

**University of Pardubice  
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

**Conformity within Society as Expressed in  
Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest***

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### Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Úvodem by autorka měla uvést definice a popis pojmu konformita dle Muzafera Sherifa. Dále načrtnout sociální klima ve Spojených státech během 50. a 60. let 20. století se zaměřením na významné události, osobnosti, prezentaci a vnímání hrozeb - náboženských, sociálních a politických. Měla by rovněž vyzdvihnout vliv vládních a nevládních organizací, jakož i masmédií a popsat rozvoj undergroundových kultur (popkultura mládeže, beatnická generace, hippies, alternativní politické organizace). V této souvislosti by měl rovněž být nastíněn život Kena Keseyho a ve stručnosti popsána jeho stěžejní díla. Následně by měly být uvedeny události, postavy a hlavní myšlenky v Keseyho románu One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest a porovnány s definicemi a koncepty načrtnutými v první části práce. Závěr by mohl zahrnovat kapitulu o konformitě dnešních USA se zdůrazněním amerického vlivu na ostatní svět.

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## **Abstract**

The thesis begins with definitions and descriptions of conformity according to Muzafer Sherif and Erich Fromm. The social climate of the United States during the 1950s and the 1960s is described, featuring the important events, personalities, and narratives and perceptions of threats—social and political. The influence of governmental organizations as well as the mass media is highlighted. Developing subcultures (the Beats and hippies) are also outlined. Within this context, the life and significance of Ken Kesey is briefly described. In the thesis, events, characters and themes in Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are compared to these definitions and concepts.

## **Key words**

Conformity, the United States of America, the 1950s, suburbs, anti-Communism, the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, counterculture

## **Souhrn**

V úvodu práce jsou uvedeny definice a popis pojmu konformita dle Muzafera Sherifa a Ericha Fromma. Dále je popsána společenská situace ve Spojených státech během 50. a 60. let 20. století se zaměřením na významné události, osobnosti, prezentaci a vnímání hrozeb –zejména sociálních a politických. Dále je vyzdvihnout vliv vládních organizací a rovněž masmédií a popsán rozvoj „undergroundových“ kultur (beatnická generace, hippies). Součástí tohoto kontextu je též stručný popis života a významu Kena Keseyho jako autora. V rámci práce jsou uvedeny události, postavy a témata v Keseyho románu *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, které jsou porovnány s definicemi a koncepty.

## **Klíčová slova**

Konformita, Spojené státy americké, padesátá léta 20. století, předměstí, antikomunismus, šedesátá léta 20. století, hnutí za občanská práva, alternativní kultura

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## 1. Introduction

*Some lose mind and become soul, insane. Some lose all soul and become mind, intellectual. Some lose both and become accepted.*

Charles Bukowski

Conformity can be described as obeying the mores of society. A person who conforms behaves in accordance with the mores of society, and changes their opinion in order to be accepted. For example, a homosexual who is afraid of what other people would think about their sexual orientation may choose to get married to an individual of opposite gender in order to fulfill the expectations of society. Another example, a student who is enthusiastic about arts and wants to study the subject is urged by their parents to change their opinion because it is said that artists usually struggle in their career and also people associate artists with the use of drugs, and think that all of them have affairs all the time, etc. So the student after many unpleasant talks with their parents eventually enrolls in an Economics course.

The mores that make people change their opinion are called social norms. A norm is a set of generally shared values of different sorts. Throughout our lives we are taught to follow many social, cultural, or religious norms. Many people and institutions shape our personality—parents and teachers, politicians, and writers; political system as such, church, and organizations of various kinds. For example, one becomes a Greenpeace advocate as a result of being impressed by the idea of the protection of nature, or on the other hand the punk subculture is a result of people sharing a common ideology that has an impact on society. Clearly, an individual is shaped from an early age by many factors. Parents indeed play a very important role in our lives. They teach us how to behave in our surroundings. For instance, a child who calls everybody except their parents by their first name is at certain age told by their parents that some people have to be called Mr. or Mrs. The child then learns to call her teacher Mrs.

according to their significance in society. So the child calls her doctor Doctor, a police officer Sir, and the president Mister President.

Many literary works reflect on and question social problems and important issues of the day. Many authors criticize and express their opinions about society, politics, or culture. In his works, Charles Dickens portrayed the harrowing situation of the London working class of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ernest Hemingway is well known for depicting the tragedy of war in his novels, such as *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. What then were typical problems of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America that Ken Kesey was trying to illustrate in his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? For a variety of reasons he chose to place his characters into the isolated ward of a mental hospital with only limited possibility to break loose.

The ward represents American society as a whole. The author's view might be understood as a critique of America in the 1950s. While most of the characters in Kesey's novel can be regarded as types of the American 1950s, one of the main protagonists Randle P. McMurphy symbolizes the rebellion of the 1960s.

Written in 1962, the novel is also a reaction to the politics of the Cold War, by 1962 heading into its second decade After the Second World War, the power of the Soviet Union had increased and Communism spread rapidly. This evoked anti-Communist reactions among some American politicians who fueled a fear of Communism and prompted suspicion among the general public. Most Americans, however, became less involved in political affairs and paid attention mainly to their homes, work and family.

In the first section of this thesis, the term conformity is introduced as a typical feature of the American society of the 1950s. Two interpretations of the phenomenon of conformity are offered, one proposed by psychologist Muzafer Sherif and the other by German-American social psychologist Erich Fromm. Once this theoretical background is offered, it is possible to discuss the major themes of the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In the practical part, these themes are linked to the features and events related to the 1950s. In this part, the paper deals with the question of why people conformed to the norms and values of society, focusing on the way of life, economic



growth and consumerism, as well as the political atmosphere, also highlighting the role of mass media and federal agencies.

With the new decade of the 1960s, radical movements began to challenge conformity. It was the era of the civil rights movement, the second wave of the feminist movement, and the hippie counterculture. Therefore, these phenomena will be mentioned and some of these issues will be exemplified, though the novel was written in 1962 and much of what happened in the 1960s was yet to come. The paper also points to the literary influence of Ken Kesey who can be regarded as one of the predecessors of the radical movements of the 1960s. Not only his works, but also the way he lived, illustrate the massive social change of the era. Therefore, his life will be briefly outlined.

The aim of the thesis is to provide some clues for a better understanding of the seeming placidity of a decade sometimes called “the Fabulous Fifties,” as well as the tempestuous character of the 1960s. Robert Boyers in his essay called “Porno-Politics” pointed out that “Kesey’s novel is wholly successful as an indictment of modern society.” Written in 1968, the essay expressed the idea that the setting of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* can be viewed as “a microcosm of the society-at-large.” In his novel, Kesey criticized politics and the gender roles in society, and defined authorities and institutions as “people 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.” (Boyers in Kesey, 1973, 435-436)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> KESEY, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Ed. PRATT, Clark. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1973. All further quotations from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* will be taken from this edition.

## 2. Conformity as defined in psychological terms

Conformity is a term used in social psychology, the science that studies the way people interact with each other. (Smith and Mackie, 2000, 3) Smith and Mackie define conformity as “the convergence of individuals’ thoughts, feelings, or behavior toward a social norm.” (Smith and Mackie, 2000, 591) Social interaction in society causes the formation of social norms—standards of behavior that encourage individuals to act in congruence with generally accepted ways of thinking, feeling and acting. (Smith and Mackie, 2000, 372) Most people feel anxious if they stand out as different from the majority, therefore they feel a strong pressure toward conformity to avoid this anxiety and go along with the rest of the group. (<http://www.psywww.com>) Conformity can also be defined as “yielding to group pressures” which may take different forms, ranging from persuasion and criticism to bullying and teasing. On his web page *Simply Psychology*, Saul McLeod introduced a distinction between three types of conformity—normative and informational conformity, and identification.

The term conformity is often used to indicate an agreement to the majority position, brought about either by a desire to “*fit in*” or be liked (normative) or because of a desire to be correct (informational), or simply to conform to a social role (identification). (<http://simplypsychology.org>)

Every day we are confronted with such pressures which have an impact on our behavior. Whether we like it or not, people and groups are brought into closer relationships. A group seldom functions as a closed system. (Sherif, 1961)<sup>2</sup> What a particular group is doing then has wide impacts on its members and also other people outside the group.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychologists began to study the process through which people adjust to the norm. Since the 1930s, when Arthur Jenness was

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<sup>2</sup> Muzafer Sherif’s study “Conformity-deviation, norms, and group relations” from work *Conformity and Deviation* published in 1961 is available online at the Brock University website resources. URL: [http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Sherif/Sherif\\_1961d.html](http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Sherif/Sherif_1961d.html)

among the first to study conformity, (<http://www.simplypsychology.org>) the influence of group pressure on decision making has been dealt with by many psychologists. To have a better understanding of the process, two theories will be discussed. One dating back to 1935 was introduced by Muzafer Sherif, who conducted laboratory experiments. The results proved an urge in subjects to change their opinion in favor of the consensus. Another view, offered by Erich Fromm, helps us understand conformity in general as well as become familiar with the character of US society of the time.

### **2.1. A classic study of conformity—Muzafer Sherif**

One psychologist who studied conformity was Muzafer Sherif. He was particularly interested in the formation of the normative process. The central part of his study dealt with the problem of conformity and nonconformity in group relations. Laboratory experiments conducted in 1935 proved normative processes within groups that led the participants to behave according to the expected and usual ways of doing things in the individual's surroundings. In the experiment, Sherif proved that people conform to group norms by using an autokinetic effect which is based on a visual illusion. A small spot of light is projected onto a screen in a dark room. The point, though static, appears to move. The participants in the experiment were first asked individually to estimate how far the light moved. Their answers ranged from 20 to 80 centimeters. When tested in groups of three and then being asked to agree on one estimate of the light movement, the group converged to a more unified opinion. The person whose estimate was greatly different from the other two conformed to their colleagues' view to appear agreeable to others. (<http://www.simplypsychology.org>)

A later study was focused on the effect that significant other people have on one's behavior. For these purposes, the traditional laboratory setting was far from adequate for the study (Sherif, 1961) because behavior, as Sherif found out, is regulated by the normative process even when the individual is left alone. In the study, Sherif maintained the importance of an individual's relation to significant others, for example members of family, church, or colleagues and neighbors. An observation that was conducted in the late fifties illustrates such a conforming behavior. In 1958, a group of

liberal students from the American Southwest were interested in the attitudes of owners of restaurants in the surroundings of the university. In particular, the students asked the owners if they would serve Afro-American students. In most cases, the restaurant owners responded that they were willing to do so, but at the same time, each of them was concerned about what the other owners in the area would do. The study proved that “our image of ourselves, our appraisals of our own practices, are not self-generating.” It also turned out that our self-appraisals “are not independent of our relatedness to people significant in our eyes, whether these significant people are seen as friend or foe.” (Sherif, 1961) Without question, social values, norms, or moral standards are products of either direct or indirect social interaction.

Similarly, the novel portrays the process of changing the opinion in favor of significant others. For example, during staff meetings—“Chief” Bromden, a schizophrenic inmate of Indian origin who feigns being mute and deaf is allowed to be present in the room where the staff meetings take place. He is able to witness how Nurse Ratched decides about the future of a new admission—patient Randle P. McMurphy. Before the meeting, the “Big Nurse” expressed the idea that McMurphy’s aim was to disturb. The graduate students and a doctor in the room brainstorm theories about McMurphy’s case and try to find a solution how to approach the patient. Bromden notices similarities in the college boys—things like having “the same leg crossed and coffee cup on the same knee.” The Big Nurse represents authority and the boys are aware that if they make a mistake they can end up in Portland to finish their training in a sanitarium for alcoholics, which none of them would be happy about.

The students come with various conclusions about McMurphy and try to arrive at a diagnosis of the patient. Some think McMurphy might be dangerous, others claim that he is only feigning mental illness to avoid hard work. One disagrees, calling McMurphy “the arch type of psychopath.” But above all, Ratched’s colleagues want to come up with something she would find acceptable. What the nurse cannot stand is that McMurphy has always acted against the will of authority. After a few theories are presented, some of the men change their opinion that McMurphy is not dangerous and want to send him to the “Disturbed Ward” where serious cases end up. They are feeling certain that Ratched will find their idea interesting. The Big Nurse, on the contrary,

decides to keep McMurphy on her ward because she refuses to overestimate his significance saying he is not “some kind of ‘super’ psychopath.” She persuades all the men that McMurphy is not an “extraordinary person” and the best thing is to keep an eye on him on her ward. (143-149)

## **2.2. Erich Fromm on conformity**

Erich Fromm, a German-American psychoanalyst, explained in his work *The Sane Society* that an increase of conformity in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was caused by a loss of *overt* authority in the Western society. The eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were characterized by a presence of overt authority. Such authority meant that people always knew who was giving orders—either the law, the boss, God, or parents had to be obeyed. The demands might be reasonable or not; one could still disobey them. But some form of authority was present. As long as there was overt authority, there were revolts and conflicts. But in the 1950s the situation changed. People were no longer able to determine whom to rebel against. Authority came to have an anonymous character.

The loss of overt authority was visible in many spheres of life. Even the American Army accepted the new form of authority—anonymous authority. Fromm explained that the Army came to be perceived as if it was “an attractive business enterprise” and a soldier was viewed as “a member of a team.” In families, the children were those who suffered the most. They could not acquire any principles or strong beliefs simply because their parents themselves did not have any. Parents did not give commands; the orders were not given but suggested. The new generation was not guided and the youth was prone to conform to their fellows. (Fromm, 1955, 138-139)

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Billy Bibbit, the inmate representative of the young generation, has a very difficult relationship with his mother. The woman is very authoritative and she is a very good friend with the Big Nurse Ratched, the head figure of the ward. Both women put Billy down, both being too interested in his future although they never let him do what he really wanted. Billy has always stuttered and experienced very sad times because of his handicap. As he put it, the first word he stuttered was probably “m-m-m-m-mamma.” (128) It was not easy for Billy to be

accepted by his peers and girls always laughed at him. When he once proposed to his girlfriend, unable to articulate himself, being stuck on the word “marry,” the girlfriend started to laugh and it was over. Billy’s fear is fueled by such experiences and also his mother who commented on the episode with the girlfriend that “[the girl] was quite beneath you.” (131)

In the final part of the novel, the patients throw a party right on the ward. Alcohol, medication and also some girls are the highlights of the night. Billy Bibbit is also taking part and feels great when he can spend the night accompanied by one of the girls who are friends of McMurphy. Billy and the girl lock themselves in a seclusion room to have privacy. Unfortunately, the drunk and tired patients fall asleep, and what wakes them up in the morning are the aids and the Big Nurse coming. As a result of Ratched’s bullying and claiming that she would tell his mother what happened, Billy cuts his own throat. The consequence is McMurphy’s act of choking the nurse and later on, McMurphy is sent to have a lobotomy—a brain operation that reduces him to a complete imbecile. Bromden, an inmate who refuses to let the Big Nurse feel she has won the match, then decides to suffocate his mate and flees from the hospital. His intention is to go to Canada (307-311)—maybe there he would find a home not affected by civilization so much.

In the 1950s, the character of housing influenced the everyday lives of the population of an America that was indeed changing immensely. How and where people lived also played an important role in strengthening the effect of conformity. After World War II, the wave of suburban development brought a different pattern of social relations. (Fromm, 1955, 139) In this period, America was rebuilt into vast suburbs. Millions of Americans moved from big cities to find a new home in suburbia. (*U. S. News & World Report* in Satin, 1960, 16) People were brought closer together. It was literally only a few meters separating neighbors. In *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm gave an example of a new settlement in Park Forest, Illinois, which “was made to house 30,000 people” in ranch-type houses and rental garden apartments. The inhabitants were of a similar age, “between 25 and 35,” married and had one or two children. One of the people expressed the warmth of the environment by saying that “you get real acceptance

in a community like that.” Fromm pointed out that this “craving for acceptance” is a typical feature of a person who loses their own identity.

Why should anyone be so grateful for acceptance unless he doubts that he is acceptable, and why should a young, educated, successful couple have such doubts, if not due to the fact that they cannot accept themselves—because they *are not* themselves. The only haven for having a sense of identity is conformity. Being acceptable really means not being different from anybody else. Feeling inferior stems from feeling different, and no question is asked whether the difference is for the better or the worse. (Fromm, 1955, 140)

This led to the complete lack of privacy. Problems were shared within the community. People longed to be accepted, so they adjusted their mores to that of the other residents. As a result, they started giving up themselves and becoming part of the herd. One woman, for example, was found reading Plato when being visited by neighbors. Her very unusual choice surprised the visitors. This made the woman think she was strange, but she “overestimate[d] the damage.” Such experiences made people willing to change. Privacy, too, was regarded as something weird and efforts to stay alone were rare. (Fromm, 1955, 140-141)

What could be called “togetherness,” had its dark side. Those who did not fit in were discriminated and ostracized. An example might be another woman living in Park Forest who was excluded from the community after she threw a party which was a total failure. One resident recalled: “Poor thing, she did it all wrong. The girls turned up in their bathing suits and slacks, as usual, and here she had little doilies and silver and everything spread around.” Since then, she was kept “out of things” and later decided with her husband to move somewhere else. (Fromm, 1955, 144)

The suburban growth had inevitably had an impact on certain groups of society. In Bromden’s flashbacks to his childhood we see what happened to his tribe at The Dalles. In this case the Indians must have withdrawn from their homes because their village stood in way of suburban growth. The white needed their land to build a dam. The entire community of the Chief’s tribe was forced to leave. (208)

### 3. Characteristics of America in the 1950s—the Fabulous Fifties

#### 3.1. Suburbia, consumerism, media, and the young generation

The 1950s were a decade of comfortableness and an easy acceptance of conformity. The standard of living was steadily rising. Almost every family had a car, and many could afford a two-car garage. Billions were invested in building vast suburban areas that accommodated millions of Americans moving from the cities. (*U. S. News & World Report* in Satin, 1960, 16)

A passage from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* illustrates how the landscape of the country was changing over the 1950s and describes the negative consequences of the life in suburbia. Some of the patients accompanied by Doctor Spivey are allowed to go on a fishing trip. Bromden, unlike the other members of the crew, notices the remarkable changes immediately because he has been in the hospital for many years. Bromden mentions, for example, “a string of full-grown men in mirrored suits” coming back home from work who lived in houses that were “strung across the hills outside of town.” And there are “five thousand kids” living in “five thousand” identical houses owned by the men in suits. It sometimes happen, the Chief continues, that “the kids went home by mistake to different houses” but “nobody ever noticed.” (227-228) This passage is, of course, exaggerated but reflects well the uniformity of the suburbs.

New machines were developed that produced more goods to please the consumers. A TV set, for example, became commonplace in homes. Life was easier and more comfortable, with fridges and “heat-and-serve” meals in them. Americans quickly accepted new inventions—FM radios and tape recorders. The nation became prosperous and its people had never been so well off. (*U. S. News & World Report* in Satin, 1960, 16-18)

As Gilbert Seldes pointed out in his 1950 article “The People and the Arts,” the rise of media—radio and television also shaped the social landscape of the era. Radio was not a new invention but in this period, radio broadcasting became a part of everyday life. (Seldes in Satin, 1960, 65) By the end of the 1950s the basics of radio had



been well established. There were several types of radio available—“AM/FM Table Radios, Portable Radios, Automobile Radios, and High Fidelity AM/FM.” Models with electric clocks were also providing the “wake-up-to-music” feature. The High Fidelity radios included even a record changer. The radio industry had become highly competitive. Costs of the radio sets were reduced so the radio became a household commodity. (Lempert, 1984, 81) Radio at the time had an advantage over television because of its natural rhythm and constant presence—people turned it on at home, at work, and their cars. Considering the fact that media have a creative effect on people’s minds in that they present only a limited and partial view, it is dangerous because they can present a false view of life. Seldes claims that they “prevent the community from raising mature and responsible citizens.” According to Seldes, the aim of media in general is to make people more suggestible and to keep the attention of their audience. Commercial broadcasting indeed induced a passive acceptance of values of different sorts. For example, in music “the tendency [was] to approach the lower end of the scale of values, to exclude the exceptional.” Programs based on laughter and sentimentality were intended to please the average man tired after the long day and to amuse his wife while she was doing the housework after she was left home alone. The tendency was to encourage uniformity. In his article, Seldes concluded: “Radio has become static.” The repetitive rhythm was a stimulus “to do the same thing at the same time, without end.” (Seldes in Satin, 1960, 63-7)

In Kesey’s novel, the omnipresence and repetitiveness of 1950s’ radio broadcasting is reflected in the consistent presence of the melodies played to patients. According to the Big Nurse, the radio has a therapeutic effect on the mind of those patients who are not able to play cards or read due to their poor state of health. (102) As Harding says, he and the other inmates no longer notice the noise (76) that sometimes “hinders conversation and reading.” It is on McMurphy’s initiative that a second day room is opened for the Acutes—the younger, more active patients such as Harding, Billy Bibbit and Martini—so they no longer need to listen to the annoying noise. (107)

Members of the media however were aware of their brainwashing effect on public and some journalists criticized the monotonous character of radio broadcasting.

One article published in Oregon newspaper *Eugene Register-Guard* in 1957 pointed out, all Americans were singing the same songs, as they heard the same hits. They were telling the same jokes they had heard on TV. Their clothes, the books they read were all the same in all regions of America. In short, people worked to become “members of the team” by sharing the same taste dictated to them by media. Indeed, a stranger visiting the United States in the fifties would have been impressed by the similarities in people, by the uniformity and the lack of individual differences. (*Eugene Register-Guard*)

Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer who visited the United States in 1947, was shocked by what she found—a nation of conformism, of the average man and, surprisingly, also the young man. She later recalled:

This country, once so passionate about individualism, had itself become a nation of sheep; repressing originality, both in itself and in others; rejecting criticism, measuring value by success, it left open no road to freedom except that of anarchic revolt; this explains the corruption of its youth, their refuge in drug-taking and their imbecile outbreaks of violence. (Whitfield in Bigsby, 2006, 256)

The youth of the 1950s were indeed very different from the previous generations that were revolting against arbitrary values. The author of an article in *The Nation* explained that the influences on the 1950s generation were anonymous. Especially the young were exposed to an influence of mass media such as television and the weekly popular magazines with their advertising and simplified approach to world affairs. The values presented in them—political, economic, religious and ethical—were often accommodated to please adolescents and Americans accepted them. (*The Nation* in Satin, 1960, 22-23)

*The Nation* asked sixteen professors from sixteen colleges to comment on the then present generation of students. The article which was called “The Careful Young Men” told of the youth that had become “increasingly bland in every way.” What caused the blandness was “loss of political idealism, the contemporaneity of cultural values, and prosperity.” Karl Shapiro, a professor at the University of Nebraska, called the youth of the 1950s “the Brain-Washed Generation.” He described his students as passive and the causes, he explained, were the affluence and also a loss of political

idealism. (*The Nation* in Satin, 1960, 25-26) However, also education and educators could be blamed for the lack of individuality and enthusiasm in the youth of the time. Students were trained in schools that maintained group discipline, so the pupils might painlessly adapt themselves to what was then considered to be “a normal code of behavior.” As a result, there were countless college graduates who even could not read some of the finest pieces of literature, who could barely speak proper English, write a coherent essay, not mentioning their lack of interest in politics. *Life* and *Fortune* magazines found out through social studies and reports that young people in particular “have a profound urge to conform to the mores of the groups to which its individuals are attached.” (Smith in Satin, 1960, 12-13)

As a response to the article “The Careful Young Men” published in *The Nation* on March 9, 1957, Oregon’s newspaper *Eugene Register-Guard* published an article called “Careful, Brainwashed Young Men” on April 5, 1957. The author of the article partially agreed with the original idea claiming that “the intellectual tone of an American college [was] one of conformity, complacency, compliance and caution” and “the object of education [was] adjustment to the life situation.” On the other hand, the author disagreed with *The Nation* and expressed the idea that society as a whole, not only students was brainwashed—highlighting again the impact of media and consumerism on society. (*Eugene Register-Guard*)

### **3.2. The Korean War, escapist tendencies, new inventions**

Although the Korean War was a dominant event in the life of the 1950s youth, hardly anyone wanted to join the Army. There was no enthusiasm for war. Young people were not willing to become heroes. But at the same time, they did not participate in any anti-war activities. There were almost no manifestations of pacifism. Some observers ascribed this lack of concern about the Korean War issue to youth’s passivity. (*Time* in Satin, 1960, 4)

The attitude towards and presentation of joining the American Army was explained by Erich Fromm in his work *The Sane Society*. In the book, published in 1955, Fromm criticizes the Army giving the following reasons:

The army is propagandized as if it were an attractive business enterprise; the soldier should feel like a member of a “team,” even though the hard fact remains that he must be trained to kill and be killed. (Fromm, 1955, 138-139)

Instead, more than ever before, this generation wanted a good, secure job. (*Time* in Satin, 1960, 5) After World War II, jobs became more technical. New machines made work easier and people had more time for recreation. Their earnings increased so they could also spend more money on their holiday. Experts were required for newly established jobs. As a result, new schools appeared. Consequently, there were more students of high schools and more college graduates than ever before. (*U. S. News & World Report* in Satin, 1960, 18-20)

The 1950s saw also a revival of interest in religion. Many new churches were built. (*U. S. News & World Report* in Satin, 1960, 19) Church membership and attendance increased. Popular magazines included articles with religious themes. Faith was fashionable. The renewed interest in religion was to some extent a result of the anxiety of the time. (Meserve in Satin, 1960, 141-142) In the younger generation, large numbers were seeking their faith in God. The fact that it had not found one before, *Time* observed, was less significant than the fact that it felt the need to believe. (*Time* in Satin, 1960, 10)

Furthermore, the 1950s was an era called the first baby boom. Americans married at a younger age because it was easier for them to set up their home. They had a secure job and higher wages. There was a trend toward larger families; parents were better able to provide for their children due to improved economic conditions. Births were no longer deferred. (*Science News Letter* in Satin, 1960, 113)

During the 1950s, new inventions and technology were developed that helped save lives of Americans but contributed also to the loss of many. New drugs were introduced that were used for the treatment of pneumonia, tuberculosis and heart diseases, among others. Tranquilizers were introduced and became widely used to treat patients with mental diseases. New drugs were helpful also in healing wounds of soldiers who were dying for their nation in the war in Korea. America equipped her men

with new weapons and invested “more than 300 billion dollars” in the fight against Communism. (*U. S. News & World Report* in *Satin*, 1960, 16-18)

Of course, the use of drugs is reflected in Kesey’s novel, as the plot takes place in a mental hospital. But one problem lies in the fact that some of the patients have suffered from harmful side effects after taking their medication. However, the personnel forces patients to take it. For example, the epileptic patient Sefelt is strongly advised to take his Dilantin although his gums are ragged and he is losing teeth. His friend Fredrickson, on the contrary, takes a double dose of Dilantin—the extra dose comes from Sefelt—to prevent an epileptic fit. (166-170) Both these patients are afraid of their illness but at the same time, they misuse the drugs; and the staff instead of helping the inmates is only forcing them to follow the rules.

When a speaker in the day room announces the time for taking medication, the patients get their capsules. One rarely asks what he is being “required to swallow.” (32) The patients have no choice, they have to follow the rules and obey the staff. When inmate Taber does not want to take his medication, or better say only asks what medication is given to him, he is considered a trouble-maker. A nurse insists he swallows it saying

“It’s just medication, Mr. Taber, good for you. Down it goes, now.”  
“But I mean what kind of medication. Christ, I can see that they’re pills—”  
“Just swallow it all, shall we, Mr. Taber—just for me?” She takes a quick look at the Big Nurse to see how the little flirting technique she is using is accepted, then looks back at the Acute. He still isn’t ready to swallow something he don’t know what is, not even just for her.”  
“Miss, I don’t like to create trouble. But I don’t like to swallow something without knowing what it is, neither. How do I know this isn’t one of those funny pills that makes me something I’m not?”

To solve the problem, the Big Nurse comes and says that if Taber wants to act foolish, he does not need to take his medication “orally.” (32) The problem is solved—the patient is forced to give up.

### **3.3. The dark side of the fifties—politics, anti-Communism, McCarthyism, actions of certain US federal agencies**

The relative peace and prosperity of the 1950s camouflaged rough-and-tumble politics. After World War II, Americans feared that their way of life was threatened by a system, the expansion of which might result in a destruction of democracy. Though after the war the Soviet Union annexed large territories of Eastern Europe and in 1949 China fell to Communism, some of the anti-Communist outrages were exaggerated. During Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency (1953-1961), the fear of Communism was often fueled by paranoia and naïve generalization that every person that had been interested in the communist ideology had to be necessarily a spy. (<http://www.jiffynotes.com>)

Americans were threatened by the system and rather followed the prescribed order. In *Cuckoo's Nest*, the patients found themselves in a very similar situation. They were intimidated by the Big Nurse and her staff and exposed to the threat of the Electro Shock Therapy that lead to a state of disorientation for days. If exposed to a great number of such therapies, the treatment might cause irreversible damage to the patient's mind. Inmate called Harding points to patient Ellis who, after the treatments, turned into "a drooling, pants-wetting idiot at thirty-five." Another example mentioned is Bromden. Harding explains that he "received more than two hundred shock treatments," and as a result he became "a six-foot-eight sweeping machine, scared of its own shadow." Harding advises McMurphy: "That, my friend, is what we can be threatened with." (67)

The main political figure active in the fight against Communism in the fifties was Senator Joseph McCarthy. Although he did not participate in any prosecution directly, the accusations he made at a 1950 Republican meeting that 205 members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) worked in the State Department triggered a witch-hunt against alleged Communist spies. One of the victims of McCarthyism was Alger Hiss, a government official who was tried for working on behalf of the Soviet Union and found guilty of perjury for lying about his espionage activities. (<http://www.jiffynotes.com>; Haynes and Klehr, 2006, 7) The trial was used as a campaign tactic by Richard Nixon, who played the key role in exposing Hiss as a communist spy. The strategy of Red-baiting—the act of accusing a person of being a

communist—became a popular tool in election campaign among politicians. (<http://www.jiffynotes.com>)

Many Americans agreed with the goal of removing Communists from Government, but they did not agree with McCarthy's methods. (McCarthy in Satin, 1960, 85) Also both President Harry S. Truman and Eisenhower disagreed with the senator's "bullying tactics." (<http://www.jiffynotes.com>) In *The Fight for America*, a book McCarthy published in 1952, the politician explained that his aim was to expose the truth about men who were betraying their nation. He asked President Truman to discharge those allegedly involved in the Communist conspiracy and took the evidence to a Senate committee who would "hire investigators and subpoena witnesses." But in McCarthy's view, these two methods did not prove to be effective enough, so he decided to present the names publicly, the idea being that once the evidence is presented to the American people, those accused "can do but little damage." (McCarthy in Satin, 1960, 85-94)

During the era of McCarthyism, thousands of Americans were accused of being Communists or communist sympathizers. Others lived in fear—the fear of being labeled as subversive. (*Time* in Satin, 1960, 9) McCarthy was the embodiment of the effort to impose anti-Communist conformity. But the effort was more significantly encouraged by the legislative investigation committees—especially the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) enlarged its competencies and monitored intellectual and cultural life. People could no longer express their opinion if it was not congruent with the political system in the state. (Whitfield in Bigsby, 2006, 259) The role of public in the fight against Communism was supported by authorities. In 1947, John Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, said before the House Un-American Activities Committee that "victory will be assured once Communists are identified and exposed, because the public will take the first step of quarantining them so they can do no harm." His words were later used in a well-known speech McCarthy gave in 1952. (McCarthy in Satin, 1960, 95)

One factor that contributed to the spread of anti-Communist ideas were the new media. The 1950s saw a huge increase in the purchase of television sets. The new tool

helped also then Vice-president Richard Nixon to save his political career when he was accused of misusing campaign funds. (<http://www.jiffynotes.com>) Nixon allegedly accepted 18,000 dollars from his supporters. In his 1952 Checkers speech which was aired to millions of Americans, Nixon claimed that none of the money had been diverted for his personal use. He gave an account of his financial history to the radio and television audience including full details of his debts and other liabilities. Later in the speech, he recalled the Alger Hiss case and presented the idea of getting rid of the alleged Communists who infiltrated the Government. A part of the speech was also dedicated to President Eisenhower who, according to Nixon, was the only man able to save America from Communism. The speech ended with a promise that a vote for Eisenhower was a vote for what was good for America. (<http://watergate.info>)

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a dialogue between McMurphy and Harding directly criticizes President Eisenhower. Their conversation should resolve who of the two patients would become “a bull goose loony,” (18) in other words, who is the craziest person on the ward. The men are making the situation even more ridiculous by talking through a mediator, one of the inmates, Billy Bibbit:

“Mr. Bibbit, you might warn this Mr. Harding that I’m so crazy I admit to voting for Eisenhower.”

“Bibbit! You tell Mr. McMurphy I’m so crazy I voted for Eisenhower *twice!*”

“And you tell Mr. Harding right back”—he puts both hands on the table and leans down, his voice getting low—“that I’m so crazy I plan to vote for Eisenhower again this *November.*” (20)

This incident may seem funny but there are also less humorous events presented in the novel that refer to politics, some also illustrating the 1950s accusations. When Bromden describes the ward and *the routine* there, he mentions patients’ playing cards and telling jokes to each other. But indeed, they must be careful not to say something inappropriate because one of their friends may blow the whistle. The Chief explains that the patients spy on each other. If a man says something about himself he did not intend to let slip, one of his mates writes down the piece of information into the big log book by the Nurse’s Station in the day room. As the Big Nurse says, the book has a therapeutic benefit for the whole ward. Bromden claims, however, that its only purpose



is to have enough evidence to send a patient to an electro-shock treatment. As a reward, the patient who wrote the piece of information in the log book is allowed to sleep late the next day. (14)

The Big Nurse is the true leader in the hospital. What she dreams of is to create “a world of precision efficiency” where “the schedule is unbreakable.” To accomplish her goal she chooses her perfect doctor—Doctor Spivey—a man with “a big wide forehead and wide jowly cheeks” who does not come up with his own ideas but rather follows Ratched’s suggestions how to run the ward. Indeed, Doctor Spivey is a mere puppet in her hands. (27-9) If the doctor would disagree with the nurse, she could have mentioned that, for example, the doctor had requested a fairly higher amount of drugs for patients, implying that the doctor was an addict. Ratched can let fire anyone who tries to usurp her power in the ward. (60-1) Over the years, she has collected also a perfect staff of aides—black boys who are full of hate but have been gradually trained to follow her orders without question. She taught them “her own technique”—not to show hate and “wait for a little advantage, [...] then twist the rope and keep the pressure steady.” That is one way she gets the patients “into shape.” (28-29)

She holds power over both staff and patients. Considering the power over inmates, Ratched uses a strategy reminiscent of the 1950s accusations. The strategy is applied during the Group Discussion—a therapeutic meeting which is supposed to help patients learn to get along in a group before they will be able to function in a normal society. They are supposed to say something about their past, or anything they have in mind. Usually, there are long periods of silence but now and then the patients talk about themselves and by asking well targeted questions, the nurse gets confessions of various “sins” they have committed. (47-48) Not only do the inmates confess their own slip-ups but they also comment on their fellows’ lapses and write about them in the log book. All she needs then is to open the log book during the Group Discussion and read notes written by patients. As Harding explains, Ratched does not even need to prod the patients directly. All she needs is to open the log book during the Group Discussion and read notes written by patients. Harding further expands on this idea:

No. She doesn’t need to accuse. She has a genius for insinuation. Did you ever hear her, in the course of our discussion today, ever *once* hear her

accuse me of anything? Yet it seems I have been accused of a multitude of things, of jealousy and paranoia, of not being man enough to satisfy my wife, of having relations with male friends of mine, of holding my cigarette in an affected manner [...]. (61)

During the meeting, a patient has to answer the nurse's questions and certainly does not help himself if he keeps quiet. The inmates explain to McMurphy how the Big Nurse's questions, or rather not answering them may cause a trouble for him. Scanlon, one of the patients, advises McMurphy: "If you don't answer her question, Mack, you *admit* it just by keeping quiet. It's the way those bastards in the government get you." (66)

In the hospital, mediocrity was encouraged. This idea is expressed in the concept of the Combine. As Bromden puts it, this is a huge organization which aims to adjust "the Outside" in the same way the Big Nurse adjusts "the Inside." Under the nurse's rule, the ward was completely adjusted to surroundings. (26) Bromden further explains that "the ward is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches [...]." (38) Here Bromden suggests that the instruments for the Combine's aim to adjust society are education and religion.

What helped Ratched to achieve the adjustment of the ward according to her rules is the Therapeutic Community. According to Doctor Spivey's theory, it is society who decides who is sane and who is not, so one has to measure up. The group can help a patient by showing him where he is out of place. Doctor Spivey tells that the aim of the Therapeutic Community is "a democratic ward, run completely by the patients and their votes," and men who will once be able "to turn back Outside." Any complaint or problem a patient has should be therefore discussed in the group instead of "letting it fester inside of [him]," the doctor explains. Also, if a patient hears a friend say something during their conversation, the best thing is to list it in the log book for the personnel to see. It is by no means "squealing," as Doctor Spivey says, but it is helping the friend. The intention is to create the ward similar to "the democratic, free neighborhoods" found outside. So the outcome is "a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside." (47)

Indeed, the world outside was not in favor of any inadequate or unusual behavior. In the novel, the issue of homosexuality is expressed indirectly through the character of Harding. He is an example of a 1950s homosexual who under the pressure of society got married and, as a result, lost a big deal of his identity. His life was then full of bitterness. It is embedded in Harding's words how gays were feeling at the time.

I discovered at an early age that I was—shall we be kind and say different? It's a better, more general word than the other one. I indulged in certain practices that our society regards as shameful. And I got sick. It wasn't the practices, I don't think, it was the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me—and the great voice of millions chanting, 'Shame. Shame. Shame.' It's society's was of dealing with someone different. (294)

Ken Yeager writes in his work *Trailblazers: Profiles of America's Gay and Lesbian Elected Officials* about openly gay Minnesota Senator Allen Spear. The Senator, who was not only a gay person but also Jewish, explained that he had “always felt alienated, [and] an outsider in society.” The senator, who came out publicly as a gay in 1974, recalled how hard it was for him to grow up in the 1950s. He could not tell even his parents the truth because people at the time considered homosexuality a taboo. “In a small Midwestern town in the 1950s, you just didn't stroll in to your parents or school counselor and say you're gay,” he declared. In a 1997 speech, Spear also explained what an insidious effect McCarthyism had on the small town of Oberlin.

McCarthyism was a crusade not only for political conformity but also for sexual conformity. Communism and homosexuality, we were told, worked hand in hand to undermine the American way of life. Being gay at Oberlin in the 1950s was little different from being gay elsewhere—you stayed in the closet or else. There was no openly gay or lesbian life. Liaisons were furtive and the subject of whispered rumours. (Spear in Yeager, 1999, 16-18)

#### **3.4. Culture, beat generation, biographical information on Kesey**

In his article called “The Culture of the Cold War,” Stephen J. Whitfield described the effect the establishment had on public culture. Standards were set upon the arts and people could not freely express their opinion if it was not congruent with

the political system in the state. Artistic works were censored. American popular Culture was politicized. Whitfield pointed out that:

Creativity is unlikely to flourish where the tastes of officials matter. A society that imposes political standards upon its art, or demands of its artists certain sorts of citizenship tests (uncritical loyalty, abject repentance), is too much like totalitarianism. When a standard becomes pervasive and intensive, and so potent in its effects that countless careers are ruined and the public cannot make its own choices in the marketplace of ideas, then the United States has come to resemble—rather uncomfortably—the sort of society to which it wishes to be contrasted. (Whitfield in Bigsby, 2006, 259)

The wave of anti-communism had ceased to rampage in American society by the mid-1960s; the sea of suspicion had been quietened. Some of the victims of the Cold War—including those who were blacklisted by McCarthy—were rehabilitated. (Whitfield in Bigsby, 2006, 271)

In the 1950s, there was the mainstream culture and then there were the Beats. They were by no means of those who would be threatened by the establishment. The four original founders of the movement were Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Neal Cassady. They met in New York in the late 1940s and since then shaped ideas and lifestyle of people who felt a social change was inevitable. Although it was a slow process, the Beats attracted more and more supporters.

The term the Beat Generation was first used in 1948 by Jack Kerouac who told his friend working for *the New York Times Magazine* that he and his friends were a beat generation. The journalist later wrote an article called “The Beat Generation” where he described the principles of the movement above all emphasizing “a nakedness of mind.” Allen Ginsberg later explained what he understood under the term Beat.

The point of Beat is that you get beat down to a certain nakedness where you actually are able to see the world in a visionary way, which is the old classical understanding of what happens in the dark night of the soul. (<http://www2.lib.virginia.edu>)

In her work *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, Ann Charters cites historians Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak who called the Beats a

“bunch of dissenters.” Indeed, the Beatniks gave the establishment reasons to be afraid of their influence on the general public—they were “vaguely left wing” oriented, hedonistic, and above all very popular. The mass media saw that people were fascinated by the Beats; and therefore much attention was paid to the topic in articles of *Time*, *Life*, and *Look*, but the image presented in them was distorted to “smash this appealing movement.” Young people, however, imitated their new heroes—“in the proliferation of coffeehouses, poetry readings, jazz listening, and hip slang later in the decade.” People dissatisfied with the existing order of things craved for a change that the Beats could offer.

They attracted so many young people because, through the mass media, they flamboyantly spoke of the possibilities of choice and change. Such ideas repelled the conservative forces in America, which needed abdication, acquiescence, or at least apathy to survive. Attacking the Beats was first of all a recognition that this statistically tiny group disproportionately countered such acquiescence. (Charters, 2001, xxxv-xxxvi)

In the late 1950s, Ken Kesey also belonged to a community which chose to live differently from the rest of society. There were novelists and other literary intellectuals, and also students of various disciplines who found a “bohemia” on Perry Lane near Stanford University. (Wolfe in Kesey, 1973, 316) One of the most interesting people on Perry Lane in Kesey’s view was Vik Lovell, a graduate in psychology who introduced Kesey to psychoactive drugs. Kesey later took part in experiments with these drugs which also influenced his work. It was after taking LSD that Kesey had the idea to write a novel from the point of view of an Indian—Chief Broom. (Wolfe in Kesey, 1973, 322-329)

In *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Kesey presented many characters that were not able to conform to the social order. A representative of an individual living voluntarily on the edge of society in Kesey’s novel is one of the main characters—R. P. McMurphy. Mack’s role in the novel is truly crucial. Thanks to his efforts to break the routine, the patients become more confident and their fear of the Big Nurse would gradually decrease. McMurphy is puzzling the staff of the hospital. For example, once, when he is not allowed to use toothpaste early in the morning because the ward policy says it has to be locked in the cabinet, as Mack is told by one of the aides, Mack dips his toothbrush

in the soap powder the black boys use for cleaning, leaving the black boy completely baffled. (91)

Mack's behavior reminds Bromden of his father, the chief, who was always bucking authorities. Like once, when the government men came to negotiate about buying Indians' land. The chief confused them by keeping looking at the sky saying "Geese up there, white man. You know it. Geese this year. And last year." So the men were not sure what to do. "Yes. Maybe true, Chief Bromden. Now. Forget geese. Pay attention to contract. What we offer could greatly benefit you—your people—change the lives of the red man." The chief went on without noticing them, "... and the year before and the year before and the year before..." Then, the white men left, leaving the laughing chief and his brothers behind them. (91-92)

#### **4. Characteristics of America in the 1960s—the Turbulent Sixties**

The American Sixties broke the traditional rules in every possible way "from music to fashion (or lack of it), to manners and mores." The traditional norms were challenged in literature and art. The government was criticized for its policies in Vietnam. The young were actively participating in civil rights movement; and mind-altering drugs became a popular means to bring freedom and new independent way of life. (<http://www2.lib.virginia.edu>)

##### **4.1. The Feminist Movement, politics, and the Civil Rights Movement**

The second wave of the feminist movement in America reflected the discontent of women with their position in society at the time. Women's movements powerfully influenced the nation "creating new roles for men and women." (McWilliams, 2000, 9) There were radical feminists "who challenged the economic and social premises of American society." Their goal was to achieve an equal position with men. Feminists claimed that men and women should inevitably have the same educational, economic and job opportunities. (Cavallo, 1999, 12)

The role of gender is also one of the major themes in Kesey's novel. Dr. Michelle Napierski-Prancl explained in her essay "Role Traps in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" that the work acts as an example of the link between sex and power, and also indicated how the novel did not pay much attention to the movements that were shaping the society at the time.

Sexism is apparent in *Cuckoo's Nest* as characters are relegated to two types of role traps: those that favor traditional norms of femininity/masculinity and those that challenge them. We sympathize with characters who act gender appropriately and dislike or feel sorry for those who do not.

Gender roles in this novel are best understood if placed in the social context of the time of publication. The 1960s was a period of social turmoil when the drug culture, the Civil Rights movement, and the second wave of feminism occurred simultaneously. While embracing the drug culture, this book acts as a form of backlash against the civil rights and feminist movements. (Napierski-Prancl, 2003, 227-229)

The power women have over men is indeed one of the main themes of *Cuckoo's Nest*. The narrator of the novel Bromden, a patient of Indian origin has flashbacks to his childhood. He recalls that his mother, who was a white Christian, refused to take her husband's name Tee Ah Millatoona. When the whole family moved into town, it was much easier for all of them to use the name Bromden instead. (272)

Marcia L. Falk, a professor of literature at Stanford University, writes in her paper about the issue of gender. According to Falk, Chief Bromden's mother is the most striking example of female power. Mrs. Bromden made her husband "small." The professor further pointed out that "it is largely because of her power to threaten male virility that the Chief is now in a mental institution." The mother is of course only a symbolic representation of "the White Man's brutal destruction of all cultures other than his own. (Falk in Kesey, 1972, 451)

In the novel, Chief Bromden explains what happened to his father in a conversation with R. P. McMurphy. The Indian blames not only his mother but society as a whole.

No. It wasn't just her that made him little. Everybody worked on him because he was big, and wouldn't give in, and did like he pleased [...]. The Combine [...] worked on him for years. In the town they beat him up in the

alleys and cut his hair short once. Oh, the Combine's big—big. He fought it a long time till my mother made him too little to fight any more and he gave up. (208)

The Chief remembers an incident that on the other hand illustrates how the Indians refused to obey the authorities. When Bromden was very young, he remembers how his father and uncle decided to keep the tradition after their mother died. Hanging the dead body from a tree they broke the rule of established society. (274) Their deed was illegal but they would have broken tradition of the tribe which was set hundreds of years back.

In his thoughts Bromden also recalls one day from the distant past, from days when the family lived in the village on the river Columbia. Three white people, all wearing fancy outfits, arrived in a car and started looking the village over. Appalled by the image of the poor hovels of the tribesmen, they expressed their disgust and spoke about the government's plan for the village. Bromden, then about ten years old, had been in front of a shack next to the three of them listening to whole their conversation and they did not seem to even notice him being there. He tried to complain and respond to their offensive remarks but they did not care; they refused to acknowledge his presence. (198-200)

This was the first time Bromden experienced a feeling he got used to later in his life. Then he started acting deaf. What made him feign a deafness was the way the white people had looked upon his community. It was as if the Indians could not speak English and as if they still scalped people. Bromden remembered his teachers at grade school who quit listening what he was saying. In the Army anybody with more stripes also acted as if he could not hear or talk. (198)

In his critique, Terry Sherwood concludes on the role of Chief Bromden and his representation in the novel:

The six foot, eight inch "Vanishing American," the fist man in the ward, has been defeated by a racist society which bulldozes its Indian villages and, after using the tribesmen to fight crippling wars, incarcerates them in asylums to clean floors for white inmates. (Sherwood in Kesey, 1972, 389)



The issue of Civil Rights became the most difficult domestic problem for John F. Kennedy who became President in 1960. With his election the new era of liberalism began. From the beginning, the issue of Civil Rights became Kennedy's most difficult domestic problem. Year by year the pace of racial change had quickened and blacks gained more rights. (Matusow, 2009, 62)

One of the first steps in the Civil Rights had been taken by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the late fifties, he led Blacks in a boycott against segregation of black and white people in buses in Montgomery, Alabama. (Matusow, 2009, 62) On April 3, 1963, King initiated a campaign to smash segregation in Birmingham, Alabama although he knew it would be tough, if successful, the segregation could have become milder over the nation. As a result of his role in the protests, he was arrested on Good Friday, April 12. In a cell, King wrote his famous "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" that defended demonstrations and nonviolent protests. However, the black protesters were provoked to a massive riot. (Matusow, 2009, 99) A major reappraisal of policy inside the Kennedy administration was needed.

Kennedy amply fulfilled the promises made. On June 19, 1963, he sent Congress a civil rights bill where most of the movement's demands were embodied. As an important part, the bill further strengthened the voting rights laws for Blacks. "By November 1963, pending bill had made [Kennedy] a hero to most liberals and won him respect from all but the militant fringe of the Civil Rights Movement." (Matusow, 2009, 90-93)

The President's assassination in Dallas, on November 22, 1963, left millions of Americans bereft of a man who, they believed, could bring the desirable change the nation was ready to undergo. Especially among Blacks, grief was tinged with anxiety. Also, Kennedy's successor Lyndon Johnson had become an enthusiast for Civil rights, yet as a new President he had to face "outrage over continuing economic inequality and even rejection of the liberal goal of integration and assimilation of black Americans into a white-dominated society." (Hellman in Bigsby, 2006, 305) Not only the black community but the whole nation later expressed their discontent and impatience with President Lyndon B. Johnson and his War on Poverty. One of the goals of the welfare program was for example to rebuild inner-city slums or to make loans more available to

the wider public. (Cavallo, 1999, 211) After all, the program appeared inadequate to its announced aims. (Hellman in Bigsby, 2006, 305)

The war in Vietnam began to raise more and more indignation. In addition, riots and violent uprisings of Blacks became one of Johnson's main problems. A paramilitary group of black activists fighting against injustice toward blacks arose. They called themselves Black Panthers.

The Panthers modeled themselves on Third World anti-colonial revolutionaries. They adopted black paramilitary uniforms, operated community programs of free breakfasts for children in black communities, and referred to police as "pigs." Black intellectuals began denigrating the goal of integration in favor of an emphasis on black pride, history, and culture summed up in the slogan "Black Power." (Hellman in Bigsby, 2006, 305)

Black Americans were also disconcerted with their part in the Vietnam War. At first, Blacks served with enthusiasm but gradually the movement against involvement of black soldiers in the war grew. Problems in the military and the changing atmosphere in the larger society led to serious conflict. Anti-war movement had its advocates in Martin Luther King, Jr. and Muhammad Ali. The latter declared that "no Viet Cong had ever called him nigger and claimed a deferment as a conscientious objector, citing his membership of the black Nation of Islam." Ali refused to be drafted and as a result he was sentenced to five years in prison. Later he was pardoned. (Hellman in Bigsby, 2006, 305-306)

The movement against the Vietnam War increased among whites as well. Demonstrations grew in size and intensity. Young men's lives were determined by the threat of being sent to Vietnam. On campuses they were safe from the draft, but the awareness of those fighting in the war and uncertainty led to an atmosphere of an increasing intensity of emotion. It became popular to oppose a society labeled as the System (Hellman in Bigsby, 2006, 307)

## 4.2. Counterculture, literary influence

During the second half of the Sixties, a counterculture overlapped with the antiwar movement. The members of the counterculture were known as “hippies.” The young people gathered and formed a society in the society with a different set of values. Haight-Ashbury where they gathered “had by June 1966 drawn an estimated 15,000 hippies.” Mind-altering drugs such as LSD and marijuana offered ways to transform inner consciousness and break through the “doors of perception,” Aldous Huxley pointed out— having a personal experience with the hallucinogen found in peyote mushrooms. (Hellman in Bigsby, 2006, 308)

Ken Kesey was one of those hooked on the new hallucinogenic drug—LSD. Another advocate of the drug was Timothy Leary. He taught psychology at Harvard. Unlike Kesey, whose novels are dealing with the issue only partly, Leary turned drugs into a main topic. In *Psychedelic Prayers After the Tao Te Ching* the author justifies the drug use maintaining massive psychedelic experience among the population. After the possession of LSD became illegal, Leary was imprisoned for a number of years.

There were not many among hippies who read much, but those who did found their inspiration and ideology in the books of Norman O. Brown—a scholar at Wesleyan University who was enthusiastic about “underground explorations.” In 1959, Brown published a work called *Life Against Death* which was perceived as the bible of cultural radicalism and established Brown as a prophet of the counterculture. (Matusow, 2009, 277)

In *Life Against Death* we can find all the characteristic features of hippie movement inscribed. Brown, like the hippies, did not agree with the political system, he refused Western civilization. Like the hippies, Brown was in revolt against civilized sex, finding an alternative in “pan-sexualism” and polygamy.

Rejecting descent into the id as mere regression, Brown wished to make the unconscious conscious, incorporate the content of the id into the ego—to create, in other words, a new ego, a body ego, which Brown called the “Dionysian ego,” overflowing with love, knowing no limits, affirming life. (Matusow, 2009, 278-279)

The hippie movement was spreading through a generation of the young so fast because it challenged the traditional values supporting the liberal movement of the 1960s—“reason, progress, order, achievement, [and] social responsibility.” Hippies mocked liberal politicians and scorned bourgeois society. In so doing, they opposed established authority and at the same time baffled President Lyndon Johnson more than anyone else. In the name of liberation, they rejected everything Johnson stood for, including his efforts to liberate the poor and the black. “Clearly, liberation meant something different to liberals like him from what it meant to radicals like them.” (Matusow, 2009, 276)

In 1969, a new president, Richard Nixon might witness the gathering in Woodstock that represented an alternative to the oppressive society. Hundreds of thousands of young people journeyed to a four-day outdoor concert in New York upstate. The audience openly used drugs, shared food, and took off their clothes. These four days of freedom was a fulfilled dream of the young generation.

At the end of the decade, it became clear that the counterculture would not survive only on drugs, sex, and rock and roll. From the beginning, the acid prophets had also warned that the use of LSD did not inevitably “produce the God experience.” Violence in the counterculture mounted and the end of the era of LSD neared. “The always tenuous link between drugs and love was broken.” During the forthcoming decade, the counterculture as well as the antiwar movement faded out. (Matusow, 2009, 303-305)

## 5. Conclusion

Conformity is a key word, and probably the best one we would use to characterize the American 1950s. Interestingly, for describing the following period of the 1960s words such as rebellion or revolution, a sort of completely different terms, would be needed, the decade being in many ways the very opposite. It seems that never in history of the United States of America have two decades differed so remarkably. While the Sixties are well known for the Civil Rights Movement, antiwar protests, and a rejection of authorities, the period of the Fifties might be sometimes called placid because Americans at the time were rather content with the current situation and indeed too prone to accept conformity.

Kesey's work captures the conformity of the 1950s as well as the rebellion of the 1960s. Though this paper cannot offer a full picture of the two decades, it will be more clear to the reader what environment gave birth to such an impressive novel.

It may suffice to say that fifty years after the novel was published, conformity is still embraced in the United States. This is mainly due to an increasing influence of mass media on public but also practices in politics similar to those of the 1950s. Moreover, the current political atmosphere in America is influenced by the alleged threat of terrorism.

Hopefully, people can defy the power that would threaten their freedom. In the decade of 1950s when people were far from rebelling, even then certain people felt the need for a change. Those who wanted to be free, like *McMurphy* or the Beats, were free. And the same holds true today—those who refuse to become a part of the Combine and find a way how to resist authorities embodied by state and reject the norms dictated by masses really can be free.

## Resume

Po druhé světové válce, kdy došlo ke vzestupu vlivu Sovětského svazu, se ve Spojených státech amerických změnila jak politická, tak i společenská situace. Americká společnost v padesátých letech se příliš nezajímala o světové ani vnitropolitické dění a spíše inklinovala k finančnímu zajištění a rodinnému životu. Stalo se tomu tak i proto, že určití političtí představitelé vyvíjeli tlak na společnost a přesvědčovali občany o tom, že je důvod se obávat sílí sovětské moci. Vyvolali ve společnosti také obavy, že ve vládě operují tajní špioni sympatizující s komunistickou myšlenkou. Došlo proto k různým neprokázaným obviněním a následně také k poškození pověsti mnoha vládních činitelů.

Největší podíl na rozšiřování protikomunistické propagandy měl senátor Joseph McCarthy. K dosažení svého cíle odhalit veškeré špiony, ač k tomu neměl žádný prokazatelný důkaz, využíval jednak veřejná vystoupení a jednak média. Podobnou taktiku zvolil ke svému zviditelnění a také očistění své pověsti Richard Nixon, když před celým národem objasňoval celou svoji finanční historii kvůli nařčení využívání státních peněz pro osobní účely.

Média všeobecně měla na americkou populaci velký vliv. V polovině dvacátého století došlo k rozmachu jak rádiového vysílání, tak i televize. Rádio bylo součástí domácností již dlouhá léta, leč televizní přijímač byl pro mnohé výdobytkem doby, který si však mohl postupně dovolit téměř každý. Média však nepřinášela objektivní pohled ani na domácí politiku ani posluchače a diváky příliš nevychovala ke kultivaci poslechem kvalitní hudby či mluveného slova. Ani tisk mnohdy nebyl naprosto objektivní. Proto i mnozí cizinci, kteří navštívili zemi v padesátých letech, byli překvapeni, kterak onen národ tolik pověstný originalitou jedince a svobodou projevu, se najednou stal pravým opakem a byl spíše podobný systému, kterým Američané tolik opovrhovali, systému Sovětského svazu. Média byla cenzurována a tvůrci byli motivováni tvořit průměrné pořady a díla.

V románu *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* od Kena Keseyho je tento tlak, který byl na společnost vyvíjen, také cítit. Kesey používá mnohé takové obrazy, kupříkladu po příchodu McMurphyho, jednoho z hlavních hrdinů na scénu, několikrát proběhne diskuze ohledně rádia, které hraje od rána do večera tytéž hity v denní místnosti. Vrchní sestra Ratchedová tvrdí, že tomu tak je z důvodu terapeutických, poněvadž na oddělení jsou i velice staří pacienti, kteří mají potíže se sluchem, ale hlavně už nejsou schopni téměř ničeho jiného než právě poslechu. Pacienti na oddělení se dají rozdělit do dvou hlavních skupin. Jsou to mladší pacienti, kteří nemají na první pohled nijak závažné problémy, a pak jsou tu „chronici,“ kteří nejsou schopni normálního života. Buďto jsou připoutáni ke zdi jako pacient Ruckly anebo jsou vyplašeni z vlastního stínu jako jedna z hlavních postav románu Náčelník Bromden. Když na oddělení dorazí nový příjem Randle P. McMurphy, ostatní pacienti ho zpočátku zvědavě „oťukávají,“ ale pak se nechají naprosto strhnout jeho spontaneitou a živelností. McMurphy je opravdu velmi odlišný od ostatních. Bromden připisuje jeho divokost a nepřizpůsobivost jeho stylu života. Nikdy se neoženil, nepořídil si rodinu a vždy byl na cestě, aby obehral dalších pár „kámošů“ o nějaký ten dolar. Jinak jsou ale pacienti všichni velice vystrašení a nechávají se šikanovat Ratchedovou a jejími pomocníky. Nikdo se neodvážá vzepřít Sestrinu nařízení. Ani personál nemocnice se nijak nepokouší prosazovat své názory, všichni tupě přijímají pokyny shora.

Kesey ve svém románu reflektoval soudobou společnost, která pasivně přijímala lži předkládané médii a institucemi. Autority se snažily ovlivňovat obyvatelstvo, protože se obávaly rozmachu komunismu, a i tím upevňovaly konformitu. Výsledkem byla velice homogenní společnost. Jednou z věcí, které byly nepřijatelné, byla homosexualita. Tehdejší pohled na tuto problematiku stavěl homosexuály do svízelné situace. Tito se v mnoha případech přizpůsobili a oženili se či vdaly, aby se neodlišovali od většiny. V románu je typickým příkladem Dale Harding, který ač homosexuál zřejmě byl (zcela přímo tento fakt z jeho úst nezazní), pod nepřímým vlivem společnosti pojal za manželku dámu, která jeho pocit méněcennosti jen umocnila. Vliv ženského elementu je jedním z mnoha motivů románu. Postavy žen Kesey prezentuje buďto jako poslušné ženušky nebo jako mocné fúrie. Do první skupiny lze zařadit například zdravotní sestry, které nemají vlastní názor. Do druhé pak spadá především Ratchedová a její přítelkyně, matka jednoho z pacientů Billyho Bibbita. Tyto dvě ženy mají na

starost jednu z největších tragédií celého příběhu, kdy v samotném závěru Billy po vyhrožování ze strany Velké sestry Ratchedové spáchá sebevraždu. Důvodem je to, že Billy stráví noc s dívkou, která na pozvání McMurphyho vnikne do nemocnice, kde se koná rozlučková párty s Mackem. Ratchedová se ráno o celé věci dozví a dává Billymu najevo, že vše jeho matce poví. Vyhrožování a zastrašování jsou hlavními zbraněmi Sestry.

Jejím posledním vítězstvím je potupa McMurphyho, který se po nešťastném konci Billyho na sestru vrhne a pokouší se ji uškrtit. Zřízenci tomu zabrání a Mack je poslán na jiné oddělení. Po nějaké době se však vrátí. Pacienti už ale svého kamaráda nepoznávají. Je totiž ve stavu úplné neschopnosti, protože podstoupil operaci zvanou lobotomie, při níž se odstraní z lebky část mozku a pacient pak vykazuje daleko méně nežádoucího chování. Pacienti se na jeho utrpení nemohou dívat. Bromden se jedné noci rozhodne McMurphyho trápení ukončit a sám z ústavu uprchne. Bromden je ztělesněním nové naděje na svobodu.

Hlavními nadějemi budoucnosti byli mladí lidé, kteří na konci padesátých let přestali akceptovat soudobý stav věcí a stále více utíkali do světů, které jim nabízeli například Beatnici. Autoři jako Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg nebo Neal Cassady inspirovali mládež nespokojenou s uniformitou tehdejší doby. Beatnici nacházeli stále více příznivců a stali se předchůdci kulturní revoluce, která přišla v šedesátých letech. V roce 1960 byl zvolen prezidentem John F. Kennedy, který sliboval svým neotřelým zjevem a postojem novou naději nejen pro mladou generaci, ale také pro černošskou komunitu ve Spojených státech. Černí Američané nebyli spokojeni s jednáním, kterému se jim dostávalo. Ač byli zapojeni do války ve Vietnamu, nic se nezměnilo na tom, že byli stále diskriminováni a nedostávalo se jim rovnocenných možností ve vzdělání a zaměstnání. Rovněž ženy se dožadovaly svých práv. Později se hnutí za občanská práva přerodilo v subkulturu zvanou hippies. Spolu s alternativním způsobem života zahrnujícím užívání psychotropních látek a volnou lásku se hippies stavěli proti režimu, jehož ztělesněním byl prezident Lyndon Johnson. Mladá generace zkrátka rebelovala proti všemu, co připomínalo konvence.



Hlavní myšlenkou knihy *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* je víra, že jakákoliv autorita či systém, které ze svobodných lidí činí nesvobodné, může být pokořena. McMurphy je postavou, která ke vzpouře proti netvorům typu Ratchedové motivuje ostatní svou bezprostředností a odvahou. Kesey, který sám na konci padesátých let patřil k subkultuře odhodlané vzdorovat konformitě, vytvořil dílo, které díky pozdějšímu filmovému zpracování, ale i dramatisaci oslovilo širokou veřejnost.

V dnešní době, kdy dochází ve Spojených státech k podobné situaci, jako tomu bylo v padesátých letech, si Keseyho román zaslouží velkou pozornost. Mohl by čtenáře inspirovat k zamyšlení, jestli to, co člověk vidí a slyší v médiích, je nevyhnutelně pravda. Mnoho už bylo řečeno o událostech, které následovaly po útoku na World Trade Centre. Došlo k politizaci celé aféry, která měla za následek hon na všechny protiamerické teroristické organizace i jednotlivce. Docházelo k překrucování informací a veřejnosti byly a jsou předkládány černobílé závěry. Stejně jako tomu bylo před více než padesáti lety, dochází v dnešní společnosti k tendenci přiklánět se k jednomu, tomu jedinému „správnému“ pohledu, který se nakonec může ukázat jako ne zcela pravdivý. Přitom jedině tak může docházet k rozvoji demokracie, když existuje pluralita názorů.

Nutno dodat, že v padesátých letech se našli jedinci, kteří vzdorovali systému. Ti, kteří chtěli být volní (jako například McMurphy), volní byli. A totéž platí i dnes. Jen ti lidé, kteří se odmítají stát články společnosti, která se vykazuje uniformitou, opravdu mohou být volní.

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