

**THE CONCEPT OF HOME AND FAMILY
IN THE NOVELS OF KEN KESEY
“ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO’S NEST” AND
“SOMETIMES A GREAT NOTION”**

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Abstract: In Mihailo Roško's article "The theme of family and house in the postmodernist American writer Ken Kesey's novels," One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest "and" Sometimes a Great Notion "are analyzed from the point of view of the independence of two epic traditions: those events which take place outside the threshold of the house, that is, in the great world and those in which attention is focused on life, especially at home. The novel "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest" therefore belongs to the first tradition, and the novel "Sometimes a Great Notion" belongs to two family traditions. At the same time, the main heroes of the novels are very similar: strong, unruly personalities, who defend their dependence and freedom from the pressure of the system, and tend to withstand the blows of fate and to cope with life's trials.

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The theme of home and family occupies a specific place in the history of literature. If we remember the first known literary works of the ancient world, such as "The Epic of Gilgamesh", "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana", "Iliad" and "Odyssey", the Bible stories, myths and fairy tales, or the later medieval works like "Beowulf", "The Song of Hildebrand", "The Song of the Nibelungs", "The Song of Roland", Irish and Icelandic sagas, chronicles, we can see that the theme of family, fireside comfort, home and everyday life is virtually absent in them. Apparently, back then it was considered worthwhile to glorify and transmit to descendants only something extraordinary and unusual. It could be large tragedies and catastrophes, such as the invasions of aggressors, wars, coups, natural disasters, or large victories and achievements (for instance, relocation to new lands, fertile and full of game, or their conquests, as well as victories over foreign enemies, acquisition of new weapons or new knowledge that helped to survive and become more powerful). Ancient people glorified heroism and superhuman achievements of the individual. Everything mentioned took place beyond the threshold of home and family and beyond routine. According to V. Propp, a prominent researcher of the fairy tale, a fairy tale begins with the exit from the house: the father takes the children to

the forest on the orders of the stepmother; the dragon or the wizard kidnaps the princess from the house, children of a certain age are sent to the service of wizards or monsters etc. And there, beyond the threshold of the house, in the woods, in the afterlife, on the road (if to take into consideration chivalric or picaresque novels), in foreign lands and uncharted territories characters appear in situations where they have to perform exploits and go through trials. These trials are initiations, in which characters gain life experience and mysterious wisdom to finally die heroically, winning fame and remaining in people's memory being sung in poems, or receive awards as a result of tests (the hand of the princess, the half of the kingdom (or even the whole kingdom), magic objects (e.g. the cap of invisibility, seven-league boots, the magic tablecloth, the steel-sword etc.), which usually is the completion of fabulous and mythical stories, chivalric novels etc. The theme of home and family appears rarely and only like the motive of memories and desires of characters, who miss their families, being away from them for a long time – at wars (“Iliad”), in the campaigns (myths of the Argonauts, “Odyssey” etc.). But it is possible to become a hero, go through trials, and accomplish feats only in the “big world” and not at home, holding the wife's skirt...

These are sentimentalists who give an important place to the theme of home and family, since events in their works usually take place in the family estates of nobles. The theme of home and family will be used more actively by realists of the nineteenth century. Everyday life and family relationships will become central in works of many writers from different countries... In the end, it turned out that family problems are equally interesting and equally complex like those which took place beyond the home threshold. Complicated relationships of men and women, gender issues, the struggle for dominance, the search for harmony, the issue of loss of love or its retention, the problems of children and parents.

Certainly, some writers pay more attention to the problem of the man's search for himself in the outside world, some concentrate on difficult family issues, and some are interested in both points. Today we will focus on the works of the American writer of the second half of the twentieth century Ken Kesey, whose first novel entirely lacks the theme of home and family, but it is central in his second novel. In the first novel – «One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest» (1962) – events take place at the institute for the insane, so that we do not see homes and families of the characters. All of them are outside their homes and families, and the main characters simply do not have a family: McMurphy and Miss Ratched have never created it, Bromden and Bibbit, despite their adult ages are chaste. Harding, for example, is married, but family problems are the main among those which led him to the madhouse. In the second novel – «Sometimes a Great Notion» (1964) – everything is the opposite – the central events take place

in the Stamper family in the house, in the yard, in the home village of loggers. In the first novel the rising action takes place when a new patient comes into the ward for the mentally ill. It is McMurphy, a profligate and fighter, gambler and vagrant, the veteran of the Korean War, who violates the established hierarchy and the usual rules of behavior of patients and staff. In the second novel the rising action is the return to his father's home of "the prodigal younger son" Lee. It is the home of his father Henry and the family of the elder son Hank to whom the younger half-brother has been jealous since the childhood, because he's always been stronger and better.

The writer also applies different narrative techniques and viewpoints in the mentioned novels. In the first novel it is schizophrenic Bromden, the patient of the ward for mentally ill, who tells about the arrival, deeds and death of McMurphy. He is the only narrator of the novel, we see all the events through his eyes. In the second novel the narrative technique is more complicated. Kesey experiments, juggling different points of view, jumping from one viewpoint to another without logical transitions and clear labeling of to whom they belong, separating them either in italics, or in the parentheses... It is hard to immediately guess who speaks or thinks, or recalls...

In the first novel the couple of main characters – McMurphy and Bromden – according to Leslie Fiedler, reminds of the usual for American literature couple of two buddies – the white and non-white (Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Ishmael and Queequeg, Huckleberry Finn and Joe), but before it was a non-white partner, who acted like a holistic individual and was close to nature, while the white one either consciously or unconsciously learned from him the integrity and naturalness. In Ken Kesey's novels however it is the white (McMurphy) who represents freedom, naturalness, integrity, and teaches it to intimidated patients and primarily to half Indian Bromden. On the other hand, Bromden and McMurphy remind of Hemingway's self-reflecting character and the code hero named so by Young. Bromden is an educated, understanding reflecting narrator, he admires the strong freedom-loving nature of McMurphy and becomes his follower, disciple. In the novel «Sometimes a Great Notion» the code hero is the older brother Hank and educated Leland is a reflecting personage, but he does not just admire his older brother, he also envies him, accuses him in his weakness and cherishes hope for revenge.

In both novels we see the conflict of a freedom-loving strong personality and the system that by different methods tries to control, dictate its terms and impose rules and behaviour patterns to each individual. The main personages – McMurphy and Hank Stamper – are strong personalities, courageous and indestructible individualists, dominant males. Both are under the pressure of the external "system" ("Combine" and Big Nurse in the first novel; the union of loggers and its cunning head Mr. Draeger – in

the second), close environment (patients – “family substitute” – for McMurphy; younger brother Lee, beloved wife Viv, and relatives – for Hank). In both novels the protagonist is “tested for invincibility”, undergoes “initiation” for courage.

Both novels have a mythological load. In «One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest» there are very strong Evangelical motives: McMurphy acts like the Messiah, twelve patients whom he takes on a sea trip are like his 12 disciples, and narrator Bromden is like one of the evangelists, for it is he who tells us the story of McMurphy from his appearance at the hospital to his death, which is read as a sacrifice for the salvation of patients. In the novel «Sometimes a Great Notion» there also are Evangelical motives: the motif of return of the prodigal son (in the novel it is the younger brother), and the motif of envy of Cain to Abel in the relationship of brothers Hank and Leland. And in both novels Evangelical calls for tolerance and humility are changed into the calls for love of freedom, courage, invincibility, willpower of personality. At the same time the main concepts of Christianity – self-sacrifice for others, love, mutual help and mutual support – remain inviolable. It seems that Ken Kesey’s ideal of personality is a harmonious combination of a strong freedom-loving invincible individualist of Nietzschean type with the Christian ideal of altruistic protector and savior of the weak even if he has to sacrifice himself. McMurphy and Hank Stamper are such characters, but only the first one die “for friends”.

Simultaneously, it should be stated that the novel “One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” is substantially richer in mythical allusions. McMurphy can be interpreted as a white Indian God-Saviour, as well as Lonely Ranger, a popular comic books hero, a Melville-esque white whale, Hamlet, a carnival King of fools, a trickster and Joker, a Tarot cards character, etc.

Undoubtedly, both novels bear characteristic features of Psychoanalysis. Specifically, the author focuses on Oedipus complex. The confrontation between Chief Bromden, a Native-American chieftain, and his white mother, who represents aggressive white civilization, destroying the natural and authentic can project upon the opposition of the tyrannical head nurse Ratched of the so-called “Combine” and a rebellious informal leader McMurphy. His followers include a schizophrenic Chief Bromden, who sees himself and other patients as children that have not grown up. However, Kesey’s “upside-down” manner of characters’ portrayal represents “children” (patients) as being intimidated by the Mother (Nurse Ratched), not by their nominal father (McMurphy), who, on the contrary, enables them to break free from authoritarian coercive methods and, consequently, grow up. (On the level of symbols, after all, the novel may serve as an epitome of family life, the so-called “nest”, as the very title indicates. Competing formal and informal leaders represent mother-father opposition). Oedipus complex can also be traced in the second novel, where

intercharacter relations are greatly affected by family relationships on the whole. Here, a half-brother Hank, representing Father, attempts to conceal his intimate affair with a young step-mother, whose son Leland watches their adultery through a crack in the wall. The desire for revenge leads Leland back home, to Hank's family. To be honest, Hank's competition with the old patriarch is complicated due to younger brother's envy. Hank has always been the best on the west coast in all spheres, which leads to Leland's insecurities and his attempts to put the blame on Hank, overshadowing the latter with his constant success. Hank stole their father's love, respect and admiration of their peers, even his mother's affection. Hank aggravates the situation, since he does not have the slightest notion of his brother's inner conflict. The desire for revenge against Hank takes Leland back to Oregon, where he meets Viv, a feminine sensual beauty, whose love for her husband Hank fades quickly when she begins to realize her true place in the Stamper household. In order to "dethrone" his brother Leland seduces Viv, strong and independent. The novel reaches the climax, when Leland starts to put Hank under pressure with the help of a logging labour union, preventing him from signing a profitable timber contract. Weather conditions, Cousin's death and their father's accident, leading to the loss of the hand, all contribute to Hank's despair. There is a scene, when desperate Hank, foreseeing the inevitable disaster, swims across overflowing waters of the river and finds himself at home to watch his beloved wife Viv making love to Leland. The scene is an absolute reflection of young Leland's suffering to see his mother committing adultery with Hank through the same crack in the wall.

In the first novel the author hasn't made use of extensive descriptions, the fact being determined by the setting of the events, i.e. a ward in the lunatic asylum. However, even despite the remote establishment, so far from beautiful nature, Bromden's memories occasionally take us to magnificent landscapes. One of the final scenes, right before Bromden's escape, reveals us indescribably beautiful world out of the window through the eyes of Bromden (the thing he learnt from McMurphy, even after the death of the latter, is to notice details of the surrounding world). The second novel is full of descriptions, since the scene of the novel is set in a logging settlement in the heart of Oregon woodlands. Besides, Hank Stamper, a strong-willed and determined man, is deeply in love with his native land. The character is fond of infinite forests, the flora and fauna of Oregon, he is good at farming and capable of milking cows. This love is rooted deeply in his soul, runs in his veins, causing Hank to fight with the waters of the Wakonda river, wrecking lands and putting at risk the safety of his household. In the novel Stampers' household symbolizes the nature of its owners, both old Henry and Hank, in particular.

Reflecting characters in both novels evolve under the influence of the main character's strong personality. Bromden's ill imagination makes him see himself as a "child in need of reaching adulthood". Having understood Bromden's vision, McMurphy makes a promise to assist him in growing up, that is in becoming a self-sufficient personality. Symbolically, such "growing" is portrayed in the following way: at the beginning Bromden pretends to be deaf-mute, at night he is wearing a restraint jacket, while nurses swaddle him like a baby, unable to speak or do the most ordinary things. Affected by McMurphy, Bromden utters his first word ("thank you"), learns to get up from his bed, feels erection for the first time in many years (following McMurphy's stories of affairs with women), dares to raise his hand, voting against Nurse Ratched's will, fights with orderlies, consequently becoming the bravest McMurphy's follower. In the end, after his leader dies, Bromden manages to break window bars and get away from the mental institution. Leland in his envy at his inviolable older brother is reigned by the desire to come back and avenge himself, having realized his plans of dethroning Hank, goes on to become just as Hank was. The Leland's character learns to be strong not by means of revengeful deeds, but by overcoming his own insecurities, similarly to Hank. In the final scene, following Viv's leaving the family, Leland stands side by side with Hank so as to carry out the logging contract's obligations. Having started to live the way his brother does, Leland no longer considers Hank his rival or enemy. Thus, we can speak about the reflexing character's initiation (both Bromden and Leland Stamper) in the two novels, their transition from weakness and cowardice to self-realisation as an unbreakable personality, from "childishness and helplessness" to maturity. Unlike "Sometimes a Great Notion", "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" is rich in allusions and parodies in the spirit of "black humour" novels, typical of post-modernist literature. The second piece of writing is more lyrical, dwelling on the themes of love, absent in the former, with non-frequent inclusions of irony and parody.

As far as the character's strenuous trials, actions and adventures outside his "usual world" are concerned, "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" is a typical piece of post-modernist era, therefore the mental institution can be interpreted as the so-called echo, "the house of initiation", where little boys were taken to learn sacred wisdom to finally become grown-up men. The novel "Sometimes a Great Notion" breaks with this tradition, highlighting the possibility to reach initiation in a native house, close to people who are your family. Hank becomes an unbreakable "superman" in his native settlement, and subsequently his brother Leland undergoes his initiation similarly to and following into Hank's shoes, only upon his return to his father's household.

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