



AP[®] English Literature 2002 Sample Student Responses

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McMurphy, the protagonist in Ken Kesey's novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, is a very complex character. There is much ambiguity regarding his moral character, seeing as when he first arrives at the mental institution, he seems like a rebellious rabble-rouser just for the sake of being different, as he harangues the meticulous nurse Ratched about almost everything. However, as his characterization develops throughout the novel, it becomes ~~more~~ evident that, in fact, McMurphy's rebellious nature becomes a struggle for all of the patients against Nurse Ratched and the dominance of her institution.

The central theme of the novel is one of finding one's identity amidst the uniformity of the mental institution. In a world where everyday the patients operate on the same schedule, in the same confined area, there is precious little individuality. This leads the Chief, a longtime resident of the institution, to develop a very mechanical view of the world, "The Combine," he calls it. Over time, McMurphy's struggle becomes one for the Chief, along with the other patients, who have been stripped for so long of their ~~at~~ individuality.

This struggle, however, is not evident ^{throughout} the entire novel. At first, when McMurphy ~~drinks~~ ^{tries to} and smokes in his room just to flaunt Nurse Ratched's rules, ~~or~~ ^{and} when he swindles the other patients during a game of poker, he seems like a morally bad vagrant who committed himself to the institution just to avoid forced labor at a work camp. The more he gets to know the other men, though, their struggle becomes his struggle.

What once was a verbal protest to watch the World Series on television becomes a struggle for freedom which claims McMurphy's life, but in the process liberates the other men.

Throughout the novel the question exists of whether or not McMurphy is morally a good or bad character. For much of the novel, the answer is unclear, and even is swayed a bit to the side that McMurphy is a lazy, troublesome individual. But when he makes the discovery that most of the patients, such as Billy Bibbit, in particular, to whom McMurphy becomes very close, are at the institution under their own volition, it becomes his quest to free them, as well as himself, from Nurse Ratched's domineering nature. By the end of the novel, when McMurphy hijacks the institution's bus for an unapproved fishing trip, the men's transformation from ^{being} insecure and domitable into becoming more independent, self-supportable individuals, is complete. Ironically, now that the men are finally able to support themselves outside of the institution, ~~they check themselves out en masse~~, leaving only the Chief and McMurphy as being committed by the state, among a few others, "vegetables," as McMurphy calls them, the most severely handicapped patients, McMurphy all of a sudden needs their help, but doesn't receive it.

After the wild party on the ward, which completes the liberation of the men, Nurse Ratched sends McMurphy a "vegetable" by way of a lobotomy, a tragic end to the life of the charismatic liberator whom she could never harness. When the Chief suffocates McMurphy to

Save him years of suffering, the tragic irony of the novel is complete. McMurphy is a martyr for the others, and, in the end, the only way they can thank him is by suffocating him to spare him years of suffering. The irony and characterizations in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are very powerful, and contribute to Kesey's central theme of a quest for individuality.

The reader develops a great sense of attachment to McMurphy over the course of the novel. He takes on a hero's persona, yet he started a penniless convict. He ends up liberating over a dozen men, yet the great paradox is that he cannot free himself from the constraints of the institution. In many respects, McMurphy's characterization is a metaphor, a euphemism, for the "American Dream." The great irony, however, is that, while McMurphy takes the other men on a metaphorical journey "from rags to riches," he cannot find the same social and moral values in his own life. The reader, too, feels sympathy for McMurphy in this martyred state, yet, like the other patients once were, and McMurphy now, is ^{feels} powerless. This is the main theme of Kesey's novel, that, in the grand scheme of society, individuals are powerless over themselves in the end, but they can affect others for the better.

The developing characterization of McMurphy throughout the novel reflects Kesey's views of American society at the time, in the 1970s. McMurphy essentially embodies the theme Kesey wishes to promote, and ends up dying for his deeds, although he did so much to improve

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the lives of those he touched. It seems as if, even in McMurphy's mind, he hadn't gone to the institution to help others, he had done it to avoid a work camp for himself. But, just as he seemed ~~ambivalent~~ bad at the beginning of the novel, and is very ambiguous throughout much of the body of the novel, at the end he is clearly a hero, and a clear embodiment of the central theme of the novel.

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Question 3

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In the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, Mr. Edward Rochester plays a pivotal role as a morally ambiguous character. The mystery that shrouds his somewhat shady past brings many questions to mind on whether he is evil or good. The novel depicts him as a hard, ruthless man. He cares for no one and does his best to escape life. What will further conclude the mysterious nature of Mr. Rochester is a secret that he has kept ~~#~~ for ~~30~~ 15 years.

Jane Eyre goes to work for Mr. Rochester inadvertently through his housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax. She is to be the tutor for a child living in his home, Adèle. When walking on the road one day, she meets a man on a horse. He is somewhat hateful and egotistical even after she helps him when he falls off his horse. Upon returning home, she finds that the man on the road was Mr. Rochester. He is proud and insolent and criticizes her childhood at a girls school. This behavior further characterizes his mystery while he keeps a child in his home and seems to be a good businessman, he can be hateful to Jane.

This ambiguous behavior is further understood when he stays home for months. Mrs. Fairfax tells Jane that Mr. Rochester never stays home for longer than a couple days. This confuses Jane because he now stays when she is here, yet he is very critical and harsh when dealing with her.

His motives are questionable at this point. ~~His~~ his actions are understood later however, when he claims that he loves Jane and wants to marry her. She has come to love him as well and agrees. However his morals are put in question again on their wedding day. A man steps forward at the ceremony and makes known that Mr. Rochester is already married and his wife lives at his home locked in a room with a maid. However, Mr. Rochester makes known that she is insane and he was forced to marry her. Jane questions his morals, however, why would he ~~he~~ marry her when he already has a wife? Why would he lock up his insane wife and try to forget her? This brings up a dilemma of huge proportions and causes Jane to leave.

Mr. Rochester is a perfect example of a morally ambiguous character. He can be harsh and cruel one moment, yet profess love to a girl the next. He can take care of an orphan child, yet criticize Jane for her sad childhood. Is he ~~he~~ really a harsh, cruel man, or does he simply crave freedom from the constraints his father put on him? His role in the novel was to create a special life for Jane. Her whole life was sorrowful until she came to work as a tutor where she found acceptance and love. Mr. Rochester made this possible. Yet his own demons have produced hell for her. His mysterious behavior keep the novel moving, and the reader questioning the outcome. His facing the past and accepting his

Question 3

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life will be the only thing that can save him.

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In F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, the reader is never quite able to discern the true character of Gatsby. Fitzgerald only provides conflicting glimpses of Gatsby throughout the novel.

Gatsby could be seen as a morally ambiguous character for he acts good at times and evil/bad at others. Perhaps the best example of his goodness is his love for Daisy. His aim in life has been to please her by his money, clothes and societal standing. Gatsby also befriends Nick allowing the reader to observe that he can make friends and enjoys company. These things allow the reader to infer that Gatsby is a man of morals and good character.

However, there are also images of Gatsby which are immoral. For instance, although he truly loves Daisy, he wants her to leave her husband for him. This shows Gatsby's lack of regard for promises and the ~~sanctity~~ sanctity of marriage and also his ~~selfishness~~ selfishness that prompts him to ask Daisy to leave Tom in the first place. Gatsby also conceals his past by partially lying and also by avoiding it which reveals a shallowness by not being able to admit where he used to be in life.

Fitzgerald uses Gatsby's moral ambiguity to cause different affects in characters in the novel as well as the readers. The goodness of Gatsby causes the characters and readers to cheer Gatsby on, but his evil side makes him untrustworthy throughout the whole novel. Also, Gatsby's evil side directly leads to his downfall: his

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Question 3

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destruction and death.

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