One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975) is perhaps the best-known antiauthority film in history. The film’s director, Milos Forman, was well acquainted with repressive authority, having experienced it firsthand for much of his life. Born outside of Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1932, Forman lost both his parents to the Nazi death camps of World War II. When he began making films in the mid-1960s, a brief flourish of Czech political and artistic freedom allowed him to explore daily life through satire, and he helped develop what the French call cinématage vérité (truthful cinema), an influential style based on realism and lacking traditional heroes. Forman’s Loves of a Blonde was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1966, and his Fireman’s Ball received the same recognition in 1967. However, communist authorities labeled Fireman’s Ball as a threat and banned the film. One year later, while Forman was visiting Paris, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. Forman never returned to his homeland, but the image of Soviet tanks rolling into his country continued to haunt him and echoes throughout his work on One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

Based on the popular 1962 novel by Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest initially was adapted as a Broadway play. Its star, Kirk Douglas, bought the film rights and tried unsuccessfully for twelve years to generate interest from Hollywood in making the
movie. When he felt too old to play the role of the protagonist, McMurphy, Douglas assigned the rights to his son, Michael. After securing private financing, Michael Douglas coproduced the film with Saul Zaentz of Fantasy Records. They went on to earn Oscars as producers—a first for Michael Douglas—when *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1975.

The producers chose Forman as director for his ability to capture the concerns of the times. His American film debut, *Taking Off* (1971), was a comedy about the lack of understanding between young people and their parents. The generation gap was a popular theme in the 1960s and 1970s, as the American people, especially young people, began questioning all manners of authority, old-fashioned institutions, and the social status quo. The civil rights movement and the anti–Vietnam War protests of the 1960s morphed into the campus demonstrations, violent antidraft protests, and women’s liberation movement of the 1970s. In a particularly transforming event of the times, National Guardsmen opened fire on student protesters at Kent State University in 1970, following a rock-throwing incident, and killed four students. A few years later, American faith in authority was further shaken by the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up, which led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, in its antiauthority stance, resonated strongly with these and other events of the 1970s. Pauline Kael, movie critic for *The New Yorker*, said that the film came along when the right metaphor for the human condition was a loony bin.

Nearly all the top U.S. film critics gave the film positive reviews, heaping particular praise on Jack Nicholson’s portrayal of McMurphy. Their reservations related to the film’s simplification of themes in Kesey’s novel. Kesey, for his part, never wanted to see the film. He was so upset by the film’s choice not to use another character, Chief Bromden, as narrator of the story that he sued the producers. Nonetheless, the film succeeded with the public at the box office: made with a budget of $3 million, *Cuckoo’s Nest* grossed $112 million after release. At the 1975 Academy Awards, the film won the five top honors—Best Picture, Best Director (Milos Forman), Best Actor (Jack Nicholson), Best Actress (Louise Fletcher), and Best Adapted Screenplay (Bo Goldman and Lawrence Hauben). It was the first film to sweep the top five Oscars since 1934’s *It Happened One Night*.

Although Louise Fletcher’s portrayal of Nurse Ratched proved Oscar-worthy, many of Hollywood’s leading actresses, including Jane Fonda, Anne Bancroft, Ellen Burstyn, Faye Dunaway, Geraldine Page, and Angela Lansbury, had turned down the role. The character of Nurse Ratched may have been unattractive because both Kesey’s novel and the Broadway play portrayed her as a castrating female determined to rob men of their masculinity—a stereotype to which the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s objected. However, when the film was being made, the screenwriters, producers, director, and actress together altered the portrayal of Nurse Ratched into a broader figure of institutional authority without such sexist overtones. When Fletcher, in her first starring role, earned an Oscar for her portrayal of Nurse Ratched, some of those who declined the role admitted they had made a career mistake. Fletcher furnished one of the award ceremony’s most memorable moments when she used sign language to thank her deaf parents.

Although Milos Forman’s work is filled with people injured by society, he often relies upon humor to portray the ordinary humanity of these damaged souls. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, he presents the inmates of a mental hospital as quirky and funny in the midst of outrage. Forman’s characters are individual human beings capable of displaying great dignity. He relies upon techniques from his roots in cinéma vérité to create the look and feel of reality—an especially noteworthy approach in light of the fact that the novel is quite hallucinatory and the stage play used a surrealist set design to underscore the madness. Forman set the story in a real mental hospital.
institution in Oregon, cast the institution’s administrator as the doctor in the film, and used actual patients as extras. In the pivotal role of Chief Bromden, Forman cast a nonactor, a full-blooded member of the Creek tribe working as a park ranger near Salem. Through realism, humor and humanism, Forman transforms the story to better express the tenor of its time.

Following his success with *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Forman directed the film version of the popular counterculture musical *Hair* (1979), followed by *Ragtime* (1981), *Amadeus* (1984), *Valmont* (1989), *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996), and *Man on the Moon* (1999). Although *Amadeus* won eight Oscars in 1984, including Best Picture and another Best Director award for Forman, critics generally acknowledge *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* to be his foremost work. In November 1977, the American Film Institute voted it into its Top Ten of America’s Best Films, along with *Casablanca*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *Citizen Kane*.

**The Triumphant Spark**

Set in the stark depression of a mental hospital populated by lost souls, this film explores bleak concepts of oppression, cruelty, suicide, and euthanasia, or mercy killing. Yet, remarkably, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* celebrates life. From the moment McMurphy enters the institution, he charges it with an unprecedented jolt of vivacity. Both the patients and the staff are accustomed to a world deadened by sedatives and routine. The phonograph in the nurse’s station plays numbing waltz music while the patients line up for their medications. During group therapy sessions, the patients and their nurse go over the same ground again and again. The Chief pushes his broom around the floor to no purpose, and the same men play the same card game at the same table day after day.

McMurphy bounds loudly into this setting, irreverent and bold, whooping at the Chief, teasing Martini away from the pinochle game, and generally upsetting the carefully established order with his energy and zest. McMurphy’s life force is so strong and compelling that it changes the men on the ward and threatens the authority that has kept them docile and compliant.

Nurse Ratched represents this authority, and she controls all the deadening influences: the drugs administered without question, the rules written on the blackboard, the unalterable work schedule, the music that cannot be turned down. Her therapy sessions have nothing to do with getting well but instead press the group into the same painful and humiliating grooves until she decides it is time to adjourn. Her entire demeanor is in opposition to McMurphy’s. Her face is stony and immobile, her voice controlled and modulated, her uniform starched and spotless.
In contrast, McMurphy’s expressions change constantly. He shouts, curses, jokes, and cackles with glee, and his hair is wild. After undergoing brutal electroshock therapy, he quips that the next woman to take him on will light up like a pinball machine. Everything about McMurphy threatens Nurse Ratched, and the two are in immediate opposition as the forces of life and death, sanity and insanity, independence and authority.

Even in the setting of a “cuckoo’s nest” and under the chilling gaze of Nurse Ratched, McMurphy manages to inspire a spark of life. Games like blackjack, basketball, and the World Series engage the other patients despite Nurse Ratched’s disapproval. Under McMurphy’s enthusiastic tutoring, the wheelchair-bound Colonel begins to sing as if he were at a baseball game, and the nearly catatonic Chief shoots baskets so the inmates can beat the orderlies in basketball.

Sex is a natural expression of delight for McMurphy, whereas it is a source of embarrassment and shame to Nurse Ratched. McMurphy believes young Billy Bibbit should be out in a convertible with a girl instead of inside the institution, but Nurse Ratched wants Billy to feel ashamed after having sex with a girl in the ward. The most vivid celebration of life in the film occurs during McMurphy’s fishing escapade. He teaches Cheswick to drive a boat because it is fun, and he explains to Martini that he is not a loony now because he is a fisherman. McMurphy’s infectious joy teaches others to revel in simply being alive, to find identity and meaning in their experiences.

Many of the life-affirming images in Forman’s film are taken from the Christian symbolism embedded in Ken Kesey’s original novel. Raised in a religious household, Kesey knew Bible stories well. Forman weaved these threads throughout the film to provide additional depth: the patients flock to McMurphy as disciples. They become fishermen. They soak in the pool as in baptism. McMurphy performs the miracle of getting the Chief to speak. McMurphy suffers for the men, and one of them betrays him. Yet he sacrifices himself for them, dying so that his ebullient spirit might live on in each of them, rather than saving himself when he could.

Nurse Ratched believes that she—and the institution—have won when McMurphy undergoes a frontal lobotomy. His body is still alive, but everything that made up his unique spirit is gone. The film’s final affirmation of life echoes of resurrection, for the forces of death do not win. Instead, the Chief tells McMurphy, now essentially dead, that they will leave together. He smothers McMurphy’s body to free his spirit, then lifts the marble water fixture from the floor and throws it through the window. It is as if he were rolling away the stone from the tomb. As the Chief’s white-clad legs run away into the dawn, Taber begins to laugh, and music rises up in triumph.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols
Themes
Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Conformity As a Threat to Freedom

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is a film with distinct political undercurrents, which are forcefully presented. When men conform to authoritarian rule, the film argues, they jeopardize not only their physical but also their mental freedom. McMurphy learns that the prison where he was held previously offered greater personal freedom than Nurse Ratched’s ward. In prison, he could have watched the World Series, served out his sixty-eight days, and then been free to go. Nurse Ratched’s authority, however, extends from the television to the term of McMurphy’s commitment, and her authority will not bear rebellion. Under her totalitarian control, McMurphy cannot even be sure what the rules are, for she rigs them to achieve the results she wants. When the men side unanimously with McMurphy the second time they vote on watching the World Series, Nurse Ratched announces calmly that the nine men with their hands up represent only half the ward and therefore are not a majority. The unresponsive patients, the “chronics,” do not threaten her control. When the Chief surprises everyone by raising his hand, she tells the jubilant McMurphy that his vote does not count, because the meeting is adjourned. Under authoritarian rule, even the appearance of democracy is subverted to maintain the status quo.

The Contradiction Between Tyranny and Sanity

As head nurse in a mental institution, Nurse Ratched should be promoting her patients’ sanity, but instead her tyranny directly subverts their mental health. She keeps the patients docile, medicated, dependent, and childlike. McMurphy tells the patients they are not loonies but men, and he encourages their manhood through fishing and basketball. The men then begin to ask reasonable questions about Nurse Ratched’s authority. Scanlon wants to know why the dormitory is locked during the day. She explains, insidiously, that time spent in the company of others is therapeutic. Cheswick demands the cigarettes she has confiscated and informs her that he is not a little child. Nurse Ratched’s oppression, however, causes Cheswick to lose control, and she keeps him in place with electroshock therapy. The men do not improve under her domination but rather disintegrate like Billy Bibbit. Nurse Ratched’s reason for keeping McMurphy on the ward, she tells the doctor, is to help him. Instead, she robs him of his vivacity and his sanity.

The Sacred Nature of the Individual

Unlike Nurse Ratched, McMurphy honors and loves the sanctity of individual human beings. He talks to the Chief, even though he thinks the Chief is deaf. He is patient with the babyish Martini, even though he cannot grasp the fundamentals of blackjack. He helps Taber catch a fish and teaches Cheswick to drive a boat. He encourages the Chief to grow through playing basketball. He intervenes on behalf of Cheswick by breaking the glass of the nurse’s station to get his cigarettes. He shows his affection for all the men, particularly Billy Bibbit, as he gives Billy the gift of his first sexual encounter, even as McMurphy realizes it will cost him his chance at freedom. In all these ways, McMurphy shows love for the unique, individual nature of each man. When McMurphy’s lobotomy robs him of the traits that made him an individual, the Chief returns his love through an act of death and resurrection. The Chief frees McMurphy, affirming that the spirit lives on after the body’s death in the minds and behaviors of the living.

Motifs
Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Obstacles to Personal Freedom

The film underscores the loss of personal freedom with recurring patterns of barriers, gates, fences, bars, locks, and shackles. We hear the ward door slam ominously behind Nurse Ratched as the first sound of the movie. We see Bancini locked in overnight restraints. McMurphy first appears in manacles. Throughout the film, faces are filmed behind wire mesh and bars to emphasize the hopelessness of captivity. The glass of the nurse’s station represents the barrier between the individual and power—a barrier the patients are forbidden to cross, even though it appears more transparent than bars. McMurphy first crosses the barrier when he attempts it to turn down the music so he can think, but Nurse Ratched escorts him out, unwilling to tolerate independent thought. Later he shoves his hand through the glass, shattering the boundaries maintained by the authoritative state, with dire consequences.
Games

Games feature prominently in the film, not solely as a simple pastime but also as an affirmation of life, health, and enjoyment. McMurphy teaches blackjack and basketball, games he sees as manlier than the pinochle and Monopoly the patients play prior to his arrival. Under his coaching, the patients have the empowering experience of beating the orderlies in basketball. Enjoyment is important to McMurphy: for him, driving a boat is fun, fishing is fun, sex is fun, and games of all kinds help the patients feel alive. He tells Martini when he teaches him to fish that he is not a loony but a fisherman. In addition, the World Series take on pivotal importance in McMurphy’s battle for life against Nurse Ratched: the baseball games symbolize unity, as the ball players work as a team, and also, as a distinctly American pastime, echo the anti-authoritarian strain in American history.

The Rebel As Savior

Repeated references to Jesus draw attention to McMurphy’s role as a life-giving savior. The men follow him as disciples. When he is exasperated, McMurphy frequently invokes Jesus. He takes the patients fishing on the sea, in a literal representation of Jesus with his followers. He performs the “miracles” of getting the Chief to speak and Billy Bibbit to stop stuttering. He joins the men in the pool, dunking as if baptized. Because of his rebellion against authority, he suffers for them on the electroshock table. Finally, he sacrifices his own flight to freedom to help Billy Bibbit. Sefelt tells legends about McMurphy’s mythic escape just as the disciples spread word of Jesus’ resurrection in the Bible. When the Chief kills McMurphy out of mercy, the scene echoes the death, the tomb, and the resurrection that leads to eternal life.

Hearing As a Human Connection

Many of the film’s scenes reflect upon the sense of hearing as a means of understanding and connection among the characters. The Chief pretends to be deaf in order to withdraw from his surroundings, but McMurphy talks to him anyway as a means of establishing a human connection. His affectionate chatter begins to engage the Chief in life once again. On the other hand, the numbing music that Nurse Ratched plays is so loud that McMurphy complains he can’t hear himself think. He tells her the men wouldn’t have to shout if she would turn the volume down. Nurse Ratched, however, opposes thinking, understanding, and any other activity that would lead to healthy human relationships between the patients.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Keys

Over and over again, the camera focuses upon keys, and their metallic jingle echoes as the overriding symbol of authority. Nurse Ratched wears her keys on a loop over her arm like a decorative bracelet of power. She leads the men in stretches before group therapy, and her keys provide the only sound as she lifts and drops her arms. The orderlies wear their keys clipped to their belts like pistols at their sides. Orderlies control and discipline the men, and they use their keys to lock them down at night and release them in the morning. For McMurphy, keys are the means to escape. He is able to drive the men away for a fishing trip, because the keys to the bus are in the ignition. He gets Orderly Turkle drunk in order to liberate the keys from his pocket while he sleeps, then uses those keys to open the ward’s window, the portal to the world of freedom. As the orderlies drag Billy Bibbit away screaming the next morning, Washington flaunts his power by ordering McMurphy to drop the keys. McMurphy, realizing that Washington means to beat him senseless, slowly and carefully places the keys on the windowsill in admission of his failure to escape the institution’s control.

Cigarettes

In contrast to keys, cigarettes represent freedom. The men use cigarettes as chips in blackjack, each cigarette representing a dime—their only money to spend as they wish. Cigarettes provide the men with a makeshift currency, giving them power to place bets, take risks, and feel like men instead of children. In a climactic scene, Cheswick demands to know why Nurse Ratched has confiscated his cigarettes. She blames McMurphy for running a casino in the tub room and winning all the men’s money—a form of personal initiative that defies her authority. She does not want the patients to have the powerful feeling of being in control of their own lives. When Cheswick explodes, he makes clear the importance of his cigarettes, yelling that he is not a little child to have his cigarettes doled out like cookies. His desperation leads McMurphy to shatter the glass of the nurse’s station in order to retrieve Cheswick’s cigarettes, a symbol of his capacity for individual dignity.

Pornographic Playing Cards
McMurphy’s deck of dirty playing cards appears at critical moments of the film to signify his rebellion against authority. He makes Martini his first disciple when he flashes the pictures of naked women in his face, leading him away from the sedate game of pinochle. In his first group therapy session, he shuffles the cards defiantly while Nurse Ratched is speaking. McMurphy uses the cards most effectively during his evaluation by the doctors. As they conclude, Dr. Spivey asks him if he has any questions, and he flashes a card at the doctors, thus undermining their authority over him, openly demonstrating his contempt, and privileging raw, sensual experience over the regular, ordered life in the hospital.

http://www.sparknotes.com/film/cuckoo/