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(Title of Thesis) Struggles in Ken Kesey's Novels *One Flew
over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*

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*Rád bych poděkoval paní doktorce Ulmanové za její
trpělivost, ochotu a podnětné připomínky. Také bych chtěl
poděkovat svojí sestře a matce za jejich pomoc a rady.*

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá pojetím zápasu, konfliktu a boje v románech Kena Keseyho „Tak mě někdy napadá“ a „Vyhod'me ho z kola ven.“ Konflikt je natolik ústředním motivem, že jsem se rozhodl prozkoumat jeho rozličné podoby. Zjistil jsem, že nejen mezilidské vztahy, ale především psychické procesy většiny postav jsou plné konfliktů. Toto zaměření je specifické pro Keseyho a naznačuje jeho pohled na svět. Konflikt je tu chápán jako nevyhnutelná součást bytí, ba jako nutný a do určité míry tvořivý prvek. Práce se zakládá na podrobné analýze primárních zdrojů, tedy zmíněných románů. Dále využívám řady kritických pojednání, která zastupují různé interpretace obou děl. Ve třetí kapitole vycházím z teorie Sigmunda Freuda zabývající se existencí sebedestrukčních tendencí ve všech živých organismech a dále ze studie Josefa Viewegha shrnující nejčastější motivy sebevražd.

První kapitola popisuje a rozebírá zápasy a konfliktní vztahy mezi jednotlivými postavami a přeneseně i hodnotami, jež zastupují. V knize „Vyhod'me ho z kola ven“ je to především Randle McMurphy a jeho nelítostný boj proti vrchní sestře. Jde o zápas mezi oklešťujícím řádem tyranské sestry a nevázanou živelností gamblera McMurphyho. Ostatní pacienti ho pasují do role vůdce a s jeho pomocí pomalu nacházejí ztracené sebevědomí. Neoblomný hrdina je také porovnáván s postavami, jež nepřemožitelné síle čelí ústupem místo předem prohraného zápasu. V druhé knize probíhá důležitý střet mezi bezohledně nezávislou rodinou Stamperů a městečkem Wakonda, která na jeho stávku bere pramalé ohledy. Zatímco město je plné pokrytectví a morálního úpadku, Stampeři žijí v relativní harmonii, ačkoliv s přírodou nemilosrdně bojují.

Druhá a třetí kapitola se zabývají zápasy vnitřními, tedy psychologickými. Ve druhé kapitole vysvětlují, že dosažení identity, která je pro jedince přijatelná, je v mnoha případech vleklý boj. Lee Stamper nebo Indián Bromden se celou dobu snaží oprostit od své slabosti a nízkého sebevědomí. Nechtějí být otloukánky ani utíkat od těžkostí do relativního pohodlí poskytovaného halucinacemi nebo rovnou sebevraždou. Tato kapitola se také zabývá silnými postavami a ukazuje, že ani ony nenesou svůj osud s lehkostí a samozřejmostí. Opakované konflikty, které svou silou a nezlomností přitahují, je také oslabují. Jsou to rváči spíše z donucení, než z vlastního přesvědčení. Ovšem podléhat pravidlům nejsou schopni. Konec kapitoly představí překvapivý závěr. Dosažení vytýčeného cíle v případě Leeho a občanů Wakondy, tedy přemožení Hanka, nevede k žádnému uspokojení, ale naopak k jejich apatii. Předchozí konfliktní vztah měl tedy i jistou pozitivní funkci.

Sebevraždy a další sebepoškozující sklony jsou předmětem poslední kapitoly. Jsou představeny v kontextu Freudovy teorie, která uvádí, že stejně jako existují sebezáchovné instinkty, tak proti nim působí pudy tíhnoucí ke smrti. Fakt, že Freud tyto pudy uvádí jako univerzální pro všechny organismy a nejen lidi, je zajímavý proto, že v knize „Tak mě někdy napadá“ nejsou ani zvířata ušetřena úmyslné sebeztrouky. Řada hrdinů tohoto románu trpí myšlenkami na smrt, ze všech nejvíce Lee. Neúspěšný pokus o sebevraždu, změna prostředí ani tvrdá práce ho nevyhlídí. Ve druhém románu je zlomovým bodem sebevražda přecitlivělého Billyho. McMurphyho vliv ho nestačí zachránit před předčasnou smrtí.

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore the theme of *struggles* in Ken Kesey's most acclaimed novels *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*. The two books were written only two years apart, and despite the major difference in form and style, I was struck by the amount of conflict around which they both revolve. The conflicts are very visible and explicit, they form the basis of the plots, they condition what kind of characters appear, and introduce the idea of various types of opposition. Being novels from the sixties written by an important countercultural figure, this is not all too surprising. The point I wish to illustrate, is that the characters' *internal* struggles hold at least as much importance as those that are exhibited on the outside. These internal strivings have a very essential nature, because they are struggles for identity, and also for survival, which leads me to believe the novels situate conflict at the very core of human existence.

It is first necessary to clarify what exactly is understood by "struggles". *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* offers these definitions: the verb to struggle means "to make violent, strenuous, labored or convulsive exertions or efforts against difficult or forceful opposition or impending or constraining circumstances." The noun is similarly explained as "an act of earnest striving: a violent effort or exertion (as to obtain an object, overcome a difficulty or avert an evil¹)." The collocation "struggle for survival" is mentioned as are the synonyms "contest" and "contention". This is why the expression *struggle* is so appropriate, since it can describe the competition and opposition which goes on between R. P. McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, between the values which they represent, between the half-brothers Hank and Lee Stammers, but can just as well represent an internal conflict of will, of one's idea of self against external pressure, and even of that self against its own tendencies. This is what notably the Chief and Lee are doing: fighting their weakness.

In the first chapter I am going to concentrate on the external conflicts of the novels. This aspect has been widely studied by numerous scholars, and it is therefore possible to comment and expand on some of these already established views. The opposition and contention form the central plotlines; McMurphy's and Ratched's skirmishes are divided into chapters resembling rounds of a boxing match where one or the other has supremacy and the other

¹ Philip Babcock Gove et al, eds. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1965).

novel, though less clearly segmented, develops around the oscillations of Lee's motivation to overcome his brother and Hank's conflict with the rest of Wakonda. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* clearly presents the concepts of yielding and conformity. Here the asylum becomes a symbol of systematically produced obedience. It serves as the perfect stage for McMurphy to wreak havoc on and show an inversion of the patients' ready submission with his staunch opposition. He meets his match in the person of the Head Nurse. In *Sometimes a Great Notion* we are immersed in a brotherly contention between an embittered university graduate and his lumberjack older sibling. The somewhat covert struggle, which erupts into violence only at the end, unwinds against the backdrop of the Stamper family breaking a strike held by the local logging union. While Hank is an obvious and perpetual fighter, Lee is considered a weakling. Still vengefulness stemming from a wrong he feels was done to him years before drives him sufficiently to make him a formidable opponent.

The second and third chapters will look beyond the external confrontations between characters and their sets of values, and examine the conflicts going on inside the characters. This is the area that is not so well explored and will be based mostly on close reading and my own analysis. It will also utilize some basic psychological concepts. The intrapersonal struggles can be divided into two basic categories, which will serve as the topics of the second and third chapters. The first one is the striving towards independently forming and preserving a genuine sense of identity. The second type is an even more basic or essential struggle; that against suicidal tendencies.

Identity, or the way the characters view themselves and are viewed by others, is presented not as a given, but something at times demanding great exertion of will. That is, of course, an identity acceptable for its "holder", not one fitted on to him by others. Shaking off old traumas and establishing a new notion of self is what brings Lee Stamper across the continent from the East Coast to Oregon and motivates the fulfilling of his revenge despite the sympathy which he forms for his brother and his family. But he must fight his own problematic personality as much as his brother. Similarly, Chief Bromden must assert his position in the world and not succumb to cowardice or mental illness in order to be able to achieve a rebirth at the end of the novel. These are the two most vivid examples, but the idea of identity is central to all the patients of the mental asylum and it is also what leads Hank to risk everything for a seemingly banal mission.

Throughout both novels death lurks ready to claim anyone not strong enough to oppose it and is victorious a number of times. In this sense, also life itself is presented as something not to be taken for granted, but instead as a struggle against the temptation of death. Death, the ultimate escape from every struggle the world can confront one with, is a way to evade the obligation to fight. Characters, who are unable to find enough self-confidence or enough strength to face problems successfully, choose this fate. It is also despair, caused either by the lack of belief that one can succeed or even seeing success itself as pointless because existence has no purpose, that leads the characters to suicidal thoughts. A tendency to seek death is described also in animals, which offers an original view of an otherwise exclusively human trait, and suggests it might not be solely pathological, but in a sense *natural*. Such a logic is supported by Freud's idea of a death-wish, which pulls in the opposite direction of the life instincts. Struggling is thus essential also for mere survival, which can be understood as a successful rejection of the possibility to escape difficulties or the seeming meaninglessness of life through suicide.

Chapter 1: A World of Opposites

Both *One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion* are based on very visible confrontations which establish their centers of gravity. In the first case it is the clash between Randle Patrick McMurphy on one side and Nurse Ratched on the other. In their battle which resembles that of good versus evil McMurphy is backed by a not very dependable crew of mental patients, two prostitutes and sometimes by the weak Doctor Spivey. Contrariwise, the Head Nurse seems to have the full support of the mental hospital with its personnel, an arsenal of drugs, shock therapy, lobotomy and the threat of using them as well as control over the release of patients, and in an extended way the acquiescence of the mainstream society and the establishment which she forms an integral part of. This summary shows the two opposing sides to be clearly uneven. They are very clearly defined and there is quite a black and white sense of heroes and villains.

In *Sometimes a Great Notion* the struggles are plural. There is the opposition of the Stamper family to the city of Wakonda whose strike they are breaking, there is its opposition to the forces of nature which continually menace their very lives and good fortune, and there is a "one-on-one" struggle going on between the half-brothers Hank and Leeland Stamper, whose object is the former's wife and the latter's self-esteem. The structure of the novel is also more complex confronting the reader with multiple narrators in the same paragraph or breaking the linear structure of time and space sometimes forcing the reader to struggle to understand. It would be more difficult to find the "good guys" in this work. This chapter will concentrate on the external struggles, that means the interpersonal ones, which often represent the clash of different ideals or values. The aim is to explore the nature of the confrontations as well as their participants and examine some already existing criticisms and analyses which understandably vary in their premises and arrive at different conclusions.

One Goes East, One Goes West²

We may first of all ask where the need for confrontation in Kesey's novels originates. In *Parables of Possibility: The American Need for Beginnings* the author argues that the very

² Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. (London: Picador, 2002) vii.

American identity is constructed as an opposition to Europe, as a break with the past. He views this negative assumption of identity as typical for American fiction where various characters, namely Huck Finn or Randle McMurphy, reflect on society by going against the stream; they "measure the world in which we live by the worlds in which they are unable to live³." This opposition or criticism is more prominent than a real attempt to present an alternative. *The Hipster, the Hero, and the Psychic Frontier* is another work which deals with opposites. There is the "hipster" and the "square" meaning the rebel as opposed to the obedient product of society, wilderness as opposed to civilization, madness to sanity, and East to West. It is a very polarized conception appropriate for the polarized world of Kesey's novels.

The concept of so-called internalization of geography sees the East-West polarity as allowing a spatial representation of the afore mentioned opposites. Being safely in line with the accepted majority philosophy on the one hand is opposed to going beyond, to the frontier of what is known or accepted, into rebellion, but similarly also into madness. This idea of the frontier places McMurphy and the patients of the asylum in one category. It could be argued that the Beats, who preceded and influenced Ken Kesey, are a synthesis of the different ways in which one can be on the frontier. The question of geography taps into the specific location of both novels which take place in Oregon, the extreme West of the United States. However, this is certainly also a result of the author's deep knowledge of the area. It is beyond doubt that both Hank Stamper and R. P. McMurphy clash with the mainstream world around them. They are too full of life, too original, too strong-willed and too independent to accept the bounding rules which try to fit them into a restrictive and normative society.

In the Country or in the Town

Pastoral Convention in Vergil and Kesey finds a link between Vergil's bucolics and Kesey's novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*. It examines the title, which is a verse from Huddie Ledbetter and John Lomax's song "Good Night, Irene." The stanza in question goes:

Sometimes I live in the country

Sometimes I live in the town

³ Terence Martin, *Parables of Possibility: The American Need for Beginnings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 83.

*Sometimes I get a great notion
To jump into the river ... an' drown.*⁴

This introduces the opposition between the Stamper family's life in a truly natural environment, regardless of the fact that they are constantly battling it, and life in the town. We are presented with various characters living in the city, but they are generally not very admirable individuals. They are hypocrites in terms of morals, they lack self-confidence and ambition. The Stampers, with all their peculiarities, maintain a more "bucolic" existence in nature's womb despite the difficult symbiosis. Also the relations in the nuclear Stamper family are better than those of the more distant family members, at least in everyday activities. It should be pointed out that the most destructive force which enters the family is Lee who is a city-bred East Coast university student and therefore does not easily fit in to the virgin forest where he was born and spent an unhappy childhood.

The idea that cities corrupt is by no means a new notion. Being from two different worlds, the Stamper family is unwilling and unable to mix with the townfolk of Wakonda, which leads eventually to their strike-breaking. They are like water and oil and not even a time of crisis can change that, it only illustrates the relations in more striking colors. John A. Barsness sees the relation as typical for an American Western in his essay "Ken Kesey: The Hero in Modern Dress". The hero is supremely independent, relying on nature and being a part of it, he is there to "hack paradise"⁵ for himself out of it. This is exactly what the Stampers do, because it reflects their aggressive relation to the forests of Oregon. Hank is a heroic persona, and his way of life is irreconcilable with the average existence of the inhabitants of town and so he stamps all over the town in quest of his own supreme goal, which is the delivery of logs to the logging company. It is also more or less clear that, similarly to R. P. McMurphy and despite his flaws, he is the "good guy" or in other words a real western hero.

Virility and Mechanical Sterility

The previous theme is slightly twisted in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* as that of nature versus a mechanical sterility. Chief Bromden believes McMurphy can beat the Big Nurse

⁴ Ken Kesey. *Sometimes a Great Notion*. (London: Methuen, 1985) viii.

⁵ John A. Barsness, "Ken Kesey: The Hero in Modern Dress," *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, Mar. 1969: 27-33.

because he is himself, he is natural and untroubled by doubts of what he is or what he should be. This is not totally true, but nevertheless his energy, his appetite for life in all its forms be it food, women, adventure, a game, a bet or a good story is striking on the backdrop of his cagey and suppressed fellow patients and especially compared to the sterile and efficient organization of the ward. This is embodied in the form of Nurse Ratched who sits separated from the patients by an ostentatiously clean pane of glass hiding her own femininity behind a perfectly starched outfit although it cannot hide her large breasts, a very human and unwanted attribute. Everything “weak and of the flesh⁶” is suppressed and replaced by routine work and play time which is designed to take the patients through life on a conveyor belt never giving them time to stop and think about what they are doing and why. Rules are generally void of any sense and serve only in a restrictive function. Their uniforms also steal some of their uniqueness and identity. Special attention is paid to cleaning and the nurse reacts with disgust to human dirt like a smudge on her glass as if she was above such low things. She is extremely uneasy around Randle running around in nothing but his whale shorts.

Because the Indian’s illness gives his impressions a visible form, this dehumanized and mechanical sterility materializes into illusions and nightmares of a complicated system of machinery controlling life on the ward. He sees the Head Nurse sitting behind the controls and having tiny mechanisms installed into the patients to assure their absolute compliance. As a consequence of the mechanization he believes to be the only witness of, the Chief sees the process outside the hospital as well. His nightmares about robotic people seem to be confirmed by the uniformity in the appearance of houses, employees and children he sees on the way to the fishing trip which seem to come off of a mass assembly line.

In this context the patients of the asylum are the faulty products which need to be adjusted, meaning brought into line, so that they would not pose a threat to the majority system. “Madness and Misogyny in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*” by Daniel J. Vitkus uses some of Michel Foucault’s ideas to explain how society deals with behavior or thinking which is not in accord with the dominant philosophy⁷. The parallel is made between asylums and prisons, and it should be noticed that McMurphy comes to the asylum from a prison work farm. The article also points out the blurred division between sanity and insanity which is something Kesey suggests in his novel.

⁶ Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest* 149.

⁷ Daniel J. Vitkus, “Madness and Misogyny in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*,” *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 14, 1994: 64-66.

Promethean Heroes

'Blindfolded and Backwards: Promethean and Bemushroomed Heroism in "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Catch-22"' presents another approach to Kesey's novel. The author calls McMurphy, as well as the hero of *Catch 22*, Yossarian, Promethean heroes⁸. The term is quite appropriate, as their battles against forces stronger than themselves inevitably fail. The author's conclusion is that such a battle is futile because it can only be won or lost, and when faced with such uneven odds it will necessarily be lost. The heroes make themselves too visible, they pose a threat and therefore a clear target for the larger system such as the asylum or the army. Bromden advocates the same theory and subsequently makes himself completely negligible despite his abundant size. Randle on the contrary comes into the asylum like a tidal wave, he is everything which the Head Nurse had tried to suppress. He is rough, manly, self-confident, sexual, seemingly worry-free and above all he is more than willing to show it. On the other hand the nurse has robbed the men of self-respect, their manliness, independence, and even their identity which she tries to change to meet her demands. It is all too clear that these opposite forces must collide and so they do. And it is the rebel who does not survive the clash, but neither is the Nurse victorious.

It is questionable whether McMurphy and Hank Stamper can be considered winners or losers. In all cases it is the other characters, like Chief Bromden, who are presented in the essay as those who have found a way to beat the system. By letting themselves be "bemushroomed," that is "seeing but not seen"⁹ they leave the reality instead of fighting it and in this way defy it. They are not the romantic heroes, but much more subtle characters with undoubtedly a certain appeal. What is not taken into much account is that this is a risky path, because without McMurphy the Chief, hiding in his fog, would probably never be able to become a hero of any sort and would stay a silent victim. And when he finally throws the control panel through the window to claim his freedom he can hardly be called bemushroomed any longer.

⁸ William Schopf, 'Blindfolded and Backwards: Promethean and Bemushroomed Heroism in "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Catch-22"' *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, Autumn 1972: 90.

⁹ Schopf, 91.

Battle of the Sexes

The confrontation in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* can also be read as a clash between the sexes. All the patients are men as are the technicians and the aides, but the real control obviously comes from the Head Nurse. The men call her a “ball-cutter¹⁰” and she truly does try to deprive them of any manliness and self-respect hiding her oppression under a kind motherly tone of voice and morality as can be seen in her outrage when Billy Bibbit sleeps with Candy at the end of the novel. Another example of this is the forced public discussion of Harding’s sexual problems with his wife. In the afore mentioned article by Daniel J. Vitkus, the author reaches the conclusion that the novel is strongly misogynistic¹¹. The fact is that the female characters either oppress under the pretense of care like the Head Nurse or Billy’s mother, or they are aggressive and unfaithful like Harding’s wife, or prostitutes who are depicted as the embodiment of simple fantasies of a drinking buddy and willing sexual object rolled into one.

In general the female characters are not very developed and in nearly all cases they are on the side of the oppressors. And the final confrontation between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched is an ambiguous mixture of her exposure and domination, a symbolic violation which seems to be accepted as a more or less necessary solution by the other patients. The act is in a way justified by the nurse’s insidious tyranny, nevertheless the novel as a whole can be viewed as problematic in terms of gender. The depiction of men and women in the novel is noticeably uneven. It sympathizes with the male characters obviously much more than with the female ones and subsequently invites the reader to do the same.

Also *Sometimes a Great Notion* marginalizes women, and two out of four important female figures are, again, prostitutes. Nevertheless, they are no longer all black and white cartoon figures. There is the mysterious and vengeful Indian Jenny who is simple-mindedly pragmatic and mystical at the same time. There is Simone, fighting unsuccessfully the temptation to sell her body for earthly comforts. The novel also presents the highly intelligent, independent, complicated and finally suicidal Myra, Leeland’s mother, and the most developed and interesting female character, Vivian. Vivian will be further discussed in the following

Odstraněno: , at least not all of them

¹⁰ Kesey, *Cuckoo's Nest* 56.

¹¹ Vitkus 80-87.

chapters. In this novel, women are shown as neither overwhelmingly positive or negative characters nor are they viewed as oppressors of men.

All Is Well That Ends Well

The two novels end very differently, which is the result of a major difference in the degree of McMurphy's and Hank's commitment to others. Hank Stamper is a real loner in the sense that not only does he turn the entire town against him, but not even the loss of his wife is enough to stop him. What is more, the death of his best friend and near death of his father does not serve him as a warning, but a push to finish the mission to deliver the logs. Since he has basically no attachment and himself is extremely durable and fit, the only thing that can stop him is his own death. On the contrary, R. P. McMurphy comes to the asylum seeking an easier life and looking for ways to make his stay more entertaining or profitable. The Chief thinks that Randle might be able to endure the Combine, because he cares about no one but himself. But his attitude changes essentially as he attaches himself to the other patients and is pulled into their difficult relationship with the Head Nurse and into the role of her chief opponent.

This change is deliberate and thought-through, it is demonstrated by his intentional smashing of the Nurses' Station glass for the first time. And the commitment to the patients is what leads McMurphy's steps from then on making his relationship with Nurse Ratched always more explosive until he attacks her for causing Billy's suicide. All this despite he found out his release depends on the nurse's decision. The brawling man gradually turns into a savior to finally sacrifice his life in order to give the others strength to truly begin theirs. There are indices of a parallel with the story of Christ, especially the cross shaped table used in electro-shock therapy or the fishing trip with a company of 12 followers. And the sacrifice is not truly a defeat, because Randle's "presence [is] still tromping up and down the halls¹²" and more importantly his actions leave such a strong imprint on the other patients that they are able to finally stand up for themselves. Chief Bromden goes through a full transformation and is once more a mountain of a man.

¹² Kesey, *Cuckoo's Nest* 305.

As has been shown, conflict and struggle is dealt with in a rich and many-layered fashion in the two novels. Despite the fact that they are undoubtedly stories of struggle, of opposites, and confrontation, it is an altogether different question what is confronting what. Through the characters of Hank Stamper, Lee Stamper, the population of Wakonda, R. P. McMurphy, and Nurse Ratched we are witness to a romantic western hero fighting for his freedom, a promethean hero fighting forces greater than himself, non-conformism fighting conformity as well as a battle of the sexes. Kesey's novels are noticeably saturated with conflict and this defines his specific approach to fiction as stories of opposition and struggle.

Chapter 2: Asserting One's Self

The following section of the thesis will study the first of the internal struggles, which is the struggle for self-assertion. One prominent reason for conflict in Kesey's novels is the characters' necessity to claim their place in the world, to exist in a way that will be sufficiently in accordance with their needs and desires. The fact that the needs of one character often contradict those of another one inevitably lead to conflict situations. We can recognize two categories of characters; one comprising those who must or believe they must undergo a major transformation to harmonize their realities with their needs, and those who simply get into conflict because of their tendency to go their own way. There are two characters for whom self-assertion is much more urgent than for the others and these are arguably the protagonists. Chief Bromden needs all his mental powers to escape the role that he has been given and one that he has accepted, and Leeland Stamper is on a quest to step out of his brother's shadow once and for all by figuratively bringing him down to his knees.

Chief Broom

The striving to live in an acceptable way is the most striking in the case of Chief Bromden. Similarly to Leeland Stamper, for him, self-assertion linked with rediscovery of self, is not something in the background. It is the central question and he must change significantly in order to escape the loss of contact with reality, the mental institution, and be taken seriously as an intelligent human being. The reader can understand how the monumental son of an Indian chief came to be regarded as not much more than a walking broom. His memories show how the trauma began, when his existence was ignored by government agents who treated him as someone who couldn't even speak English. It is open to debate whether this was the result of their ignorance or if the boy's speech was drowned out by the roar of the waterfalls, either way it eventually lead him to pretend to be mute. "The Vanishing American: Identity Crisis in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*" states that this step is all the more serious due to the fact that Indian culture is an oral one¹³.

¹³ Elaine Ware, "The Vanishing American: Identity Crisis in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*," *Varieties of Ethnic Criticism*, Sept. 1986: 95-101.

The name has a special importance for Indians as is also mentioned in the afore-mentioned essay. Our hero's name is mockingly changed in the hospital to Chief Broom, which reflects how he is viewed: an imbecile suitable only for sweeping the floor. Bromden's father was his natural role model and as he became increasingly powerless this was mirrored by the son's mental breakdown. The father was pressured by his white wife until he rejected his Indian name and accepted his wife's. He also eventually gave in to a government dam construction plan which took the Indians' land after he had been attacked and had his hair cut; another significant loss which can be an allusion to the Biblical story of Samson whose strength lay in his hair. In a broader way, the father's struggle is a part of his tribe's struggle to win the right to live according to their beliefs, which is made difficult by the systems and laws of the United States as is shown in the funeral of the chief's grandmother. After her death, the chief's father and uncle held true to their traditions and "buried" their mother in a tree and were subsequently jailed. The loss of Indian traditions brings about the uncertainty regarding identity.

This identity crisis affects Chief Bromden throughout his youth. The failure of majority society to accept him and the loss of traditional structures of Indian society made him refuse his identity. "That ain't me, that ain't my face...I was just being... the way people wanted. It don't seem like I ever been me."¹⁴ He became an image of what others saw in him, partially only as a protective screen, but gradually internalizing this image. 'Blindfolded and Backwards: Promethean and Bemushroomed Heroism in "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Catch-22"' views Chief's meek behavior as a successful strategy against the ward system. Perhaps he could not be successful in rebellion and would ultimately fail like his father, who was originally a "Promethean hero," had done. However, it is obvious that without the appearance of someone like McMurphy, he would never come out of the safe and at the same time suffocating "fog" and would lose what was left of his sanity in this way.

Chief Bromden seems to make the most remarkable recovery of all the patients, symbolically taking McMurphy's strength and leaving the hospital in an explosion of glass the way that Randle had envisioned for himself. Since his arrival the Indian sees something fascinating in McMurphy, perhaps a father figure, or more likely a link to the natural or even animal side of man. During the first handshake he feels fresh blood flowing into his veins. It remains a question nevertheless, whether the Indian has become independent at the end of the novel or if

¹⁴ Kesey, *Cuckoo's Nest* 140.

he still needs to be told what to do. As is pointed out in “The Vanishing American,” Bromden decides to kill the brain-dead Randle on his own initiative, but he has to be told to escape afterwards by a fellow patient¹⁵. He seems to have learned from “Mack’s” storytelling capabilities and is able to create for himself a false identity when finding a ride after the escape, but it is a story essentially invented for him by McMurphy. He even tries on his cap, but then feels embarrassed hinting that he has decided to avoid imitating his friend. More importantly, it is the chief who tells the story of the asylum, through which he assumes a voice, that of the storyteller and comes to face all that has happened. He also comes to terms with his Indian heritage. His first destination is his old home on the banks of the Columbia where he hopes to find some of his kin who have not drowned their senses in alcohol and who have resisted the government’s attempt “to buy their right to be Indians¹⁶.”

The Bull-Goose Loony¹⁷ and the Rabbits

Randle McMurphy, as has been stated previously, is a character for whom conflict is the modus vivendi. He is predestined to attract and provoke confrontation, and unlikely to back down when his path is crossed. Thomas H. Fick states that: “He is the antithesis of those passive victims - suburbanite or institutional drudge - who are no more than blank screens for the receipt of others' projected desires and expectations.¹⁸” Due to his personality, McMurphy is unwilling to accept the system imposed on the ward of the mental hospital where he is sent. It is clear thus that he is very willing to oppose the ward policy. McMurphy’s initial idea of making life easier for himself by getting transferred from a work farm to the asylum soon goes aside as he naturally assumes the role of the patients’ leader in their clash against the Head Nurse.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* we can see him both as an orchestrator and as an instrument. He invents different ways to win money and cigarettes from the other patients. But as his relation to them deepens and he gets more attached to them, he yields to their pressure to lead a revolt against the Head Nurse despite knowing that it threatens to prolong

¹⁵ Ware 100.

¹⁶ Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest* 309.

¹⁷ Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest* 18.

¹⁸ Thomas H. Fick, ‘The Hipster, the Hero, and the Psychic Frontier in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”’ *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* Vol. 43 No. 1/2 1989: 19-34.

his stay at the institution. Not only that, it drains all his powers. Despite the fact that he is obviously a seasoned and rough man with sufficient experience, when the situation arises, he is not at all enthused by the prospect of a brawl. In fact he is very reluctant and seems to be mechanically fulfilling a duty, much like Hank Stamper in *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Moreover, being a rebel does not imply that one has enough energy to hand it out to dozens of other patients so that they could oppose the restrictive ward and their weakness along with him. McMurphy gives up his chance for an early release and return to his previous life because he is held in the hospital by the needs of the other men. His sacrifice goes so far that he eventually pays with his life for their eventual redemption.

It remains a question, whether he sacrifices himself intentionally or if he cannot resist the pressure of his fellow patients. McMurphy's obviously premeditated act of breaking the Nurse's Office glass supports the intentional theory. On the other hand the strangling of Nurse Ratched is viewed by Chief Bromden, as an almost involuntary act. However unreliable a narrator the Chief is, generally the essence of his exaggerated fantasies seems to be based on perceptive observation. Also the faces which haunt him represent the pressure of his fellow patients.

Randle becomes an extension of the patients' needs and wishes, they literally assert themselves through him. His energy and courage is contagious, they play along with his pranks and pretending games, joke themselves, but when he is not around they are still generally left helpless. Most of the patients, who had been held at the hospital by nothing more, or perhaps nothing less, than the fear of life outside the walls and barred windows of the controlled and predictable if suffocating environment, finally gain enough confidence to leave only after McMurphy's martyr-like death. Even the unconfident Doctor Spivey finds the courage to demand to be fired instead of accepting a forced resignation. The force and energy of Randle McMurphy leaves a major impact at the ward, and the "Chief" symbolically hears his laughter and bellowing voice in the halls of the hospital even after he is gone while the Head Nurse's voice on the contrary is silenced by Murphy's attack.

The patients do not find they are capable of standing up for themselves and confronting the nurse and the world outside the hospital immediately. After his arrival, McMurphy notices that the men behave in a strange way. They chuckle and smile, but never laugh out loud. They follow absurd rules without questioning them. If one of them musters the courage to speak out

and criticize any part of the ward machinery, he is not supported and left to crumble under the Head Nurse's trained pressure. What is more, they weaken each other by disclosing secrets in the log book and pressing on sensitive issues during group therapy sessions. They are aware of their weakness and of its abuse by Ratched, but they do not see any purpose in trying to change the balance. Only when they witness proof that her system is not unshakable and that it can be successfully opposed do they begin to follow McMurphy's lead. Various activities give them a sense of accomplishment and worth. They stop cooperating with Ratched's belittling strategies and eventually begin to question openly her rules and restrictions. They begin to discover their capacities; George shows himself to be a supreme captain, the Chief uses his strength to help "Mack" against the aides, Harding employs his quick wits to keep the inspector from discovering the party, and Billy proves to be a gentleman. After McMurphy's lobotomy and death most of them leave the hospital or ask to be transferred to other wards thus escaping Ratched's domination.

Billy is in the end a tragic example of an attempt at assertion of one's way of life. A naturally overly sensitive person, he is further pressured by the influence of his mother and Nurse Ratched as well as unsuccessful relationships with women. He is one of those who become especially close to Randle McMurphy, because he sees him as being capable of that which he himself is not. His presence helps Billy somewhat escape his fears and lack of self-confidence. Eventually he escapes sufficiently the pressure of his mother and the nurse to start a relationship, however shallow, with a woman and even make love to her. However, he has not liberated himself and asserted himself as an adult to his mother, and the fear of her knowing what he had done is enough to drive him immediately to suicide. Without the physical presence of McMurphy for support he is still not ready to confront the central authorities in his life. The Nurse attempts to present his death as a result of McMurphy's bad influence, but it is apparently rather the lack of this influence that caused it. Billy succeeded in an outward transformation, but not in an internal one.

Brotherly Love

In *Sometimes a Great Notion* the central struggle pits Leeland against his brother. Their relationship is necessarily difficult, because one is so dominant and fit, while the other so weak he has a tendency towards self-destruction. Physically the contrast is also made clear. In their younger days spent together in Oregon, Hank was an athletic star and had all the connected advantages of such a social status. Lee had always been an outsider, weakling, the eternal little brother who often needed the other's help to pull him out of trouble. The time that Lee spent on the East Coast, in the city, leveled the differences somewhat, because he gained an intellectual advantage through his superior education. He also outgrew Hank who remains the stronger of the two. When he returns to Oregon and begins logging, he is on his brother's turf where at first he cannot present a fair match. Interestingly enough, he learns to use his weakness to win the affection of Hank's wife.

The already problematic relationship seriously deteriorated because of Hank's sexual relationship with Leeland's mother. As the latter states, he saw this as Hank stealing the only thing he had purely for himself. Lee decides that the only way he can regain his hold on life, the only way he can escape his brother's shadow which he feels has continuously enveloped him, is to get revenge in a similar fashion. He decides he must seduce Vivian, Hank's wife, to redeem himself. The idea that one action will solve all his troubles is paralleled by his childhood dreams of changing into a superhero by uttering the magic formula: "Shazaam!"¹⁹ like his comic book role model did. When in Oregon, however, he forms a bond with his brother, his wife, and the whole Stamper way of life to such an extent, that he wavers from his plan. Once again persuaded about his antagonism after an argument over music, he goes through with his plan and succeeds. He succeeds not by being tough, but rather by making Hank seem overly rough and thoughtless, and in this way earning Vivian's compassion and affection. But when the deed is done, he finds that it has become his sole purpose so utterly, that once he has accomplished it, he has nothing left to live for. In the end, paradoxically, he claims his place by the side of his brother. Therefore in a way, his act did enable Lee to leave the past behind and live. And at the same time the pull of logging and of independence embodied by Hank and the Stampers in general proved victorious and stronger than matters of love or revenge.

¹⁹ Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 187.

One Man Against the World

Hank has a personality, which makes him more apt to go against the stream, but also has sufficient physical and mental strength and stamina to succeed. He does not mindlessly oppose for the sake of opposing, but he is supremely careless of what his surroundings think or do; it is his family and most vitally his own independence that he will do anything for. Conflict is rather his curse than a need, since it is connected with a deep sense of fatigue and unwillingness to fight, but still fight he must. It is his strength and ability which invites competitive individuals to match their strength with him throughout his life and later he has to duel with Biggie Newton “hired” by the side of the union loggers. There is also the unwanted but inevitable confrontation with his half-brother Leeland. This is actually sought by the latter while Hank, the rugged logger and former star athlete, is reluctant to confront Lee even though he has seen him seduce and sleep with his wife. He is not a thoughtless fighting machine; he feels the strain of the conflicts he attracts. His father had symbolically predestined him to this contradictory nature by nailing a plaque with the words “NEVER GIVE AN INCH²⁰,” on the wall of Hank’s room with sturdy nails. Underneath the yellow paint and red pencil remains the gospel: “Blessed Are the Meek, For They Shall Inherit the Earth²¹.”

It is this nature which he is preserving by going against the entire community of Wakonda and putting his own family in an unenviable situation and even his as well as others’ lives at risk. It is because he is protecting his existence, the central principle which holds him together, that he is willing to risk so much. John A. Barsness points out that “Hank Stamper not only triumphs over all the forces of evil (the town, the corrupted institutionalized society, black civilization itself), but also over his own temptation to give in to overwhelming despair.²²” Defeat is not an option; after all he is a larger-than-life hero. But his specific role also leads to loneliness which is connected to his inability to fit in. He will always stand out in a crowd and can never be safely part of it.

²⁰ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 32.

²¹ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 34.

²² John A. Barsness, “Ken Kesey: The Hero in Modern Dress,” *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, Mar. 1969: 27-33.

A Rare Bird in a Cage

Vivian is another character who finds herself living a life she is not truly comfortable with. Her position, as a sensitive and intelligent woman, is similar to that of Lee's mother years before. But while she was rather an intellectual, sensitive and sensual Vivian is described repetitively as a "rare fairyland bird"²³ closed inside a cage, the cage being the Stamper house and aggressive Stamper way of life. As she melancholically remarks, she loves the side of her husband, which is visible only when he sleeps. Leeland being in Hank's words a "sensitive" like her, she succumbs to his seduction. And this climax finally gives her the impetus to escape, to search for what she needs. Despite her parting, a strong connection remains between her and the Stampers battling the forest around them. It is she who tells the complex history of the family who always stood on the other side of the river than the town and who is still there only thanks to their unshakeable obstinacy.

Vivian's central conflict is between dependence and independence. She left her home town looking to complement someone's life, to fill the role Hank had prepared for her. And she filled it very skillfully despite all difficulties. With Lee's arrival and his urging that she listen to his problems and help him she realizes that she "can't be something for everybody"²⁴. She arrives at the conclusion that she can no longer accommodate to others, but needs to fulfill her own dreams. Her wishes were not respected from the very start; she did not even express her wish to cut her hair short respecting her husband's desire that she leave it long. With the final pages of the novel Vivian frees her hair stuck in a zipper with a knife and, as opposed to the obstinate westerly journey of the Stampers, goes East to find her own happiness.

Kesey's novels place much emphasis on the character's need to assert their own idea of who they are both to themselves and to the outside world. For Chief Bromden it is a long but eventually successful journey. For Lee Stamper it is a process which although successful, bears very different fruit than it was expected to. Upon closer inspection the adamant heroes show cracks in their unshakable nature; even they must struggle. And finally escape is one possibility of changing an unacceptable situation and in Vivian's case it seems a positive direction. In Billy Bibbit's case escape means a final defeat in the struggle for self-confidence, and for life itself.

²³ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 141.

²⁴ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 297.

A Disappointing Victory

Kesey subverts the idea of conflict as a destructive force by juxtaposing it to the effect of the lack of conflict. He shows that the resolution of a conflict and the achievement of a desired goal can result in a total loss of motivation. After Lee succeeds in his plan to revenge Hank's sexual relationship with his mother by seducing his wife Vivian, the coveted prize is not won. Lee does not become instantly confident and content with his life, quite the contrary. As he thinks to himself: "[...] instead of turning myself into a Captain Marvel, as the ritual and the words were supposed to do according to all the little-guy-beats-big-guy tradition ... I had merely created another Billy Batson.²⁵" He had given so much energy into bringing his plan to a successful end that it had become his only aim. And with completion he becomes lost in his depression as he is thrust back into the seeming purposelessness of existence. He is almost worse off after completing his mission than he had been at the onset, because he lacks the illusion that to conquer his brother will bring his happiness.

The same can be said for the citizens of Wakonda, who had seen the Stammers as the essential cause of their work shortage and the failure of their strike. While before it they were united in their hate for the Stammers, after Hank's fall, they are quite lost in an unexpected apathy. Although they have always felt that the aggressively independent position of the Stammers is a threat to the town, they did not realize it is a relationship which is also a productive one. It gives them more energy than it costs them; instead of making them weaker, it makes them stronger. Not only does it unite the citizens in a common cause, it also gives a target to their hate and an excuse for all their deficiencies. That explains why they are left void and uneasy at Hank's defeat and they must provoke him to return to his position as arch-fiend. They do this on the one hand through acts of disdainful kindness such as offering him free food, and on the other by continuing to attack his property, this time by setting fire to the mill. Given Hank's disposition, the only possible outcome is his return to the battlefield, which reestablishes the balance. Balance for Wakonda is a state of conflict rather than one of cooperation.

²⁵ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 602.

Chapter 3: Struggling to Survive

Death is noticeably present in both of the examined novels, and in a conspicuous number of cases the death is self-inflicted. This suicidal tendency is presented in different ways; while some succumb to it without giving any or little hint as to their motivation, other characters give substantial insight into their reasons. And it is not only those who actually attempt to kill themselves who are victims to thoughts of death. Where does the obsession with self-destruction originate? To explain the reasons, I have chosen Sigmund Freud's theory of a "death instincts²⁶" as the opposing principle in living organisms to the Eros or life instincts and a part of Josef Viewegh's study called *Suicide and Fiction* dealing with motives responsible for suicide. A sentiment that can best be identified as nihilist also appears. Nihilism is defined as "a viewpoint that all traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that all existence is consequently senseless and useless: a denial of intrinsic meaning and value in life²⁷".

It will be seen that as much as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is more saturated with identity struggles, *Sometimes a Great Notion* is the darker of the novels and auto-aggression is more closely studied. It could be said that the later novel generally deals with more universal questions, such as life and death or the affinity of the past, present and future. The following citation shall serve as evidence that *Sometimes a Great Notion*, among other things, consciously has such philosophic overtones. It is an extract from a passage which claims to be an anecdote unconnected to the story, but nevertheless considered worth putting forth. The dialogue is led by a former mental institution patient named Mr. Siggs and the narrator.

"What do you mean, Mr. Siggs? The 'main party'? You mean deal with Nature? God?"

"Yes, it could be," he remarked, rolling on his rock to warm his other side and closing his eyes against the sun. "Nature or God. Or it could be Time. Or Death. Or just the stars and the sage blossoms. Don't know yet..."²⁸

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. des Lust-Prinzips (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961) 41.

²⁷ Philip Babcock Gove et al, eds. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1965) 1729.

²⁸ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 655.

The Psychology of Suicide

In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud examines a tendency to repetition of unpleasant experiences in some contexts, such as nightmares repeatedly haunting patients with traumatic memories. This finding is in opposition to his previous theory, stating that processes are motivated by seeking pleasure and avoiding unpleasant experiences. Through reasoning which he himself calls speculation, Freud arrives at the conclusion that there must be a counteracting principle to the pleasure principle. He assumes that living matter has an urge to “seek to restore the inanimate state²⁹.” Thus he identifies a death drive or death instincts which are opposite of the life instincts, grouped under the term Eros, which lead towards propagation and development. Although Freud found proving its existence difficult, he continued to use the principle in his following works as did some of his followers.

Joseph Viewegh’s study called *Suicide and Fiction* deals with the creative expressions of suicide victims such as letters they had written. More importantly for us, his work offers a concise overview of types of motivation leading to suicide. The work identifies values as the central principle in studying suicide. The two basic categories of causes of suicide are primary and secondary auto-aggression³⁰. Primary aggression means in essence that one does not value oneself and therefore directs his aggression inward. On the other hand the motivation for secondary auto-aggression is outside the subject and suicide is a way to escape the problem. Dissatisfaction with existence in general, for example if it is viewed as valueless, belongs to this second category. Such a view can be called nihilist.

“Whopping” the Elements

Now I will explore the self destructive tendencies as they are manifested by Kesey’s characters. A good starting point is at the beginning of the Stamper saga in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, where the human world is very much linked to the elements, plants and creatures that surround it. Jonas Stamper, who brought the family to Oregon, was also the first one to flee from Oregon. He was forced to do so, by a very nihilist feeling threatening his mental and

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. des Lust-Prinzips (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961) 38.

³⁰ Josef Viewegh, *Suicide and Fiction* (Brno: Akademie Věd České republiky, 1998) 6.

physical health. He came to the frontier lured by promises of opportunity, but instead found himself dwarfed by the giant trees and the lush fertility of the forest, whose aggressive thriving threatened any progress man would achieve. Its incessant push could at best be slowed down by constant effort. The forest and the river had “*complete* disregard for man and his aims³¹”, which lead Jonas to despair and to feel that all effort is vain.

The foliage immediately reclaimed anything man-made, and this underlined the temporariness and unimportance of man’s existence. And not only what was man-made. Jonas saw nature’s reckless flourish not as a miracle of life, but rather as a deadly spectacle as he “watched a mushroom push from the carcass of a drowned beaver and in a few gliding hours swell to the size of a hat [...]”³². His sons, however, grew up in the dense forest and learned to deal with it. While Jonas’ reaction was escape, theirs’ was the exact opposite. Henry, the oldest son, defined their philosophy: “NEVER GIVE A INCH.”³³ He decided to “whup it”³⁴ and that was that. Whopping it erased all troubling oneself with reasons or doubts, seeing the relativity and limitedness of human action. Henry found a weapon against nihilism, he fought the nature around him with a determination as blind as nature’s own.

Hank, Henry’s first son, is a similar character to Henry. He is tough and resolute, seemingly unswerving in his steps. His good health and virility represent well Freud’s Eros. Lee sees him as a mechanically efficient yet naturally perfect predator who “gobbles the oxygen³⁵” when he moves. It can be noticed that in this novel, machines are not linked to sterility, but instead are an extension of manly power. And Hank is repeatedly likened to one because of his tireless strength, efficiency, and stamina. For a long time he resists fatigue, pressure from the town and his relatives as well as his misgivings about his wife and Lee’s relation. But even he is not completely out of the reach of thoughts of death.

There are times when Hank is surprisingly sensitive. Listening to bird cries he feels they express the weight of this “stark old world³⁶” and muses about never wanting to enter it again. He feels sympathy for a lost goose and imagines it is lost not in the traditional sense, but that it feels the world is no longer there. And when Eggleston makes his nocturnal phone call to

³¹ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 24.

³² Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 27.

³³ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 35.

³⁴ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 31.

³⁵ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 137.

³⁶ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 465.

blame Hank for his planned suicide, Hank tells him that dying is easy, staying alive is the hard part. He is apparently not completely void of death instincts or at least a sensitivity to them. Still he remains adamant and pushes steadily on despite all opposition until the Joe Ben's death and his father's serious injury. And finally, realizing he is unable to yield, he goes right on defying everyone and everything but his own independence and will.

Giving In to the Waves

Lee Stamper is the opposite of Hank; he is more governed by the death drive than life instincts. Everything about him including his build, his lack of confidence, his psychological problems and his sexual impotence suggests he lacks Eros. The reader is introduced to him during his unsuccessful suicide attempt, so there is no necessity to prove the overwhelming presence of the death drive. What is more interesting are the sources and explanations of Leeland's proximity to self-destruction. He claims not to be able to explain the reasons for attempting to gas himself. This claim is credible, because it is rather the lack of a reason to live than a reason to die which leads Lee to suicide.

He is what Hank calls a "sensitive"³⁷ like his mother who ended her life by a jump from the window. That certainly suggests an inherent predisposition, but it could also be counteracted by Henry, his father's lust for life. Lee describes the role of literature in forming his nihilist views saying that though every author tried to find something which would transcend the banality of life, they only found nothingness. We could thus say that he is educated into a pessimist view of the world as meaningless. His mother Myra was also a very educated woman. Far from proving that education leads to suicide, it suggests that it makes one more aware of notions of the meaninglessness of existence, which are often explored in modern literature.

Lee's meditations on death are on several occasions linked to animals. He hears the crows cry "So What!"³⁸ when he is under the influence of marijuana. He watches small birds scurry to follow the receding sea so they could find food and then flee before the waves with no hope of ever escaping their debilitating predicament except by being drowned by a wave. The only

³⁷ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 184.

³⁸ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 323.

way to escape the slavery of life, he decides, is to give up the futile struggle and give in of your own accord. If you cannot win, you can at least reject the twisted rules. When Lee is saved from a potentially deadly situation, in the freezing ocean or down in a sand pit with no way out, Hank notices he is strangely relaxed. He is not enthralled in a struggle for life as one would expect, but instead feels a certain lightness and relief. Perhaps it is again the death drive luring him with its deadly sweet voice to give up the futile fight already predestined to be lost, and to accept nothingness. As much as Hank and Henry are unable to yield, for Lee it comes as natural and relieving.

Using Viewegh's terminology Lee suffers from secondary auto-aggression. Viewing life as leading to nothing, as being trapped in it only so one could suffer his share of pain and then be cast into the nothingness of death, he concludes that it is better to die than to prolong what he sees as mostly suffering. This reasoning is not exclusively conscious. He is not suffering during most of his stay in Oregon. Yet when thrown in the freezing ocean Lee makes no effort to preserve his life. Perhaps it is primary auto-aggression, which makes him so willing to let himself die. Lee suffers from feeling inferior to his more successful brother. Though he blames many of his own deficiencies on Hank, he is aware that he cannot escape all responsibility for what he sees as faults. As much as he hates Hank for being strong, he hates himself for being weak. An example of this pathological self-loathing, so strong that it creates physical pain, follows Lee's inability to make a pass on Vivian.

The Devil Within

Joe Ben is a character with unexpectedly dark undertones. He is a fervent Christian, always saying that one should accept what fate brings him. Yet how far does he believe this maxim and to what extent does he follow it himself? His surgical change of face goes directly against it. One can see that Joe is not as worry-free as he otherwise appears when he is forced to go into the woods near where his father had gone to die by his hand. Again there is a genetic predisposition which Joe tries to escape. He is haunted by the same demon that had haunted his father, he fears that he could meet a similar fate since the same "expiration date"³⁹ had been stamped on his face before he changed. When Joe is about to drown, in a desperate situation, he struggles against something he calls in turn his father and the Devil. This voice is

³⁹ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 304.

irreverent, mocks Joe's small sacrifices like giving up smoking or coffee, and sparks pessimism and doubt whether any of those small ideals ever made any difference when he is going to die before his time nevertheless. The perverse attraction to death, which he associates with his father, finally overpowers him and he paradoxically and insanely laughs himself to death. There is a strong suggestion of nihilism, when Joe asks himself in the schizophrenic dialogue "what's the [...] difference?"⁴⁰ Similarly the repetitive urge to "Watch the doughnut. Not the hole."⁴¹ is an attempt to stay away from the idea of nothingness which leads to desperation.

Another very self-destructive character is Ray the musician. His tendency not to fight problems, but rather give in to them surfaces in his repeated exclamation: "Fuck it all!"⁴² A concise way of expressing the feeling of hopeless desperation. From a psychological perspective he could be considered a victim of manic depression, because his suicidal or self-maiming actions are preceded by moments of ecstatic happiness. This seeming irony can actually be explained quite reasonably. Ray has dreams of becoming an acclaimed musician, and after an especially good concert, he feels everything is within reach. And then he is smothered by a feeling of hopelessness and of deficiency. Seeing that success is possible, he loses an excuse for his stagnation, and feels that he is the problem. It is no longer his partner Rod, who similarly blames his own inadequacies on Ray, it is not the bad tips caused by the strike going on in Wakonda, it must be him who is at fault. As he looks at his guitar, he thinks that there's no reason why he shouldn't reach the top with such a good instrument. And yet he cannot. So he destroys it along with the tools that have failed him, his hands, by thrusting them in boiling water. He does it with a trance-like calm making an analogy to Lee's near death moments.

⁴⁰ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 583.

⁴¹ Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 583.

⁴² Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* 308.

Animal Suicide

Freud's idea of a death instinct is interesting in that it does not apply itself only to humans, but is presented as a universal tendency of organic matter to return to its previous stage, that is the inorganic or dead one. Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* doesn't limit its deadly tendencies to people either. Henry describes his experience of animals behaving against any sort of life instinct; deer and foxes swimming apparently deliberately to certain death in the ocean instead of trying to save themselves on shore. It would seem that animals are also prone to be overwhelmed by a pull towards death. However, as Henry points out, the animals do not drown themselves, they actively swim, though to certain death. Molly the dog presents a battle between the death and life instincts. Bitten by a snake she struggles against death, but is at once attracted by it as it would also be the end of the unendurable pain. In the end Hank's call gives her enough strength to reach safety.

An Insane Hold on Life

Since *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* takes place in an asylum full for the mentally ill, suicide can be expected to appear in it. But in fact in comparison with the other novel it assumes a not too central position among the themes. On the contrary, as is shown by the fear the patients have of the dangers of the ocean and by the scurrying after life vests when the ship carrying the patients meets rough water, the men have quite a healthy sense of self-preservation. Similarly, the hero of the story, although finally beaten by the Nurse, doesn't let the Chief smother his remaining life without a fight. The exceptions are however of more interest to this work. The most noteworthy character suffering from suicidal tendencies is without doubt Billy Bibbit. His disposition towards self-harming behavior is evident early on from burn marks on his hands and especially his previous suicide attempts.

According to Viewegh's classification Billy fits the category of primary auto-aggression. This young man is the epitome of shyness; he is likened to a teenager despite being in his early thirties. His mother's treatment, which is totally inappropriate at his age, underlines his seeming adolescence. He is nervous, easily made to blush, stammers and suffers from an extreme lack of confidence. His stammering strengthens his nervousness and that in turn worsens the stammering. It is apparent that Billy's sensitive personality is deeply traumatized

by being laughed at and rejected by women he falls in love with. Lacking the self-esteem necessary to refuse such devaluing treatment, some part of him seems to interiorize the idea that he deserves ridicule and that he is inadequate. Owing to McMurphy's friendship and example he gains some confidence, which makes it possible for him to even begin a relationship with Candy. The self-confidence, which he feels after spending the night with her, however quickly gives way to fear of his mother finding out. He irrationally anticipates such a harsh judgment that he punishes himself by cutting his throat.

Conclusion

Though conflicts are the basic element of most literary works, Kesey's novels stand apart due to their imminent interest, or even obsession, with struggling, opposing and fighting. The sheer amount of text pertaining to this theme establishes it as central to the author's world view. Moreover, the concept is explored on several levels which are shown to be interconnected. The aim of this thesis was not to arrive at a surprising and concise conclusion, like the neat result following a long equation. Nor was it to use strictly sociological or psychological terminology to classify the character's interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics. As I believe them to play the central role in the given novels, my aim was to define the struggles, describe their main features, examine them from different perspectives and to group various occurrences, whose interconnectedness is not immediately apparent, under the common heading of struggles.

The external conflicts; those, which are clearly visible and fit the usual notion of the word conflict, were first presented. Next I explored the internal conflicts. The second chapter deals with asserting one's identity, which is shown to be a process demanding significant effort. Then I considered the conflict between the tendency towards self-preservation and the tendency towards self-destruction, both of which characters experience throughout the novels. In these three chapters I have linked the different dynamics, interpersonal as well as intrapersonal, and placed them under the uniting concept of struggles because of their common attributes. In all of the mentioned instances a character must exert himself against forceful opposition, precisely as the already mentioned definition of struggle states. He must use significant force and energy against someone or something hindering him, something standing in his supposed path to happiness, or yield and be overcome.

The second conclusion I have reached concerns Kesey's evaluation of struggles. The manner in which conflicts are presented establish a certain philosophy. *Sometimes a Great Notion* was written later and ideas present also in the earlier novel are developed further. It is in addition the more "philosophical" one, because it concerns itself with such basic elements as is life, death, or time. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* presents the difficulty of struggling against an overpowering antagonistic force. In *Sometimes a Great Notion* the concept is transfigured; the novel shows the difficulty of *not having* any force to struggle against. In other words the

consequences of the absence of conflict are shown to be catastrophic. Such a situation emerges with the overthrow of Hank Stamper. Both of his major rivals, that is his half-brother Lee and the town of Wakonda, simultaneously lose their chief opponent. The result is, however, the opposite of what could be expected. The absence of conflict proves to be more destructive than its presence.

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