

**Elements of Black Humour in
Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest***

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Ken Elton Kesey (1935-2001) is a famous American writer, novelist, and journalist. He is deemed as one of the remarkable writers of America, whose writings catch the sight of many critics in the United States. In the 1960s, Kesey became a counterculture hero and a guru of psychedelic drugs with Timothy Leary. Kesey has been called the Pied Piper, who changed the beat generation into the hippie movement. He also worked as an attender in a hospital's psychiatric ward. These experiences served as the basis for his 1963 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which examined the abuses of the system against the individual. He wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is credited with helping to usher in the era of psychedelic drugs in the 1960s.

In this novel, Ken Kesey shows readers a post-war American society in point of his own view by using the imaginary mental hospital ward as the stage. He is a productive writer; among his work *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the biggest success which won him great fame and fortune as well as various criticism.

He is also considered to be a postmodern writer since most of his works consisted of the postmodern elements. The postmodernist dynamic tension is represented by visible symbolism presented throughout his works. The important aspects of Postmodernism literary works reflect Parody, Black humor, Pastiche, Irony, Intertextuality etc., This research paper focuses on Black humour, one of the elements of Postmodernism.

Black humor defines, "in literature, drama and film grotesque or morbid humor use to epress the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox, cruelty of the modern world". Black humor further explains inhumane, insanitary, insignificance, hopelessness and irrationality.

The contents of the novel are series of absurd incidents that happened in the hospital ward. Ken Kesey applies the writing technique of black humor to satirize the absurdity of the society. In Black humor, topics and events that are unusually humors or satirical manner while retaining their seriousness; the intent of black comedy, therefore, is often for the audience to experience both laughter and discomfort, sometimes simultaneously. It uses devices often associated with tragedy and is sometimes equated with tragic farce. For example, Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove or How I learned to stop worrying and love the Bomb* (1963) is a terrifying comic treatment of the circumstances surrounding the dropping of an atom bomb, while Jules Feiffer's

comedy *Little murders* (1965) is a delineation of the horrors of modern urban life, focusing particularly on random assassinations. The novels of such writers as Kurt Vonnegut, Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Joseph Heller, and Phillip Roth contain elements of black humor. To justify the elements of Black humor, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* has been taken. Major elements like inhumane, insanitary, absurdity are deciphered on the character of Ken Kesey's novel.

In this novel, black humor is present in a very powerful form. Normally, insane people don't have the capacity to laugh or find the humor in something as we "normal" people do. They live tragic existences, wandering day by day in the bland, depressing world of an asylum. They have forgotten how to live because they are under the authoritative rule of the head nurse, and under the behavioral influence of drug doses and bossy orderlies. The patients have no real existence of their own, and they are essentially lifeless. As the Lord works in mysterious ways, Randall McMurphy is "sent" to heal the patients of the asylum. He shows them that to laugh is good, and laughing at yourself can sometimes be the best medicine. He is the comic healer who gives life to the otherwise hopeless patients of the asylum. McMurphy seems to have an affinity for laughter. In essence, it is an escape for him- it makes him feel good, and most importantly, it radiates to his friends, and helps heal them.

McMurphy always mocking against the Authoritative role of Nurse Ratched while the meeting prepares to start McMurphy interrupts, and asking about a dream where "It was like me I was me, in the dream, and then again kind of like I was't me-like I was somebody else that looked like me...". He doesn't like to continue that meeting under prevail of Ratched. Throughout this novel the character are picturing as machine even character name. Chief, the narrator in the book, is a damaged ex-soldier who sees the machine enemy all around him. The reader takes it as metaphor, but chief, a paranoid schizophrenic, sees it as reality. We get his first machine image as he tells of Big Nurse coming on duty, going after her underlings, the black boys. He sees her arms "section out/she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor so I can smell the machinery inside"(11).

Throughout the book, the controlling imagery is machinelike. Nurse's name is even a tool, a ratchet, for fixing broken machines. Earlier in the text he tells of Big Nurse's job. She is there to fix the broken pieces of society. From this, we can gather that if one does not conform, one is forced into the cuckoo's nest.

The Chief remembers one Christmas when Santa Claus visited the ward. It's likely the intruder was just a fat old man with a red nose, but in the Chief's remembrance he represents the generous spirit of Christmas, and as he is nabbed by the aides and imprisoned, (to leave six years later "clean-shaven and skinny as a pole") we wonder: if the hospital can destroy even Christmas, how can anything good survive? Through the Chief's warped vision we see the control the Nurse maintains over the ward. She even masters time, occasionally

making it go so fast that the view out the window turns from morning to night in seconds, then slowing it to a snail's pace. She likes to speed things up to make pleasant activities pass more quickly, and slow things down for unpleasant events, like the death of a patient next to the Chief. Of course the Chief is describing a familiar phenomenon-bad times seem to pass more slowly than good-but his "untrue" description reminds us of a deeper truth.

McMurphy shows the satirizing way of humor against authority of Nurse Ratched. While asking to change the TV time to watch the World series Ratched showed her inhumane to that patients. He comes happy that he got the vote, but Ratched says the meeting is closed, still smiling, but when she walks to the Nurses's station the back of her neck "is red and swelling like she'll blow apart any second". McMurphy comes front of the TV and turns it on. Suddenly she goes to control panel and shuts off the TV but McMurphy just sits there watching like nothing happened.

She tells him to get back to work. "her voice has a tight whine like an electric saw ripping through pine". Harding joins McMurphy and tells him to go back to his duties. "I think how her voice sounds like it hit a nail, and it strikes me so funny I almost laugh". Others join them and soon they'll all sitting there, lined up in front of the screen. Bromden mentions that if someone came in and saw all of them sitting there in front of blank screen with Ratched hollering at them "they'd of thought the whole bunch was crazy as loons".

The postmodern element of black humour is strongly shown in McMurphy's choice of words to describe how the Big Nurse is emasculating the inmates in the lines, "Right at your balls. No that nurse ain't some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball cutter ... npeople who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to" (60).

Conclusion

The above quote show how Black Humour is used throughout the novel to bring out its post modernism. The big Nurse uses tactics that are unknown to all of the inmates as a means of emasculating them, destroying their confidence, and effectively controlling them. McMurphy realizes this and tells the inmates what she does, which comes as disturbing news to all inmates. He uses the analogy of the Big Nurse as a "Ball cutter" in his warning to his inmates, showing the element of Black Humour; She doesn't literally cut the inmates balls off, she just reduces their self-confidence, but Murphy uses this wild analogy to try to personalize and evoke hatred towards Nurse in the inmates.

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