**3.1**

A. How and why has the doctor begun "muscle-flexing" to the nurse?

B. What keeps happening to the window and how does this affect the power dynamics of the hospital?

C. What is up with the basketball games? How is this connected to masculinity and power?

D. How does the Nurse fight back against McMurphy? What is her primary tool for control?

E. Consider Bromden's flashback. Why did the white men ignore him? Consider his explanation and your own.

F. How do white people treat native American people in this novel? Is this accurate, or is Bromden elevating the injustices?

G. How does McMurphy finally get Bromden to laugh? Why does it work? What does this mean about Bromden?

H. What do you make of McMurphy's story about working on the farms himself? What is his lesson to Bromden about staying silent?

I. What do you make of Bromden's description of his mother being five feet and yet bigger than his dad and him?

J. What do you make of Bromden's quote: "What can you pay for the way a man lives?" (187)

K. According to Bromden, what are society's methods for execution?

**3.2**

L. What do you make of George and his fishing history? Why is he in the psychiatric hospital and does this really seem like a good place for him that will help him?

M. What do you make of Candy and her introduction to the psychiatric ward? Why is she uncomfortable and how has society preloaded her expectations?

N. What do you make of the doctor and his quick change of mind (regarding the car) after a conversation with Candy?

- O. Consider the power dynamics at the gas station. What does the whole event and conversation reveal about society? About McMurphy? Is society really civilized?
- P. How do the other fishermen react to Candy? How does she react to them? What is the relationship between shame, judgment, guilt, sexuality, etc.?
- Q. Consider the men (and Candy) fishing. Do they need McMurphy? What does the whole boating experience suggest about the men's ability to function or their sanity?
- R. What do you think of Candy on the boat and how the men treat her? When do the men treat her with respect? When she shows what kind of characteristics?
- S. Why does McMurphy laugh? What do you make of Bromden's explanation of it?
- T. What do you think of the Doctor and the fish he caught? How has he changed and what has caused that change?
- U. How do the people on the dock respond to the men after they come back from the trip?
- V. Why is McMurphy so depressed or sorrowful on their return home? What do you make of his whole dialogue about the 9-year-old and his story of losing his virginity?
- W. Consider McMurphy's language when he talks about the 9-year-old girl. Why does he use words like "little whore" and how does this affect the reading experience, the reader's perception of McMurphy? How does his language challenge social norms?

#### **Part 4 219-End**

##### **4.1**

- A. How does the ward change after the men's return from the trip?
- B. How does the Nurse challenge McMurphy's power in the ward?
- C. What do you make of Harding's rant about capitalism and its description of McMurphy's motives? Is there a larger dialogue happening about capitalism, socialism (the nurse, then?), and motivations in those economies/governments?
- D. What causes Billy to turn against McMurphy?
- E. How does the quick dialogue between McMurphy and Bromden change McMurphy? "We thought it wasn't to be winning things..." (226).
- F. Some strong language out of McMurphy toward the end of this chapter... What do you make of his insult to Washington? When McMurphy uses the N\* word, does Washington's identity precede his racial identity, or the other way around? What are the racial dynamics like in the hospital?
- G. Why does Chief Bromden jump in? What does this suggest about his character development?

##### **4.2**

- H. What do you make of the kind, Japanese Nurse? How does this fortify or change the reader's conception of the Big Nurse?
- I. What is the Big Nurse's ultimatum for McMurphy and how is this a poker game?
- J. We see the lifeguard again... What is he like now? What does this suggest about the therapeutic qualities of the ward?
- K. What do you make of Bromden's hallucinations or visions while he undergoes the EST treatment? How does his flashbacks regarding his dad's marriage to a white woman reflect some key themes of the novel?
- L. What do you make of Mrs. Tingle Tangle Toes catchen hens? Can you explain this metaphor?
- M. What's up with the 'snake eyes' constantly being referenced? What does it represent? Hint: consider the placement (after what?).
- N. What is Bromden's relationship to the fog at the closing of this chapter?

##### **4.3**

- O. How is McMurphy taking the EST treatments? How does he want people to think he is handling them?
- P. How is Bromden's return welcomed? How has his relationship to the other people in the ward changed and why has it changed?
- Q. How does the Nurse attempt to threaten McMurphy in this chapter? How does he defuse it?

- R. Consider the relationship between Billy Bibbit and his mother? Shouldn't his mother be in the ward? What is happening here and how has the Big Nurse enabled Billy's mother?
- S. What do you make of the ward party? A lot happens, but consider specifically their behavior and whether or not it would seem out of place outside of the hospital. What is odd? What is ordinary?
- T. What do you make of Sefelt's seizure and Sandy's reaction to it? Is there empathy, judgment, or something else?
- U. What do you make of Harding's speech, specifically the one after Sefelt's seizure?
- V. What do you make of drunk Bromden? How is alcohol and drunkenness treated in this novel?
- W. How does Harding foreshadow McMurphy's doom? Why doesn't McMurphy leave (really)?
- X. What do you make of Harding's speech regarding judgment and "society's way of dealing with someone different" (257)?
- Y. What is Harding's argument regarding going crazy? What is the other force besides society? Explain.
- Z. Consider the description of McMurphy and Sandy the following morning. What does this suggest about them? Sexuality?

#### 4.4

- AA. How does the Big Nurse's demeanor change when she discovers the ward in complete chaos?
- BB. What happens between the Big Nurse, Billy Bibbit, and what motivates the Big Nurse to say what she says? Why does Billy Bibbit react in the way that he does? What does this suggest about the nature of human behavior and our own psychological states?
- CC. What does the death of Billy Bibbit do to McMurphy? To the others?
- DD. Consider McMurphy's assault on the Big Nurse. It is rather graphic and certainly suggestive of rape. What do you make of it? Does this overturn your perceptions of McMurphy as a character? How does this complicate the reader's conceptualization of him? What should have McMurphy done?
- EE. What happens when the Japanese Nurse is in charge? What does this suggest about society and the ward?
- FF. What do you make of the descriptions of McMurphy after his lobotomy?
- GG. Why does Bromden kill McMurphy? What stands out to you about his death with special consideration to the language used to convey it?
- HH. Why does Bromden escape? What do the closing lines of the novel suggest about his character development? What do you think will happen to him long term?

#### Closing Thoughts and Questions

- A. What are some primary themes of this novel? Consider about 6 of them.
- B. What overarching commentary on society does the book present?
- C. Consider the relationship between civilized behavior, society, individualism, and ESPECIALLY animalism and animalistic behavior. What does the book suggest about human nature, aggression, animalism, etc.?
- D. How does the book approach gender and the relationships between opposite sexes? Is the book damaged by possibly sexist moments or events? Which ones?
- E. What do you make of power dynamics and how people get and lose power? Is this accurate with reality in our society?