

KEN KESEY: THE HERO IN MODERN DRESS

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In American literature, it has been virtually impossible to distinguish between the serious and the popular hero. On the one hand, he may appear as Melville's Handsome Sailor, "with no perceptible trace of the vainglorious about him, rather with the offhand unaffectedness of natural regality . . . mighty boxer . . . on every suitable occasion foremost";¹ on the other, he may be as familiar as Owen Wister's Virginian, "a slim, young giant, more beautiful than pictures . . . no dinginess . . . or shabbiness . . . could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength."² Either figure is interchangeable with the other, a peculiarly native and primordial image arising primarily out of nineteenth-century notions of the democratic frontiersman, made virtuous and pure by the beneficial influences of nature, absolutely free physically and morally from the debilitating corruptions of European civilization. He flourishes best among the innocent ideals of the Jeffersonian landscape, that well-groomed pastoral panorama, populated with peaceful, hardworking, independent yeomen, roused to instant action by any threat to their independence.

In such surroundings, the Amercian hero was adored for over a hundred years. He has had less success in the twentieth century, except in his best-known native form as the cowboy, where he lingers on in popular literature in multiple versions of the Virginian, more and more stylized, farther and farther from the nineteenth century pastoral conviction. But it has become increasingly difficult to maintain that rugged frontiersman as hero, particularly since at midcentury the society approaches an overwhelming urbanization, and contemporary literature seems totally preoccupied with non-heroes whose landscapes are concrete and steel and whose primary characteristics are fixed upon failure. In such surroundings, faced with such assumptions, the hero is an anachronism, out of scale and out of kilter with contemporary standards of truth.

¹Herman Melville, "Billy Budd," *The Portable Melville* (New York, 1964), pp. 638-9.

²Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York, 1911), p. 4.

That is why it is so surprising to meet a pair of Western heroes in contemporary American literature, the protagonists of two novels by Ken Kesey: Randle McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and Hank Stamper in *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964). Even more surprisingly, both of these heroes have received contemporary praise and survived contemporary criticism, possibly because they are so cleverly concealed in the jungle of contemporary standards which Kesey nourishes around them. McMurphy is a patient in an Oregon mental hospital; Hank Stamper is so surrounded by Freudian implications, complicated fraternal relationships, and sexual rivalries that it is nearly impossible to catch a glimpse of his shining armor. Yet heroes both are, and they dwell, as their ancestors did, in the Virgin Land, victims like all their kind of the pastoral dream in which civilization is a dirty word and Jeffersonian democracy is both the shape of the golden past and the definition of the utopian ideal.

It is an attractive dream, a familiar and simple myth in the Western novel, where the good guys always triumph over the bad guys; or it is a complicated fable in a novel like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where the heroes of the river glide forever past the slack corruption of the town. In essence, any version of the story is a transcendental one. Central to it is the hero, more Jacksonian than Jeffersonian man, intuitive in action, non-intellectual in habit, anti-social, anti-urban, and full of the freedom and strength inherent in nature. The enemy he fights is society, artificial, complex, institutionalized—civilization, if you will, the enemy of Randle McMurphy and Hank Stamper as it was of the Virginian and Huckleberry Finn. Oppressive, conformist, regulatory, civilization is the suppressor of individual freedom and the mindless slave of a material goal. Opposed to it, the hero becomes the ultimate idealist, sacrificial but triumphant, intuitively sensitive to a higher and more spiritual good, and, in spite of the trappings of reality with which his author may surround him, the central figure of a romance.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, it seems difficult to believe, since Randle McMurphy is, as we have seen, a man who has committed himself to a state mental hospital in order to avoid the physical labor of a prison farm. But in spite of this we recognize him immediately as the hero: "voice loud and full of hell . . . redheaded with long red sideburns and a tangle of curls . . . broad across the jaw and shoulders, a broad white devilish grin . . . hard . . ."³ And from that moment he takes over, quite naturally, the world of the hospital ward. Almost immediately he becomes the "Bull Goose Loony"—the leader of the patients—standing up staunchly to Big Nurse Ratched, matriarchal symbol, destroyer of manhood, rule-maker, civilizer, and devil. The conflict thereafter is simple: Hero McMurphy vs. Villainess Ratched, he, like all heroes, alone except for the passive and undependable patients; she, supported by all the resources of the hospital and its staff. Nobly, altruistically, McMurphy sets out singlehandedly to

³Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York, 1962), p. 16.

rescue his wardmates from oppressive, regimented civilization—the world *inside* the hospital. Outside is freedom; *outside*, therefore, they must go, figuratively or literally. At first it is only figuratively—small victories over regimentation, a card game in an empty room. Later, there is even a temporary excursion into nature itself—a carefree trip on a fishing boat, a high point in the rising action, set off by small demonstrations of the power of Big Nurse. That McMurphy overcomes this power is part of the romance; that he ultimately goes down to defeat is inevitable. The climax is touched off by a wild night when the ward itself becomes the *outside*, complete with whiskey and whores. But before McMurphy can escape discovery, *order* and *authority*, in all their nightmarish power, force the suicide of one of the patients. In a last defiant gesture, McMurphy rips the uniform from Big Nurse, exposing her as mere woman, and is led away captive to lobotomy to become a mindless vegetable.

This “defeat” along with Kesey’s faultless portrayal of institutionalized and aberrant minds, has as much as anything else concealed the heroic fable which is the foundation for this black comedy. But it is not defeat. This hero is too much of an individual, too powerful, actually too successful for that. Though he does not escape, his ally, the Columbia Indian Chief Broom does, and in him the natural man ultimately triumphs. For it is Chief Broom, the Indian pretending dumbness in the face of civilization’s blind indifference to him, who rescues McMurphy’s mindless body by choking it to death, and goes over the hill to his own freedom among the wild fields and the flowing rivers—the natural world—of his childhood. McMurphy has set him free, first by returning his hulk to life, then by pointing the way to escape and destroying himself for the sake of the only other truly human figure in the novel. It is McMurphy who eventually shapes and dominates *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Thus he becomes the familiar sacrificial figure; like Robert Jordan protecting the flight of Maria, or Sidney Carton at the guillotine, he imitates the Christian martyr, demonstrating virtue by the manner of his death.

Hank Stamper, on the other hand, survives. In shape, Hank is almost identical to McMurphy, big, lusty, physically and personally so vibrant as to dominate his surroundings—and just as much a loner. As hero, his triumph is demonstrated by his survival, and his quarrel is even more clearly with civilization than was McMurphy’s, for Hank Stamper is fighting the whole community, represented by the logger’s union and the town of Wakonda, Oregon. Living across the river from them, he is as isolated from this community philosophically as he is physically, for he is wildecating logs for the big lumber company against whom the town is striking. Indeed, the only community Hank Stamper seems to have any feeling for is his nuclear family: cousin Joe Ben (with wife and children), father Henry, wife Viv, and half-brother Lee, who is his major antagonist outside the town. Hank’s task is obvious—he must complete the order for logs in spite of total com-

munity opposition and the Freudian conflict with his eastern, college-bred half-brother, who is determined to sleep with his wife in revenge for the seduction of his mother by her stepson Hank. The novel has an extraordinarily complicated structure, stylistically and psychologically, and this, as in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is the means by which Kesey camouflages his romance as a contemporary black comedy.

But in spite of such deviations from earlier, simpler, and more Victorian patterns, the hero, as Kesey draws him, is even more obvious in *Sometimes a Great Notion* than in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Just as the classic tradition demands that the hero have a supreme goal to which all other heroic values except honor may be sacrificed, so too does the American version demand that the hero's will and character be the primary means by which he attains his goal.

So it is with Hank. The family business—hence the family living—is being kept alive by his decision to log for the larger company and, in effect, to act as strike-breaker for them. From the beginning it is obvious that it is not the business but the independence which it represents that is of supreme importance to Hank, particularly as it gives him the necessary state of freedom without which no hero can survive. More significantly, it is Hank alone who wills this action; in order to protect this independence and the natural existence from which it stems, he will even defy all the orthodox assumptions of contemporary society. In this his character is clearly that of the nineteenth century hero, responsible to no one but himself, viewing social cooperation as a sign of weakness, opposition to his will as immoral. Possessed of such a single-minded will, it is no trick at all to justify the part he plays as enemy of the livelihood of the families of Wakonda. Conventional liberal ideals simply don't work for this hero. The furthest he can go toward such loyalties is to that nuclear family—or, as a sop to traditional Christian ethics, to justifying individual success as the key to general human success. Not humanity but the goal becomes holy: delivering the completed booms of logs into the hands of the company becomes Hank's righteous passion. The resultant action is arranged like the classic plot—a series of sharp little conflicts arranged along a rising curve of intensity through Hank's apparent defeat by death, weather, and the union to the final resounding climax of his decision to defy all the forces arrayed against him and get his logs to market. Along the way a host of traditional obstacles litter his path: the growing hostility of the community, the magical hexes of the whore Indian Jenny, the fight with Big Newton, and the inevitably successful seduction of his wife by his half-brother which finishes the destruction of even his family in the pursuit of victory.

Along the way he has stamped his way back and forth over the town, demonstrated the superiority of his commonsensical nature over the fairy intellectualism of his brother (in spite of that seduction), and shown in word and deed his intuitive symbiosis with nature. But even when he is taking

a physical beating, he is the hero. It is not really surprising, in the end, that he should set out implacably to accomplish his end, his only allies a boy and his half-brother Lee, whose Hellenic revenge, as well as his civilized intellectual mask, are finally submerged in the primitive floodtide of their mutual Stamper blood. The victory of the hero in this novel is complete. 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.

At the end, he has reclaimed his individuality, defying tide, temptation, and the town to deliver his logs to the company and prove his heroic righteousness again. Like the ancient Greek warriors, he rises above his obvious humanness to superhuman heights; like Natty Bumppo, he demonstrates the natural sources of his virtue and like Randle McMurphy, he holds unswervingly to his predestined goal.

Thus it remains apparent that both of Kesey's heroes are more peculiarly American than European, drawing their strength from the American myth rather than the classic one. They both are virtuous, hardworking yeomen and Jacksonian images of the central American figure, from whose agrarian roots all the democratic values are drawn. In their strength they are kin to Mike Fink and Paul Bunyan rather than to Gargantua; in their practical ambition they adhere to Henry Ford or John D. Rockefeller rather than Robin Hood; and in their moral structure, in spite of their earthiness, they imitate the Virginian or John Alden rather than Lancelot.

What amazes one about these two novels is the deceptiveness with which such heroism is displayed. There is no real trace here of the grandiloquence with which a Walter Scott portrays an Ivanhoe, or even, in spite of previous remarks, of the simple-mindedness of Natty Bumppo. Kesey, perhaps more than any contemporary American writer, has the touch of actuality—of a landscape that has been seen, a dialogue which has been heard, an action which in spite of its heroic qualities is to be believed. He knows how the *outside* looks to one who is fettered *inside*; he knows not only how the rainsoaked forest of coastal Oregon looks, he knows how it feels to endure whole seasons of rain. He knows the language of the working people about whom he writes; he is one of the few writers who can set down the incessantly obscene talk of the working stiff without sounding as though he's done it to offend.

But more than that, Kesey is capable of interplaying a wide variety of characters in their proper roles without missing a beat. One comes to believe in the mist-enclosed mind of Chief Broom as he comes to believe in the communal unity of the whole mad ward upon which McMurphy descends. But he equally comes to believe in the communal world of the Snag and the normal madneses of that proprietorial bar. It is impossible *not* to believe in the presence of these human beings in their several locations and actions. What frustrates one is the seeming necessity of also viewing them as types:

the hero and his lesser lights combatting the forces of evil. It is still the good guys against the bad guys, even if all the scenes are engagingly different. One comes inevitably up against the thematic questions: is the side of good always that of the American Hero? Does an engaging personality, physical superiority, love of nature in her many moods, unswerving loyalty to the ideal of individuality, automatically range one on the side of righteousness? Are ordinary folk in their tired confusion and their puerile actions to be so contemptuously brushed aside? Is civilization always the corruptive betrayer?

That, of course, is the way the myth defines it, heroic America cutting herself off from corrupt and civilized Europe, sending her faithful yeomen into the wilderness to hack paradise out of the limitless forests. That is the rhetorical way in which the American has always enacted the role. That Kesey's heroes seem to carry out that old-fashioned dream in an atmosphere of contemporary confusion does not lessen the traditional and romantic structure underlying it. Indeed, the central comic thread of madness in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and the theme of fraternal conflict in *Sometimes a Great Notion* are ultimately so much a part of the essential heroic action that their blackness is only orthodox villainy rather than avant-garde comedy. One cannot help but empathize with the tragicomedy of Billy Bibbit in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, driven to suicide by the organized incomprehension designed to "cure" him, or with the fondly drawn portrait of religio-superstitious Joe Ben in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, helpless for all his signs and portents before the indifferent accident of a rising tide. That Billy cures himself for one brief sexual moment and that Joe Ben literally laughs himself to death are ironic touches, but they are only incidental to the essential plot: the hero, though he may not survive, will triumph. It is a little like John Steinbeck's sardonic separation of a cast of characters into white hats, black hats, and grey hats. The white hats are the heroes; the black hats are the villains; and the grey hats are all the subordinate characters who will turn good if they are bad and bad if they are good. A little educated guessing will arrange Kesey's characters into types and sub-types of these basic groups, in spite of the vividness with which they are drawn. A few examples will suffice: Chief Broom is a white hat, for all his reluctance to become a hero (indeed, his relation to McMurphy is singularly reminiscent of Leslie Fiedler's basic duo: Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, the Lone Ranger and Tonto); the Negro ward-boys are as obviously black hats as they are black figures; Dr. Spivey is patently a grey hat, as are one or two puzzling nurses. Lee Stamper is a grey hat, who switches from independent black hat to white hat as he throws off his sexual victory and joins his brother in defying the world; Joe Ben is a white hat, a Loyal Companion like Chingachgook or Chief Broom, though not dark; Evenwrite, Draeger, even Big Newton, are black hats of varying degrees of villainy. It is an interesting game, and it would be no more than that if it

were not for the way the action of each story arranges black hat against white hat, hero against villain, until in the end it is plain to see that Ken Kesey, individualist and rebel, has written in these two novels what his native region always seems to induce: a pair of Westerns.

"The longer I teach, the more reluctant I become to accept words like 'stupid' at their face value. For we all seem stupid where we are not interested, and academic grades are given on work that is done for other reasons than interest." — Will G. Moore, *The Tutorial System and its Future*, NY: Pergamon Press, 1968, p. 36.

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