



Smoking, Mockery and Resistance as Carnavalesque Protest in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

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Abstract in English

The current study is an endeavor to understand the impact of injustice and authoritarian restraint on human behavior in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The study adopts Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "Carnavalesque" to analyze the characters' conducts. The book delves into the condition of the post war human mind, as well as the methods used in American psychology and psychiatry, and criticizes the various authorities that shape individuals through subtle and coercive means and how they ultimately impact society as a whole. The aim of the study is to shed light on the lives of the protagonist and other characters who live in a mental hospital and how they violated the dominance of the tyrannical authority through smoking, rebellion and Mockery. The book is based on the idea that persecution and authoritarian repression affect both victimizers and the victims. Therefore, the protagonist loses his life and the victimizer (the Big Nurse) loses her control over the ward. The findings of this study answer the research questions of how Kesey uses the portrayal of smoking, rebellion and mockery to highlight the political and social fluctuations of the twentieth century. Finally, the research comes up with a recommendation for further studies.

Paper Info

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Introduction

Kesey is one of the great American writers of the twentieth century; he was born in La Junta, Colorado in 1935. Principally, he spent many years of his life in rural Oregon, and he is known for his great contributions to American literature during the twentieth century. Kesey graduated from the University of Oregon and obtained a degree in speech and communication moreover, he also attended Stanford University for the creative writing program. In 1962, he published his masterpiece novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* which added much to his literary fame. The title of the novel "*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" is symbolic, according to Merriam Webster dictionary, Cuckoos are deceptive birds, they deceive other birds by laying their eggs in their nest to hatch and raise them. Metaphorically, authorities delude people through their institutions to dominate and abuse them. The novel is set in a governmental mental institution, which considered by many scholars as a microcosm of the entire society.

Through this novel, Kesey portrays a group of people living in a mental hospital, each suffering from different degrees of mental problems. The hospital is dominated by a sadistic mid age woman named Nurse Ratched or the "Big Nurse", because of her sadistic tendencies. The novel is filled with gothic atmospheres. With the help of the Negroes, she treats the patients as well as her staff harshly, to controlling every minute detail of their lives. All patients follow her strict orders and the ward's routine, till the coming of Randle Patrick McMurphy, who violates her rules and awakens the rebellious spirit of other patients, such as Chief Bromden, Billy Bibbit, and others to revolt against her tyrannical authority to prove their identities. The situation enrages the "Big Nurse" and pushed her to overcome them, through inhuman punishments, such as electroconvulsive therapy and lobotomy. As a reaction to such harsh treatment, the patients defend themselves through different means such as comics, smoking, and riots.

It's obvious that smoking, rebellion and mockery are recurring topics through many scenes of the novel. The individuals heavily smoke, drink, and mock the hospital staff, they never hesitate to engage in these behaviours once they get a chance to do it. They used such behaviors to violate Ratched's strict domination "Prohibited drinking, smoking of pot, crude fornication are joyfully viewed as signs of happy release from oppression." (Kesey, 1962, p. 9)

Many other scholars (e.g. Van de Kemp 2017; Radwan & Ibrahim, 2015) agree that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is Kesey novel in which smoking and chaos play an important role. Mason, in his work "*The houses looked so much alike*": Representations of Contemporary America's Homogenized, Consumer Society in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*" (2017), analyses the novel according to Stephen Banks's notion of "self-colonization," and expand on the potential metaphorical ties between "American dread" and post-colonial studies. The researcher also charts the similarities and differences within the institutional forces that encourage conformity in American society. The study exposes the influences of "colonization" and "self-colonization" on individuals in particular and on society in general.

Semino, in his study "Metaphor and Mind Style in Ken Kesey's" *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" (1996), argues that it is possible to combine the notion of mind and the cognitive theory of metaphor. Then he exposes how Kesey uses metaphor in the novel to show his unique views of the world and its tendencies towards physical and mental emancipation. Blažková in his study entitled "*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" (2018), discusses the crucial differences between Kesey's novel and its film adaptation which directed by Miloš Forman. The study concentrates not only on the difference between the projection of the film and the original book, but it goes further to expose the influences that these differences may leave on the audience's perception of the novel.

Although many scholars studied the novel from different points of view, there is little scientific consensus regarding the basic ethics and meaning behind the intense and reckless urge to smoke, rebel and violate rules in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Consequently, there is still a gap in previous research regarding what Kesey's portrayal of smoking and mockery represents, related to the socio-political atmosphere of the era in which the novel was written. Moreover, this article will provides a close reading of the symbolic significance of smoking, mockery and rebellion in connection with post war-America. The study highlight the cultural and intellectual dimensions of the novel and it paves the way for further studies and exposes the representations of resistance and carnivalesque elements in Kesey's works as well as other modern novels.

The article will apply Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "Carnavalesque" to analyse the characters conducts as a reaction against dominant authority throughout the novel. By applying the concept of "Carnavalesque" to the reading of the text, the study will add to existing scholarship. Moreover,

the paper will present a multifaceted reading of how smoking, mockery and violation of rules are used as a medium for political and social commentary.

Characters recurrently laugh and smoke through many scenes of the novel to ease the burdens imposed on them by the dominant authority as sort of self-defence. For instance, when one of the main characters in the novel named Harding was talking about the “Big Nurse” trying to mock her, he became furious and was unable to control his feelings. McMurphy gave him another cigarette and he accepted it silently, as continues mocking her in front of other patients, the smoke was drifts out of his mouth; "McMurphy lights another cigarette and offers it to him; Harding takes it without a word...Harding takes a long pull off the cigarette and lets the smoke drift out with his talk." (p.37)

The research question that this paper intends to answer is: How does Kesey use the portrayal of smoking, rebellion and mockery to highlight the political and social fluctuations of the twentieth century. At the end of this paper, the researcher will suggest some possibilities for further studies.

Smoking as a Medium for Social Commentary

In Wystan Hugh Auden's poem “The Unknown Citizen”(1940), man assessed by a particular ideology about human life and society suggesting that it can be measured, understood, and even improved through scientific statistical analysis. Auden draws a wider portrayal of this dystopia of surveillance. "The Unknown Citizen" was considered as a "saint" in his obedience to the state. This holiness is not from religious point of view but from the government's point of view, which places the authority in a position similar to that of God.

Through *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey draws a similar image of authority represented by nurse Ratched and her Black assistants, who compel the patients in one way and other to resist and violate such tyrannical authority. According to Mikhail Bakhtin the rhetorical forms of carnivalesque give more chances, in contrast with those offered by dominant culture as informal culture celebrates “the gay relativity” of the dominant establishments (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 11). At the very begging of McMurphy's presence in the the novel, Kesey hints about the type of cigarettes that McMurphy smoke “Marlboros” which make smoking as one of the most important characteristics of Kesey's hero “McMurphy came stomping up to the counter beside me and

hooked his thumbs in his pockets and told the salesgirl to give him a couple of cartons of Marlboros” (Kesey, 1962,p.112) McMurphy assures his addiction to smoking when he says “Maybe make it three cartons,” ... “I plan to do a lot of smoking” (p.112).

Reading *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* as a social and political commentary, not as just one of many fictional or nonfictional books written in the twentieth century, allows the argument that the portrayal of smoking reflects the writer’s opposition to the dominant order. The character excessive smoking reflects their inability to cope with alienation and the dismal atmosphere of post-war America. They smoke to numb their disappointment with “the American dream,” they used it as a cure to heal their frustration and hopelessness. Kesey portraits a microcosm through a hospital ward which resemble the harsh life of post-war America, whose people became useless, barren and broken from inside “most of us—are machines with flaws inside that can’t be repaired” (p.13). Elaine Ware, in his article "The Vanishing American: Identity Crisis in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*" (1986), opens that "besides experiencing persecution because of membership in a minority group, Bromden is also the victim of World War II. Although psychologically unstable, he is still assigned to service as an electrician's assistant in Germany and Italy, where he cannot deal effectively with the stress of combat"(p.99).

According to Kesey, the aftermath societies are unfit for living; it destroys good people and sound instincts; “but you know how society persecutes a dedicated man” (p.16). Characters refuge to smoking whenever they talk about their rulers or masters. For example, Harding disagrees with McMurphy's claim that Miss Ratched is a kind of giant monster, McMurphy reacted to his disagreement by taking out his cigarette. “He (Harding) stares at McMurphy. McMurphy takes the cigarette out of his mouth and repeats what he said” (p.36). To explore the necessity of smoking in the lives of his characters, Kesey intentionally makes his hero a heavy smoker and a blackjack for cigarettes. “He’s dealing blackjack for cigarettes” (p.46).

Smoking addiction in the hospital provides patients in the novel with a mental escape from their internal conflicts. Excessive smoking serves not only as a symbol and a remedy for frustration, but it can also be considered an act of resistance against political and social consequences. Through excessive smoking, the patients show their objection to the ideology of the new Americanism, and they show their tendency to harm their bodies to liberate their minds and bodies as a revolt against

the new modes of life. Some of the characters' dialogues in the novel can be interpreted as a protest against post-war America.

Most of the characters in the novel such as Colonel Matterson, Chief Bromden, McMurphy, Mr. Turkle, Miss Ratched and others, participated in war and experienced its cruelty and ugly face. This leads Miss Ratched to abandon her femininity and turns Chief Bromden into a mere machine: “can see all that, and be hurt by it, the way I was hurt by seeing things in the Army, in the war” (79). Therefore, it can be argued that the novel's concentration on war victims represents an indirect protest against the effects of war on individuals who come through. Implicitly, war turns people into victims like shells. Because of World War II, American society was shattered from within, and people became depressed and isolated.

So excessive smoking in the novel represents a criticism of what was once considered a bad habit in the past, which show the novel's attitude towards political debate. When Mr. Turkle and McMurphy were telling stories about army affairs, they resort to smoking to calm themselves: “We sat out in the day room in our robes, listening to McMurphy and Mr. Turkle tell Army stories while they passed one of Mr. Turkle's cigarettes back and forth, smoking it a funny way, holding the smoke in when they inhaled till their eyes bugged” (163).

Smoking as Unifier and Divider

Cigarettes and smoking hold significant symbolic importance in Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Besides serving as a means of uniting the characters, smoking also acts as a link between different cultures and social classes. For example, McMurphy and Harding belong to different cultures and different social classes. Dale Harding belongs to the upper middle class, while Randle McMurphy comes from the proletariat or working class. Yet, they found in smoking a suitable platform to express their shared beliefs and their rejection of arbitrary authority. The cultural and class differences among the characters in the novel reflect Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, which refers to the interaction of various cultures, languages, and social classes within a text.

Despite Miss Ratched's restrictions on the number of cigarettes allowed for each person per day, the characters in many scenes of the novel offer cigarettes to each other as an expression of their mutual support. For example, when McMurphy becomes angry and realizes he has run out of cigarettes, he turns to Mr. Frederickson and borrows one: "He dipped into his pocket for his cigarettes; when he couldn't find any he borrowed one from Fredrickson, lit it with a stagey sweep of his match, and went on" (p.147).

The relaxing and unifying effects of smoking also become apparent when McMurphy, Harding and his wife meet together in the ward. As Harding became nervous in the presence of his wife, he smokes his last cigarettes: When Harding's wife also wants to smoke, and asks her husband for a cigarette, as he ran out of cigarettes, she asks McMurphy light her one. Therefore, characters shared a sense of comradeship through smoking. Shared smoking puts them in the same social rank, and this new friendship continues with them and transcends their economic and social status. Smoking is not only a phenomenon that grants McMurphy and the other characters a sense of social belonging, but the political tendencies of the characters are also clarified and expressed through their relationships to smoking. As stated before, the characters' addiction to excessive smoking and their relation to it stands as a political declaration that puts them in opposition to post war America. Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984), states that:

As the comic aspects of pre-class society were relegated to the realm of the unofficial, they took on a new significance, acquiring a critical and celebratory potential that they had perhaps lacked in an earlier period. Above all, they offered an alternative to the seriousness of official culture, 'a completely different, nonofficial, extra ecclesiastical and extra political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations (p.6).

Therefore, the author's focus on smoking can be read as a revolt and a protest serving as a tool to illustrate devotion to the political standards of the one community on the one hand, while creating distance to the other community on the other.

We sat out in the day room in our robes, listening to McMurphy and Mr. Turkle tell Army stories while they passed one of Mr. Turkle's cigarettes back and forth, smoking it a funny way, holding the smoke in when they inhaled till their eyes bugged. Once Harding asked what manner of cigarette they were smoking that smelled so provocative, and Mr. Turkle said in a high, breath-holding voice, "Jus' a plain old cigarette. Hee hoe, yes. You want a toke? (P.163-164).

In the novel, the characters find their life easier and feel more relaxed under the influence of smoking. The above extract reflects that excessive smoking and the manner of smoking becomes

people's common ground, who resort to smoking whenever they feel depressed. While fog symbolizes difficulty in a form of the struggle to face situations and not giving up, it can also be interpreted as escaping from reality. Ayşe Gözde Uğur in her work *Approach to One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (2025), states that: " Among the group of patients in the hospital, people realization that smoking is reliable tool to deal with their harsh reality strengthen the bonds between them and grand them a sense of comradeship"(p.3). Through smoking characters escape their inner conflicts and it becomes their reliable cure. Thus, smoking works as a unifier among the characters and a remedy to their adversities.

Mockery and Rebellion as a Pathway to Liberty

According to Bakhtin (1984),"the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally official"(p.6). Such argument becomes clear through Kesey's portrayal of American society in his works.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the characters try to free themselves in several ways from the domination of the tyrannical authority, resorting sometimes to smoking and other times to rebellion and sarcasm, Even the agents of authority sometimes try to free themselves from the constraints of their masters, the Big Nurse for example, she is a former Army nurse of middle age woman, who has an authority on the patients and other members of the hospital's staff. On one hand, it is clear that she represents the cruelty of authority and the attempt to impose its hegemony on the common public and its employees as well; on the other hand, her character can be read as a victim of authority.

Although Kesey does not give minute details of Miss Ratched's past career, one can infer from her past job as an army nurse that her rigid conducts reflect the harsh circumstances she faced during her career with the Army. Adascalitei (2019), observes: that "Even though it would seem that all the patients are suffering of psychic illnesses and came to this hospital in order to be cured, Miss Ratched seems worse than everyone. Her desire to manipulate is her disease and this disease determines her to become at times diabolical" (p.11). Therefore, the gothic atmosphere created in the ward is a result of her internal conflict. Through such a monstrous and harsh behaviours Miss

Ratched tries to free herself from the depression, loneliness, and constraints imposed on her during her previous job with the military.

Other characters in the novel also try to liberate themselves through rebellion and mockery to challenge the dominant authority. The night party is a vivid example on such claim, the ward residents violated all prevailing rules of authority, chaos spreads all over the ward, and they illegally open the drug room and use cough sirup with liquor. They enter the Nurses' Station, which was prohibited to their entrance, mess with records and patients' personal reports, and violate the rules by having sex with two women from outside the ward. Moreover, when the guard nurse comes to check on the situation, they mock her and imagine to having sex with her: "McMurphy and Turkle switched back and forth from the drink to Turkle's cigarettes and got to giggling again as they discussed how it would be to lay that little nurse with the birthmark who went off, at midnight" (p.166).

Therefore, through smoking, rebellion and mockery, the patients try to free themselves from the prevailing dominance represented by the absolute authority of the Big Nurse. Such conduct resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin's the concept of 'carnavalesque', which subverts and liberates the dominant atmosphere of authority through chaos and humor.

Human Body as a Means of Resistance

According to Bakhtin, "the transfer of the world from the vertical to the horizontal was realized in the human body, which became the relative centre of the cosmos. And this cosmos was, no longer moving from the bottom to the top but along the horizontal line of time...In bodily man the hierarchy of the cosmos was reversed and cancelled"(Bakhtin, 1984, 363).Through the episodes of the novel, the characters' bodies become the axis of conflict. Many of them are tortured and sexually abused through drugs, sexual manipulation, and electric shocks.

McMurphy, for instance, sacrificed himself to save others from the tyranny of the oppressive authority, Ayşe Gözde Uğur (2025), argues that as for McMurphy, "Even though his actions appear to be for his benefit, his self-sacrifice not only makes him a victim but also causes him to become a defender of freedom"(p.6). Proud of his physical strength and unique courage, McMurphy was able to disrupt the authority of Nurse Ratched. Although she could turn him to a disabled man

through surgery by some other doctors in the hospital, his actions and courage paved the way for the liberation of his fellow patients. Bakhtin theorizes that the human body is the axis of resistance which he describes as the "carnival body". In a carnival, social norms and dominant authorities are temporarily suspended, and the individual becomes an agent of liberation and rebellion against the prevailing order. Through McMurphy's death, Bromden was able to transform McMurphy's defeat into a victory over the prevailing dominance represented by Miss Ratched. As Ware (1986) notes: "Only through the support of McMurphy another inmate of the hospital, does Bromden regain his strength and size and develop some self-confidence"(p. 99).

By pretending to be mute and deaf, Bromden also sacrificed his body to expose many of the secrets and hidden truths that Nurse Ratched was concealing. Despite his massive physique, he endured bullying from others and the arduous labor of cleaning the ward in order to protect himself and his fellow patients from the machinations of the tyrannical authority. So he uses his body as a means to violate the dominant order.

Influenced by McMurphy, Billy Bibbit also revolts against the tyrannical authority by breaking his virginity through his sex affair with a whore from outside the ward. When the 'Big Nurse' threaten him to tell his mother, Billy couldn't bear the scandal, and he commit suicide by cutting his throat. This incident left Miss Ratched's confused and made her feel embarrassed in front of her friend, since Billy Bibbit is as the son of Miss. Ratched's friend. Therefore, Billy also transforms death into a victory against the cruel authority and contributes to the liberation of his fellow patients.

At the end of the novel, Miss Ratched regains control of the hospital, but she can no longer control the patients' behaviour after they have been influenced by McMurphy: "She couldn't rule with her old power any more, not by writing things on pieces of paper. She was losing her patients one after the other"(p.176). Bromden ultimately frees himself from the constraints of authority by escaping from the hospital, an act of being influenced by McMurphy's courage. Therefore, Kesey wittingly positions the characters' bodies to be the axis of conflict, conveying to his readers the triumph of blood over injustice and tyranny.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this paper has aimed to display the essential role of smoking, rebellion and mockery narrative to argue that their portrayal represents the writer's views on the socio-political context of the novel. The relaxed attitudes towards smoking, rebellion and mockery in the novel on a political level, acting as a protest against the values of post-war America. Although smoking creates social and political distance among the patients, it strengthens their sense of community and provides them with a sense of political and social belonging. Through the events of the novel, the protagonist as well as other patients suffer much due to the authoritarian power and the dominant order represented by "the Big Nurse" and her assistants, which compels the characters to defend themselves through smoking and comic attitudes.

For Kesey, smoking, rebellion and mockery do not serve a fleeting narrative role, but rather it constitute symbolic mechanisms of challenge and protest against the cruel reality forced by authority. The characters use smoking and mockery as a means of temporary flee from the dominant authority, while mockery manifests in different forms of rebellion against prevailing systems and values. From a carnivalesque viewpoint, such conduct can be read as a temporary upheaval of the social hierarchy.

The characters in the novel were looking for symbolic acts of resistance to face the horrific conditions that resulted from injustice and tyranny. Smoking and mockery became expressions of rejection of dominant powers that glorified violence and conflict. Therefore, the study confirms that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* offers a critical vision of power and war through carnivalesque forms of protest.

Kesey delivers a powerful message that tyrannical rule and injustice ultimately ruin both the victimizers and the victimized. The oppression of a particular class in society directly and indirectly leads to rebellion, weakens the authority of the ruling power, and disable the social order. To prevent the abuse of power in society, people should take the initiative to unite and cooperate to achieve a free and dignified life. Thus, Kesey's views are in tune with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept

of “Carnavalesque”. For further study, the novel could be studied from a Marxist perspective, analyzing the actions of its characters.

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